

# The European Qur'an

## A new ERC Synergy Project at the Faculty of Theology

By Professor, PhD Jan Loop



I am joining the Faculty of Theology at UCPH from the University of Kent (UK) where I was a Professor of Early Modern Global History at the School of History. My academic work is mainly concerned with cultural and religious encounters, and particularly with interactions between the Christian, Muslim and Jewish world in the early modern period. Among other topics, I have long been interested in the Reformation and ensuing confessionalisation as a driver of European interests in Islam and Arabic and Ottoman language and culture.

Three years ago, in the spring of 2017, I met with John Tolan from the Université de Nantes to discuss the idea of putting together an exhibition at the British Library on the Qur'an in European Culture. This was the start of a conversation that developed rather quickly into an ambitious research project, which was joined by Roberto Tottoli (Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale") and Mercedes García-Arenal (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Madrid). In November of the same year, we submitted a proposal with the title *The European Qur'an – Islamic Scripture in Euro-*

*pean Religion and Culture* to the European Research Council in Brussel.

### A European Qur'an?

When we had to present our project to the ERC in 2018, we decided to start our presentation with a reference to Keith Ellison's inauguration in January 2007. Being the first Muslim to be elected to the US Congress, Ellison asked to be allowed to take his oath on the Qur'an. He took the oath on Thomas Jefferson's personal copy of the Qur'an. No surprise, this use of the Qur'ān caused controversy in the US and spurred anti-Islamic polemics: The Qur'ān, it was said, is alien to Western culture and political institutions. However, Jefferson's Qur'ān tells a different story: It is the first English translation directly from the Arabic, made by George Sale in 1734. This is a groundbreaking work of Enlightenment scholarship. And it had a considerable impact on numerous Western intellectuals including such figures as Voltaire and Goethe and how they perceived Muhammad, the Qur'an and Islam.

We chose this story at the interview because it raises questions which are at



*Congressman Keith Ellison taking his oath on Thomas Jefferson's copy of George Sale's 1734 translation of the Qur'an, 5 January 2007*

the heart of our research project: Is the Qur'an really so alien to the history of the West, its culture, and institutions? What are the roles that the Qur'an has played in Christian European religious and other discourses between the 12th and the 19th century? And further: What are the changes that happen to the Qur'an – or any other sacred text for that matter – when they cross religious, cultural and linguistic borders.

In November 2018, The European Research Council awarded us an ERC Synergy Grant of € 10M over 6 years

to study the history of European interactions with the Qur'an in all its aspect from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. The project has started in April 2019 and we are now a healthy cohort of more than 25 postdocs and PhD-students. At Copenhagen, we will be a group of 7 researchers – literally from all over the world (Japan, Belgium, US, Romania, Germany, Switzerland) – and one project manager, Kira Storgaard Hansen. I hope that this project and the work we are carrying out will strengthen the faculty's international profile and its ambition to become a centre of comparative religious studies. The main focus of our research at Copenhagen will be on early modern uses of the Qur'an and practices of oriental scholarship. What role did the Qur'an play in inter-Christian, confessional polemics from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century? What role did it play in early modern missionary attempts? How did European scholars interested in the Qur'an get into possession of Qur'anic texts? How did they read, translate and interpret these texts? What uses did they make of the Qur'an in historical, exegetical, cultural, diplomatic and political discourses? How did these uses change over the centuries? These are just a few of the research questions that we will be trying to tackle.

The thematic, chronological and geographical range of our research is wide: From Greek anti-Islamic polemical treatises, to 17<sup>th</sup>-century Hebrew translations of the Qur'an, to the description of pre-Islamic Arabia by a German consul for the Dutch Republic in Istanbul we will follow the manifold forms that the European Qur'an could take on.

## **Translations of translations in Reformation-Age Europe**

If there is one text that best embodies the ‘European Qur’an’, it is probably the Latin edition from 1543 by the Zurich Hebraist and Reformer, Theodor Bibliander. Theodor Bibliander based his edition on three manuscripts of the Medieval Latin translation composed by the Englishman Robert of Ketton in 1143. While we know of a number of other medieval Latin versions of the Qur’an that circulated in manuscript form, Ketton’s paraphrasing translation, and the various vernacular texts that depended on it, shaped the impression that European readers had of the Qur’an over a long period of time.

Hence, over centuries, the European readers of the ‘Alcoran’ were confronted with a text that on stylistic, semantic, structural, and material levels was quite removed from the Arabic original. This is even more true for the many vernacular translations that were based on the Bibliander edition. It was translated into Italian by Giovanni Battista Castrodardo in 1547. In 1616, this Italian Qur’an was translated into German by the Lutheran minister Salomon Schweigger, with re-editions published in 1623, 1659, and 1664. In 1641, the German edition was translated into Dutch, and from here into Hebrew and Spanish.

So, European readers who wanted to read the Qur’an in a vernacular language in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century were reading a translation of a translation – a European Qur’an, in other words, that was many stages removed from the Arabic original it claimed to represent. Particularly in Protestant circles, the European

Qur’an was treated like a written text, that could be analysed with critical philological tools like the Bible – some European scholars even attempted to publish a polyglot edition of the Qur’an after the model of Polyglot Bibles. While such approaches might have improved the European understanding of the Qur’an on a linguistic level, it prevented an appreciation of the ‘dynamic’, semi-oral character of the Islamic revelation, as well as of the ritual significance of its recitation and transcription in manuscript form. It also made it almost impossible for European readers to understand the sensual experience and aesthetic excitement that the Qur’an evoked in the process of its recitation – and thus the fundamental Islamic dogma of the inimitable beauty of the Qur’an.

## **The Role of the Qur’an in the construction of Christian European identities**

But the European Qur’an is not just a product of translations and the result of attempts to gain more accurate insight into the Islamic religion. In fundamental ways, it is also the result of the various uses that Europeans have made of the Qur’an in intra Christian debates. The Qur’an has played a crucial role in attempts to define Christian orthodoxy and heterodoxy, to confirm Christian theological ideas, to contest and confute religious enemies within Christianity, and to support or undermine historical assumptions. In other words, since the Middle Ages, the Qur’an has played a pivotal role in the construction of Christian European cultural, religious, and political identities.

Bibliander's edition can again serve as an illustrative case in point. The work was not only a reaction to the imminent threat of an Ottoman onslaught on Central Europe in the mid-sixteenth century. The compendium is also a work of early Reformation propaganda, and it is read and re-read in a number of polemical contexts during an age of unprecedented religious struggle. From the outset, the confessional reading of Bibliander's book was driven by the fact that it involved some of the spearheads of the German-Swiss Reformation – Melancthon and Luther, as well as Bibliander himself. Melancthon's *Praemonitio ad lectorem* ('Notice to the Reader') concludes on a combative note and compares the threat to Christianity that emanates from Islam to that from the Pope in Rome. Thus, the work confirmed and spurred an extremely popular Protestant trope: The idea of a double Antichrist, emanating in the West as the Pope in Rome, and in the East as the prophet Muhammad and Islam. This trope started to dominate Protestant Church histories from Melancthon's *Chronicon Carionis*, to the *Magdeburg Centuries* and Johann Heinrich Hottinger's *Historia Ecclesiastica* in the seventeenth century.

But Roman Catholic writers too made ample use of the powerful ideological charge that was represented in the association of confessional enemies with the 'the Turk'. In 1597 William Rainolds presented the most extensive comparison between the 'new heretics' and the 'Turks'. For his *Calvino-Turcismus*, which runs to over a thousand pages, he not only used the Latin Qur'an but

also Bibliander's *Apologia* and other paratexts. Florimond de Raemond, in his anti-Protestant pamphlet *Historia de ortu, progressu, et ruina haereseon huius saeculi* ('History of the Origin, Progress, and Ruin of the Heresies of this Age') from 1605, also presented a list of similarities – from excessive focus on Scripture to the use of violence in the spreading of their faiths – which was again based on his reading of Bibliander's Qur'an and of Protestant literature. Roman polemicists often used Qur'anic vocabulary when writing about their Protestant foes: the second volume of Johann Pistorius' *Anatomia Lutheri* from 1598 not only claims to show Turkish errors in Luther's concept of the Trinity, but also organises Luther's teachings into *azoaras* (i.e. *suras*). In doing this he was probably inspired by Georgius Ecker who, in 1591, presented Luther's doctrine as *Lutheran Alcoran in seventeen azoaras*.

The use of the Qur'an in the debates of the age of confessionalisation was not restricted to polemical comparisons. The Qur'an also played a central role in Protestant 'reconstruction' of the scriptural foundations of Christianity – a central element in the Protestant project to undermine the Papal claim for dogmatic authority. This function again features prominently in Bibliander's Qur'an edition, where Bibliander declares the Qur'an to be the most convenient book through which to learn the Arabic language. As the grammatical norm and as a linguistic archive of the Arabic language, the Qur'an, together with classical Arabic poetry, played a key role in the early modern study of Arabic. This was parti-

cularly the case in Protestant orientalist circles, in which the study of Arabic was aimed at a better understanding of the Hebrew texts of the Old Testament. In the work of the Dutch Hebrew scholar Albert Schultens and many others, the Hebrew of the Old Testament was read through the Arabic of the Qur'an. But not only on a linguistic level could the Qur'an help elucidating Biblical texts. Johann Heinrich Hottinger in Zurich, Samuel Bochart in Caen, Christian Benedict Michaelis in Halle and others used Qur'anic passages to interpret cultural, religious, and natural phenomena they found in the Bible.

I hope that this short essay and our future research will be able to show that the Muslim holy book has never simply represented the 'other', but has been implicit in discussions of the Christian-European self in varying religious, political, philosophical, and cultural contexts. The notion of a 'European Qur'an' can work as a productive and original conceptual tool that will allow us and coming generations to think in novel ways about the shared history of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, and about the central role that the Qur'an played in the epistemological reconfigurations that are at the basis of modern Europe.

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