4-11-2006

The Approaches of Christian Polemicists against Islam

Jessica Ferree
Macalester College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/islam

---

The Approaches of Christian Polemicists against Islam

Jessica Ferree

When studying the writings of early Christian authors, it is intriguing to explore the various arguments and accusations they made against the Islamic religion. Each writer relayed his unique understanding of this new religion and did his best to convey the message that he felt Christians should realize. Although each polemicist had his own approach to the issue, when reading multiple texts that reference the same subject it is difficult for me to identify the subtle differences buried among the many similarities. From the origins of Islam to apocalyptic predictions to miraculous conversion stories, the same ideas were continuously recycled from the 8th to the 14th century. The question that arises from this repetition is simply: why? Why did the authors choose to address certain issues more frequently than others? Why might this create problems for 21st century scholars? This paper will discuss these questions in order to better understand the different approaches put forth by early Christian authors.

To the early Christians, Islam was a new phenomenon – first political then religious – that had to be explained and discredited in order for Christians to justify their role in the religious world. Initially the Christian community felt a need to account for the success of the Arab invasion and the defeat of Christians. They also sought to find a way to survive in the new politically Muslim environment. Some authors resorted to polemics, especially once the community felt threatened religiously, in order to prove Christianity's religious superiority over Islam. One popular tactic was to debase the founder of Islam, the prophet Muhammad, by portraying him as an anti-Christian figure. (Two common interpretations make Muhammad a heresiarch and as associated with the Antichrist.)

Many polemicists used passages from the Bible to produce false prophet accusations. The book of Matthew, states "For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect" (Matt. 24:24, ESV). This verse led writers to conclude that Islam

_____

was a heresy and Muhammad a false prophet. John of Damascus in the eighth century, Paul Alvarus in the ninth, Peter of Cluny in the twelfth, Mark of Toledo in the thirteenth, and Andrea da Barberino in the fourteenth are just a few of the Christian writers who named Muhammad a fraud and his religion illegitimate. To prove this point, the authors went into detailed explanations of Muhammad's flaws. They pointed out that although the Koran permits a Muslim to have four wives, Muhammad took more than four. To prove his lustful behavior, writers also shared the story of Muhammad marrying Zaynab, the divorced wife of his adopted son Zayd (Saracens 29). At times such polemics were combined with insults against the idea of Islamic heaven, which was described as nothing more than a sinful brothel to illustrate that Muhammad was not a divine prophet but a human with earthly and vulgar desires (Saracens 86). Others, like Peter of Cluny, used the standard argument that Muhammad was not a prophet because he never showed any signs of prophecy, performed any miracles, or foretold the future (Saracens 162). Still others, such as Guibert of Nogent, depicted Muhammad as a trickster and a magician who cleverly trained a bull to carry the book of laws and kneel down before Muhammad when it heard his voice, constituting a "miracle" (Saracens 141). In the eyes of Alvarus, Muhammad was not only a heresiarch but also a precursor Antichrist. Alvarus believed that there was no truth outside of Christianity and that people must choose either Christ or Antichrist.   Muhammad rejected the divinity of Christ and therefore represented the Antichrist. Alvarus claimed that the fourth beast found in the book of Daniel was describing the Antichrist Muhammad and his followers (Saracens 90-91). He also took it one step further by rewriting the death of the Prophet as if Muhammad expected to be resurrected like Christ. The body, however, began to rot and was eaten by dogs, thus confirming Muhammad an Antichrist figure (Saracens 92).

These interpretations of Muhammad are only a sample of medieval Christian writings, but it is already apparent how similar topics were debated in many centuries. Arguments about apocalyptic predictions, Muhammad's biography, the Crusades, Islam as an idolatrous religion, and the violence of Saracens occurred frequently during the 700s to 1300s C.E. Why did the polemicists choose to reiterate these arguments (specifically

those against Muhammad's authority), and why was the repetitive approach more successful than those like Roger Bacon's attempt to understand different religions of the world through rational argumentation (Saracens 226)? The authors' lack of access to multiple resources and their personal preferences are partially to blame. In addition, medieval theologians often studied the books of their predecessors and contemporaries before writing a commentary because such writing was a continuation of "the conversation among scholars both living and dead" (Medieval 153). New twists on old ideas could be developed. However, more specific reasons exist for this trend in Christian writing.

The suggestion that Muhammad was lustful and Islam was an earthly religion could have been used for many reasons. First, polygamy is considered unlawful for Christians and it greatly contrasts with the life of a celibate monk. Further, Muhammad not only married his son's divorced wife, he also appeared as an adulterer since the book of Matthew states "And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Matt. 5:32, ESV). Finally, the idea of heaven as a brothel significantly differs from the Christian beliefs of its purity. These accusations aimed to defame the Islamic faith. In addition, the denigration of the Prophet's authority showed Islam as a false religion and therefore undermined the legitimacy of Muslim rule (Saracens 193). The image of Muhammad as the Antichrist was used to provide the readers with an understandable explanation of the role of Islam in the divine scheme. This both prevented Christians from converting and helped them live among Muslims since they knew Islam's ultimate fate. Also, consistent anti-Islamic arguments simply reinforced the idea that Christianity was dependable and superior and that it would prevail. That many authors chose to focus on discrediting Muhammad also makes logical sense. If the founder of the religion is known to be a fraud or a follower of Satan, the spiritual power behind the religion is weakened. This tactic delivered a direct blow to the religion. While Roger Bacon's approach to converting Muslims might seem more feasible to those living in the 21st century, for early Christians, his science was not accepted. It required training, time, and tolerance. Bacon was pushing his ideas in the mid-13th century, and this was a time period in which the

crusades and martyrdom were still popularly supported. His objective was not to destroy the "enemy;" instead he demonstrated tolerance. The success of the polemics did, to some extent, correspond with the time period in which they appeared. Since commentaries were continuously restudied, over the years the same topics may have remained important while specific writings were affected by the situation the writer found most pertinent (Medieval 15). Ultimately, the more popular arguments were ones that resonated with the Christian community and that affected them personally.

For at least six hundred years, the same basic polemical arguments against Islam were made by medieval Christian writers. Living in the 21st century and studying the different collections of writings from various parts of Europe, it is easy to be critical of the polemicists. This paper has already discussed the reasoning behind their tactics, and the focus will now shift towards a contemporary outlook on these points of interest.

After analyzing the arguments mentioned previously in this paper, I conclude that my disagreement with early Christians generates mainly from the difference in time periods. As I mentioned earlier, Roger Bacon sought to convert Muslims to Christianity through the use of rational argumentation. He felt that the crusades only made the Saracens more hostile towards Christianity and that proper education in different languages and philosophical argumentation could be very successful in producing converts (Saracens 226). That his work failed to gain this success surprised me. I do not agree with all of his assertions, since he also depicts Muhammad as a false prophet, but I do associate his ideas with a more "Christian-like" attitude than going to war or purposely insulting another's beliefs. My 21st century bias drew me to Bacon because his greater tolerance of religion related to my opinion of what is considered Christian behavior. This opinion relates the objections I have to the numerous stories fabricated by the early writers. Writers like Alvarus clearly held a strong dislike for Islam, whether they truly believed the stories they devised or if they felt the story better illustrated their point. Very few attempted to report the hard facts, which is what bothers me.

There are a few reasons why the polemicists would shy away from the truth: first, their lack of access to knowledge of the

_____

truth about Islam, and second, their fear that Christians would convert to Islam and accept a religion they felt was ungodly. However legitimate the justification to do otherwise, my view of Christianity includes the presence of the commandment that instructs not to bear false witness to one's neighbors. As such, it is difficult to understand how writers could be satisfied with deliberately falsifying their arguments. Despite my criticism of the polemicists, I acknowledge that while their polemical decisions may not correspond with my own opinions, I hold the benefit of hindsight and have a greater opportunity to understand the "truth" about Islam.

The polemics were written with the intent of demonstrating the superiority of the Christian faith. By using a single approach that demeaned the name of Muhammad, early theologians were able to conjure an image of Islam that depicted it as a false, sinful, and devil-supporting religion. This strategy, although continually reused for centuries, was successful at receiving attention. This interest has even lasted into the 21st century where intellectuals are still attempting to decipher the reasoning of certain commentaries and the goals of others. It is because of this never ending examination of historical Christian writings that it is possible to compare them to similar commentaries of that time as well as with the outlook of someone in the 21st century. These comparisons have furthered the understanding of the different approaches applied by early Christian polemicists.

Works Cited

The Holy Bible. Matt. Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2002.
Tolan, John V. Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam. Vol. 1768. New York: Routledge, 1996.   3-393.
Tolan, John V. Saracens. New York: Columbia UP, 2002. 3-283.