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A Spiritual Reaction to Islamic Prosperity

The Power of Sorrow in Riccoldo da Monte di Croce's Letters to the Triumphant Church

"L'appel de l'Eglise militante est d'abord expatriement,
puis élection de la patrie."

Louis Massignon, *Les trois prières d'Abraham père de tous les croyants*, 1949

DID RICCOLDO EXPERIENCE A CRISIS OF FAITH?

On 18 May 1291, after a bloody siege of 43 days, the Mamluk sultan al-Ashraf Khalil and his army conquered St John of Acre (today Akko, Israel), the last outpost of the crusader states in the Near East. After the Christian occupation of the city following the First Crusade (1104), Acre had become the main seaport in the Eastern Mediterranean, working as a pivotal trade hub for the provision of goods and food for Jerusalem and the Latin Levant. At the same time, it was one of the main headquarters of the Knights Templar, the Hospitallers, and the Teutonic Order, which among other tasks were entrusted to grant Christian pilgrims safe access to the Holy Land.[1] The loss of Acre was understood by Latin Christians as both a political catastrophe and an upsetting turning point in salvation history. Since the rise of Islam in the early 7th century, the capture of Christian capitals by Muslim forces had left a deep imprint on the Western Christian imagination: in the perception of Christian chroniclers and religious writers, the Mamluk conquest of Acre was just the most recent of a huge series of stunning defeats that Muslims had inflicted on Christianity over the previous 700 years, from Damascus to Jerusalem, and from Antioch to Lebanese Tripoli. Prophetical proclamations and eschatological expectations overflowed in the West.[2]

1 See Tommasi 1996; Lotan 2012; Musarra 2017.
2 See Musarra 2018, pp. 15–32, 65–79.

Ten years after the fall of Acre, the Italian Dominican friar Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (*c.* 1243–1320) wrote about Islamic doctrine and Muslims' religious practices, basing his arguments on refined scholastic knowledge as well as his own experience in the Near East. With his four Latin works concerning non-Catholic peoples—among which the "Saracens" have a key role—he places himself among the learned ecclesiastics who, through the late Middle Ages, attempted to decipher and withstand the rapid expansion of Islam by writing treatises against its doctrine, translating the Qur'an, and preaching against Muslim belief and practices in both Christian territories and Islamic lands. His literary corpus, though produced at the Convent of Santa Maria Novella in Florence between 1300 and 1301, draws extensively on his ten-year mission from Jerusalem to Baghdad (1289–1299). It consists of (1) a book of travels describing his route, the places he visited, the peoples he met and engaged with in the Near East (*Itinerarium* or *Liber peregrinationis*); (2) a handbook for missionaries willing to leave for the East to evangelize Oriental peoples (*Libellus ad naciones orientales*); (3) a collection of five imaginary letters conceived as a reaction to the fall of Acre into the Mamluks' hands (*Epistole ad Ecclesiam triumphantem*); and finally, (4) a systematic polemic against the Qur'an, well known among scholars as *Contra legem Sarracenorum*.[3]

This latter treatise achieved, in Europe and beyond, an impressive popularity amongst Christian readers between the late medieval and the modern times, exerting a great influence upon the Christian understanding of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an. Two examples shall suffice: the German humanist Nicholas of Cusa mentioned Riccoldo's *Contra legem* in the preface to his *Cribratio Alkorani* dedicated to Pope Pius II (1462) and used it to frame his arguments on the relation between faith and rites, claiming that it was the most authoritative source amongst the books on Islam he had collected between Rome and Byzantium; 80 years later, Martin Luther translated it into German (1542) and relied on it for his polemical invectives against the Turks. As the third part of these proceedings show, starting from the early 16th century, humanists and ecclesiastics (both Catholic and Orthodox) employed manuscript or printed Latin versions of *Contra legem* to write about Islam and, in a series of relevant cases, translated it into vernacular and Slavic languages to outline their analysis of the Muslims they met or imagined in their own days—Arabs, Moriscos, Tartars and Ottoman Turks.[4]

3 Dondaine 1967; Mérigoux & Panella 1986; Mérigoux 1986, including (at pp. 60–142) an edition of *Contra legem* according to one manuscript only, i.e., MS Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Conv. soppr. C 8.1173, f. 185r–218r; Panella 1988.

4 See the respective contributions in this volume.

Riccoldo is much better known for this polemical treatise than his five letters on the fall of Acre on which this chapter focuses. The complete version of the *Epistole ad Ecclesiam triumphantem* is solely preserved by MS Vat. Lat. 7317, a deteriorated codex kept at the Vatican Library whose main *corpus* was copied down in Rome in April 1458 by the German scribe Arnold Melxter of Welm, a presbyter from Cologne working for Cardinal Domenico Capranica. In this rich collection of writings on the Islamic Orient and the Holy Land, Riccoldo's *Epistole* (ff. 249r–267r) and his *Contra legem* (ff. 267r–300r) are written one after the other by Melxter's hand.[5] A second 15th-century manuscript kept in Florence provides a 14th-century translation into Italian of the first letter and a few passages from the second, bearing witness to a certain interest in this work and in the *Liber peregrinationis* in late medieval Tuscany.[6]

Despite these poor traces, the contents of the *Epistole* cannot be underestimated. It has been observed that they are "of rare kind in the travel literature of the time".[7] The association with this literary genre must be due to the fact that the medieval Italian version of the first letter is handed down with Riccoldo's *Liber peregrinationis* and that their modern translations in both Italian (2005) and English (2012), in a similar fashion, provide these two texts together.[8] The uncertainty regarding its literary definition, together with the fact that in them Riccoldo does not narrate the stages of his journey but rather references his previous *Liber*, should suggest, however, a different perspective. If read fully and systematically, the *Epistole* involve rather two other genres of Christian literature: on the one hand, they echo the model of city lament harking back to the Book of Lamentations and repeated numerous times down to the Ottoman conquest of Byzantium and beyond; on the other hand, they provide, through peculiar autobiographical and soteriological devices, a commentary on the Book of Psalms and the Book of Job, the latter being reinterpreted in light of Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Iob*.

In the letters, Riccoldo's thorough knowledge of Arabic and Islamic doctrine merges artfully with his ability to provide Christians with heartening spiritual reasons to keep fighting against Islam and the Muslim dominance in the Near East. Besides displaying classical polemical arguments against Muhammad's prophethood and the contents of the Qur'an, these letters represent a unique proof of how a shocking event may

5 On the relevance of this manuscript within the production, transcription and dissemination of Christian works on Islam in Rome after the Ottoman conquest of Byzantium, including Riccoldo's writings, see Scotto 2023.

6 Panella 1989.

7 Shagrir 2012, p. 1108.

8 Ricoldo da Montecroce, *Libro della peregrinazione—Epistole alla Chiesa trionfante*, ed. Cappi 2005; George-Tvrtković 2012.

give rise to complex theological and exegetical reflections on the reasons behind global crisis and the spread of a religious system that was perceived as competitive, antagonistic and challenging to Christianity. Polemics, moralization and complaints are not to be considered as final aims nor as emotional realities in their own right, but rather as discursive strategies entailed by sophisticated letters that, at the same time and paradoxically, speak ultimately about the future of Christians, salvation history and hope in God's unforeseeable plan.

This chapter lingers on how the threatening presence of Muslims in the East allowed Riccoldo to develop a creative meditation on faith, a refined theological and rhetorical manifesto providing the author and his readers with a spiritual shelter from the dramatic events taking place on earth. I am going to examine in particular Riccoldo's experience of "sorrow"—one of the possible translations of the Latin word *tristicia*—by looking specifically at the ways in which he describes his faith in God. I will show how, on a rhetorical level, Riccoldo's exegesis of the Book of Job through Gregory the Great turns out to be the exhortative backbone of the whole collection of his imaginary letters. Referring to Job, it has been claimed that the *Epistole* bear witness to the author's spiritual crisis, particularly to his crisis of faith, as well as to his loss of certainty and hope in God's plan—this implies an interpretation of the Book of Job in a deterministic, literalist and pessimistic fashion.[9] I aim to challenge this interpretation of the *Epistole* as a desperate lament conceived by an author who finds himself incapable of escaping a fatalistic view of the present, realistically confused regarding God's salvation plan and even suffering from agnosticism. I will demonstrate that by means of careful exegetical and rhetorical strategies, the *Epistole* instead provide substantial evidence of Riccoldo's very faith vis-à-vis the general crisis surrounding him, shedding light on his expectations about the reaction of the Dominican Order—and the Western Church on a broader level—to the last stage of Islamic expansion. According to the theological perspective embraced by the author, speaking about sorrow and dramatic events on the earth does not necessarily result in a pessimistic view of faith nor hampers him—despite the expression of profound concerns about the present—from suggesting a way to regain hope and thus safeguard salvation.

9 See Shagrir 2012. A more context-bound interpretation of Riccoldo's sadness—understood in light of the medieval concept of desperation—was previously provided by Weltecke 2007. Some notes on the autobiographical implication of Riccoldo's self-representation have been provided by Bauer 2021b.

ISLAMIC PROSPERITY, CHRISTIAN DOWNFALL: A DUALISTIC BACKGROUND

Though fictitiously set in different moments of Riccoldo's stay in Baghdad, his five letters were intentionally written as one consistent literary work and likely finalized soon after his return to Florence in late 1299. As Davide Cappi has shown in his introduction to the Italian translation of the letters, the work's literary coherence is proved by its narrative frame, consisting of the preface and the last short letter. Following a circular narrative, these two texts, which begin with the same incipit, provide questions and answers about God's plan that are closely interrelated.[10] Despite Riccoldo providing the writing place of each letter—*scripta in Oriente* for letters 1 to 4, *data in Oriente* for letter 5—it has been rightly inferred that he left the Orient long before finalizing his epistolary work. Given the cross-references and the refinement of his literary strategy, this must certainly be the case, and yet, though already in Florence, he insists on the fact that he experienced the fall of a Christian capital while dwelling alone (*solus*) amongst Muslims, meaning that he was still engaged as a missionary in Baghdad or elsewhere in the Near East. The writing place notwithstanding, this experience-based pattern works as a hermeneutic key in each of the five letters, where the author repeatedly complains about his being abandoned by his Dominican brethren and stranded in the Orient far from his physical and spiritual home: "I have been left alone in Baghdad, in the depths of the East, by my companions, and for many years I have had no news from the West about my brothers or my Order."[11] It seems, moreover, that Riccoldo had written several times to the General Minister of the Dominicans, Munio de Zamora, who in winter 1288 had presented and supported his missionary purpose before the Franciscan pope, Nicholas IV, getting, however, no answer from him: "Likewise, I do not know what happened to the master who sent

10 Cappi 2005, 'Introduzione', in Ricoldo da Montecroce, *Libro della peregrinazione*, pp. xli–xlii.

11 I am quoting the text of the *Epistole* according to the only extant manuscript, i.e., the idiographic MS Vat. Lat. 7317, whose online edition Emilio Panella has provided and revised several times in the last two decades, here f. 252v: "Et relictus sum solus in Baldacco a sociis in profundis partibus orientis, et de occidente a pluribus annis aliqua nova non habeo de fratribus meis sive de ordine." Most recently, Martin Bauer provided a new edition of the text, which I was able to obtain just after writing this chapter. I am referencing it beside the Florence manuscript: Ricoldus de Monte Crucis, *Epistole ad Ecclesiam triumphantem*, ed. Bauer 2021a, p. 98, § 26. In the text above, I reference the English translation provided by George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 145.

me, because I have not received any scrap of a response to the numerous tearful letters I sent him requesting help."[12]

At the end of the prologue of *Contra legem*, which was certainly written after the letters, Riccoldo gives an account of the origin and intention of his previous epistolary work: the events he witnessed in the Orient were so astonishing to him that he felt the need to give up learning Arabic and studying Islamic doctrine to address an urgent call to "the Celestial Court". His ongoing work on the Qur'an—translation and exegesis—and the news of the dramatic events from Acre—chronicle and salvation history—turn out to be closely intertwined:

> As I was also beginning to translate this law into Latin, I found at the same time so many fabrications, lies, blasphemies and uninterrupted fiction through it all, that I became full of sadness [*attediatus*] and gave up [*dimittere*]. Instead, I wrote some letters to the church triumphant about such blasphemies, where I lamented greatly in that bitter state of mind [*animus amaricatus*].[13]

Following a precise hierarchical order, Riccoldo rhetorically addresses the first four letters respectively to the living God, the Virgin Mary, the Militant and Triumphant Church, the patriarch of Jerusalem Nicholas de Hanapes, who drowned in the sea during the siege of Acre, and other unnamed Dominicans who died as martyrs to defend their city. The fifth letter consists of a brief answer by God to the author's complaints. The five letters are known under two titles conceived and used alternatively by the author. Both are significant. In the prologue of *Contra legem*, Riccoldo mentions them as *Letters to the Triumphant Church*, a title that points to the troops of saints in heaven victoriously enjoying God's glory after the resurrection of Christ, as opposed to the living believers who suffer and strive for salvation as members of the Militant Church on the earth waiting for the second resurrection of Christ. The well-rooted concept of Triumphant Church harks back to the early Church Fathers and

12 Riccoldo, *Epistole*, *Epistola* I, ed. Panella, f. 252v: "Magistro eciam, qui me misit, nescio quid accidit, quia de multis et lacrimosis litteris quas ei pro succursu transmisi nec cedulam aliquam responsionis accepi." Cf. ed. Bauer 2021a, p. 98, § 26. Cf. English trans. George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 145. See also *Epistola* III, ed. Panella, f. 256r.

13 The translation of *Contra legem* is mine, as the only English translation available is unreliable, being based on Martin Luther's German translation of Bartholomeus da Monte Arduo's Latin translation of the Greek translation by Demetrios Kydones: see Riccoldo of Monte Croce OP, *Refutation of the Koran*, trans. Londini Ensis 2010, p. 7, where it is claimed that Riccoldo decreased the number of his *Letters to the Triumphant Church*.

was extensively elaborated upon by Augustine, providing a theological pattern with which the whole Dominican order, at the beginning of the 14th century, identified itself and its anti-heretical programme.[14]

The concept of Triumphant Church is pivotal to understanding Riccoldo's argumentative strategies. In a skilful way, he systematically correlates the intercession of saints and their spiritual power to intervene in this world to the damages made by Muhammad and the Qur'an. A variant of the work's title is found in both the *titulus* and preface of the letters, wherein they are mentioned as *Letters on the Saracens' temporal prosperity and the destruction of Christians.* This short description perfectly reflects the two-fold argument of each letter. Riccoldo complains about Christian suffering in the Orient and simultaneously expresses deep concerns regarding the successful spread of Islam. In his recurring description of the Near East in the depressing aftermath of the fall of Acre, the splendour of Muslim endeavours in terms of expansion and conquests is dualistically opposed to the physical annihilation and the spiritual weakness of present Christians: "I saw Saracens prosperous and flourishing," Riccoldo writes, "and Christians squalid and dismayed as their daughters, young children, and elders were taken away crying, amid rumours that they were to be forced into prison and slavery among barbarian nations in the remotest parts of the East."[15] He also observes that the law they strictly follow and claim to be God's word, namely the Qur'an, is globally honoured regardless of its blasphemy against his God and the Celestial Court. The friar's insistence on his role of eyewitness and his legitimizing recourse to the concept of experience (*experiencia*) have proved fundamental to the understanding of his writings.[16] Complaining about the fact that God's angels pray for Muhammad and assist the Muslims, he underlines the value of experience as a proof of Islamic

14 Evidence of this self-understanding—worthy of further investigation—is provided by Andrea Bonaiuto's fresco on the western side of the so-called Chiostro Verde of the Convent of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. For the anti-heretical programme of the Dominican Order underlying this fresco, see Polzer 1995.

15 Riccoldo, *Epistole*, *Prologus*, ed. Panella, f. 249r: "[...] cum viderem sarracenos letissimos atque florentes, christianos vero squalidos atque mente consternatos, cum puelle eorum et parvuli et senes cum uxoribus ad partes remotissimas orientis inter barbaras naciones captivi et sclavi menabantur gementes [...]." Cf. ed. Bauer 2021a, p. 82, § 1. Cf. English trans. George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 138.

16 This concept has proved essential to Riccoldo's theological arguing and inter-faith insights: see George-Tvrtković 2012, pp. 108–120.

successes, reiterating that "we have seen through experience that they have prospered in almost everything."[17]

SCRUTINIZING MEDIEVAL SORROW (*TRISTICIA*) IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JOB

The author's complaint about the fall of Acre is symbolically recalled by the Latin transliteration of א, "aleph", the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet used at the end of this title with exclamatory meaning. In medieval Latin literature, aleph was used as an expression of pain, a choice that is continued in these letters and accompanied by a series of consistent Latin substantives (*tristicia*, *admiracio, stupor*), adjectives (*afflictus*) or verbs (*obstupescere*) meaning sorrow, astonishment and distress. Riccoldo employs these expressions extensively as a *leitmotiv* to describe his current psychological and spiritual state. The Christianized use of the Hebrew aleph as an incipit is modelled after the beginning of the Book of Lamentations attributed to Jeremiah. The first lament begins with the word אֵיכָה, "how", which is, according to the manuscript tradition, the Hebrew title of this biblical book. The initial aleph works as the first of a series of acrostics following verse by verse the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In Riccoldo's letters, the biblical complaint about the fall of Jerusalem into Babylonian hands from 587 BC is symbolically merged with the his personal complaint about the fall of Acre into the hands of the Mamluks from AD 1291. Alongside the Book of Job and the Book of Psalms, the Book of Lamentations must have deeply influenced the composition of the *Epistoles ad Ecclesiam triumphantem* for at least three reasons. First, for the theology of retribution they both imply: Jerusalem is conquered by the Babylonians *nostris peccatis exigentibus*, that is, because of the grave sins of the Israelites, and so is Acre by the Mamluks because of Christian sins. Second, for the linguistic register they employ: a rhetoric of emotions aimed at exaggerating and provoking in order to convey other and less immediate meanings. Finally, for the formal structure of both works: five poems or laments in the biblical book, five letters to the Church Triumphant.

In the five rules for missionaries provided in the appendix of his *Libellus ad naciones orientales*, Riccoldo claims that (1) missionaries should not preach to non-Catholics by means of a translator or interpreter, being concerned about the unreliability of merchants; (2) they must "be creative and cultivated in the Scriptures and not rely on

17 Riccoldo, *Epistole*, *Epistola* III, ed. Panella, f. 260v: "et nos post hec per experienciam probamus quod quasi in omnibus prosperantur." Cf. ed. Bauer 2021a, p. 138, § 54. Cf. English trans. George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 161.

our comments"; (3) they have to carefully comprehend the behaviours, concerns and doctrines of each sect they aim to evangelize, religious rites playing a secondary role with respect to the unity of faith; (4) they shall always debate matters of faith with the leaders of each sect, avoiding the involvement of ignorant peoples and the discussion of overly complicated issues of doctrine; finally, (5) it is not enough for a missionary to be well educated, sensitive towards each sect and enlightened in his mind; in addition to that—implying that the requirements previously expressed in the four rules were insufficient—the missionary must be passionate, fervent and tireless, guided by God's love and by his own, strong will towards saving peoples' souls, to the point that he was willing to risk his own life in order to accomplish this goal.[18] Half a century ago, the pioneer of studies of Riccoldo's manuscripts, the Dominican scholar Antoine Dondaine, considered the *regule* as "the most concrete and pragmatic page, but also the most wise and imbued with common sense, that medieval apologetic literature left to us", and in fact, Riccoldo's "spiritual testament".[19] Nevertheless, they have been left, in terms of contents, largely unexplored by scholars.

The second of these rules sheds new light upon Riccoldo's call for proper and direct use of the Scriptures among non-Catholics. The way he outlines the functioning of God's judgements in light of the Islamic conquest of Acre as well as the nuances whereby he displays his feelings of sadness and abandonment is a clear example of the centrality of scriptural exegesis in medieval inter-faith debates, in particular in controversies regarding thorny issues of conversion and evangelization.[20] Proof of Riccoldo's inclination to establishing an intensive hermeneutical dialogue with the Scriptures—including the Qur'an—is obvious in the narrative structure of the five letters, wherein the Bible is the hegemonic source on both a literary and a theological level. The way of citing it—extensively, verbatim, directly—is based on the psychological implementation of First Testament models in the present times of crisis, when the Militant Church is suffering from the expansion of Islam. The only (so to speak) biblical commentary quoted by Riccoldo is Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Iob*, whose importance is to be understood, however, in the light of the fifth letter—God's answer to Riccoldo—and the circular literary structure of the *Epistole*. Gregory is fundamental insofar as he represents a theological and spiritual *auctoritas*, not because of his exegetical technique applied to the Book of Job,[21] nor because it is to be used—as the second rule suggests

18 *Riccoldi florentini libelli ad nationes orientales editio secunda telina*, online ed. Villads Jensen, 2014. On Riccoldo's reflection on the role of Christian martyrs in the fight against Islam, see Scotto 2021a.

19 Dondaine 1967, p. 141.

20 See Szpiech 2012.

21 See Lampe 1976.

avoiding—among non-Catholics. Gregory is, as we shall see, the key figure in understanding Riccoldo's message to his brethren and to Western Christianity on a broader level.

The Book of Jeremiah, the Book of Isaiah, the Book of Psalms and, most extensively, the Book of Job are the biblical authorities referenced to nourish both the lament and the search for meanings that constitute the twofold backbone of the five letters. Thomas Burman has defined Riccoldo's *Epistole* as "his Job-like demand for answers", suggesting an interpretation worth developing further.[22] When one looks carefully at the five letters as a single consistent literary work, it is indeed apparent the extent to which its narrative strategy is based on a systematic inquiry into the Book of Job, consulted and mentioned verbatim in order to answer the basic questions on Islam raised in the preface of the letters: how to explain the temporal prosperity of Muslims? Why are they vanquishing Christians, who in turn are disappearing in the Orient? Is God enacting his salvation plan according to the Bible or the Qur'an? It is in light of this specific uncertainty related to God's intentions regarding Oriental and Western Christians—not of Riccoldo's faith in God on a broader and generic level—that Job's mournful words are quoted in key passages of each letter and with different goals: to call for God's response to the present crisis; to give reason for the Muslims' prosperity; to beg God for mercy turning to the saints and martyrs for help; to remind potential readers of the author's sadness and solitude; to question the agency of evil in relation to dramatic events, such as the conversion and the death of Dominicans at Muslim hands. This last was a typical issue of theodicy in turn inspired by the Book of Job.

Riccoldo's rhetorical discourse reflects the edifying and paradoxical narrative underlying the Book of Job. The psychological scheme behind the *Epistole* echoes the plot and the rhetoric of the biblical book. The experience of alienation, estrangement, loneliness and distance from all that is familiar to the righteous protagonist is the result of God's inexplicable and undeserved punishment disrupting Job's life in every respect. In chapter 19, Job complains of having been abandoned by relatives and friends, of having been treated as a stranger by those who were the closest to him: "He hath put my brethren far from me, and mine acquaintances are verily estranged from me. / My kinsfolk have failed, and my familiar friends have forgotten me. / They that dwell in mine house, and my maids, count me as a stranger; I am an alien in their sight" (Job 19:13–15). So does, *mutatis mutandi*, Riccoldo acting as *alter Iob*. Despite Job's immense suffering, which the scholastic and moralistic mentality of his friend-theologians cannot in any way explain, he does not give up. On the contrary, he ardently desires his oral appeal to be inscribed in a book that, according to the prophetic tradition

22 Burman 2012, p. 681.

that runs through the First Testament and reaches the sealed book of the Revelation, must be materially preserved forever so that the prophetical appeal may be disclosed, endure, become perpetual and universal. Again, Riccoldo does precisely the same with his letters. *Post factum*, the sufferer becomes capable of looking beyond earthly sorrows because, when he writes, he has already overcome them "by experience".

Scholars of the Bible have deemed the finale of the book to be a standalone parable pandering to the popular readership of that time and context. It depicts Job as a rich, powerful Oriental man abandoned to lust and wealth, vices and satisfactions allowed him by God as a compensation for the suffering he has long endured. If one reads the finale through a tropological lens, however, it is not earthly glorification that ultimately interests the protagonist of the story, nor his coming back to the state of life that he had possessed before God's will turned against him.[23] Having survived his mortal exile, Job—regardless of the material shape of his new life—shows himself willing to disclose the right path to those who still suffer on the earth, formulating a *confessio fidei* that, for the very reason that it is imbued with pain, can convince those who doubt and are tempted to give up to seek salvation in the afterlife: "Oh, that my words were now written! Oh, that they were printed in a book, / that they were graven with an iron pen and lead, in the rock for ever! / For I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; / and though after my skin, worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19:23–26). Like Job inaugurating a new life and Moses on Mount Sinai (cf. Job 42:5; Exodus 33:11), Riccoldo too strives to see God "face to face" (פנים אל פנים) to obtain an answer not only for himself—committed as he is to understanding the apparent contradictions of the divine plan by comparing the Bible and the Qur'an in the light of Oriental events—but to point out to the Dominican Order and the whole *Ecclesia militans*, if not a well-defined solution, at least a spiritual attitude that cannot be renounced.[24]

GREGORY THE GREAT AND THE RISE OF ISLAM: A CREATIVE JUXTAPOSITION

The hegemonic presence of the Book of Job amongst the other biblical writings that inspired the *Epistole* must be the result of Riccoldo's admiration for Gregory the Great. To write his letters, the Florentine friar certainly read Gregory's *Moralia in*

23 See, among hundreds of exegetical proposals and research perspectives, the commentaries, made out of different cultural agendas, by Ceronetti 1972; Spreafico 2013; Ravasi 2020.

24 This is precisely what he recommends missionaries to do in the fifth and—in his opinion—most important of his five *regules generales*. See note 18 above and the respective text.

Job, or at least, a florilegium or epitome of this exceptional commentary, which was widely available in medieval libraries. Riccoldo's consideration for Gregory is made explicit in the third of his letters—addressed "to the whole Militant and Triumphant Church"—where the pope finds a place on an extensive list of saints dwelling in Heaven. Riccoldo summons them one by one, evoking their laudable spiritual characters to arrest the expansion of Islam by calling for their power of intercession. It is not by chance that Gregory's intellectual and exegetical fight against the Antichrist is at the core of his portrait, which turns out to be particularly extensive compared to other descriptions of saints and martyrs. In this portrait, Gregory's *Moralia* is explicitly mentioned as both an authoritative work for Christians and an object of robbery and ransom in the Muslims' hands:

> O Saint Gregory, O mind devoted to God, O examiner of hearts and regulator of morals! You have written many useful things in your works (above all in your *Moralia*), not against Mahomet, but rather against the devil and his imitators, against the antichrist and his imitators. But behold, one of the greatest imitators of the devil, that famous precursor of the antichrist, Mahomet, is avenging himself against you! For a little after your time, he arose and corrupted morals and virtues in his Qur'an. He has implanted vices in order to quietly extinguish the Christian faith. He has destroyed Christian cities and churches, and now it has been seven hundred years since he has prevailed by the force of his arms. And after they destroyed Acre, they brought your book *Moralia* all the way to the great city of Nineveh. For it was there that I ransomed your book as if it were a captive slave who had found itself removed from Christendom more than a fifty days' journey by camel in all directions.[25]

25 Riccoldo, *Epistole*, *Epistola* III, ed. Panella, f. 258r: "O sancte Gregori, o mens Deo devota, o rimator cordium et ordinator morum! In tuis operibus, et maxime in tuis Moralibus, unquam scripsisti unquam aliquid contra Machometum; plura contra dyabolum et contra imitatores eius, contra antichristum et imitatores eius, utilia ubi multa inveni. Nam parum post tua tempora surrexit et in suo alchorano mores corrupit et virtutes, vicia inseruit, fidem christianam molliter extinguere(?), civitates et ecclesias christianorum destruxit; et nunc fere septingentis annis, armis et viribus prevalet. Et postquam destruxerunt Accon, librum tuum Moralium portaverunt usque prope 'Ninivem civitatem grandem'. Ibi enim librum tuum quasi captivum sclavum redemi, qui distabat a christianitate ex omni parte plusquam quinquaginta dietas cameli." Cf. ed. Bauer, 2021a, pp. 124–126, § 24–25. Cf. English trans. George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 156.

There is no doubt that the choice of Job as an alter ego suitable for conveying Riccoldo's complaints about the fall of Acre to Christian readers results from Gregory's influence. In the letters, Riccoldo draws verbatim from the *Moralia* three times. First (*Moralia*, Preface, 5), when he aims to justify the sins of the Muslims, which "many among them" committed "more out of ignorance than wickedness", thus leaving the option open for their conversion.[26] This is in line with what the friar writes in *Liber peregrinationis*, where he claims to appreciate Muslims' piety, morality, hospitality and zealousness in religious rites, prizing their wholesome life over that of Christians while simultaneously arguing against the malicious law of the Qur'an.[27] Secondly (*Moralia*, Book IV, 28), when he seeks to awaken his Dominican brethren from the "tranquillity" of their "contemplation" (*sompnus contemplacionis*), urging them to react to the present crisis from their peaceful shelter in heaven in order to prevent future victories by the Muslims.[28] Finally (*Moralia*, Book XXIII, 19, with some variants), when he exhorts Christian believers to search for answers in the Scriptures by relying on the examples of their predecessors. This last quotation, one page long, is recorded in the fifth letter, which according to its *titulus* was written "through the doctrine of Blessed Pope Gregory" and, in fact, proves to be entirely inspired by the *Moralia in Iob*. Riccoldo makes clear his attitude towards the Scriptures by recalling Gregory's teachings: "In scripture we will, in fact, find all our trials, if we look. Thus, in scripture, everything which we endure individually is answered collectively. The lives of those who came before serve as an example for those who follow, and so on."[29]

26 Riccoldo, *Epistole*, *Epistola* III, ed. Panella, f. 263r: "Multi enim ex eis, ex ignorari potius quam ex malitia peccant." Cf. ed. Bauer 2021, p. 148, § 76. Cf. English trans. George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 165.

27 See chapters 22–29 of the *Liber*, edited in Riccold de Monte Croce, *Pérégrination en Terre Sainte et au Proche Orient: Texte latin et traduction—Lettres sur la chute de Saint-Jean d'Acre: Traduction*, ed. Kappler 1997, pp. 36–205. On the importance of Riccoldo's understanding of Muslims' "works of perfection", see George-Tvrtković 2012, pp. 48–68.

28 Riccoldo, *Epistole*, *Epistola* IV, ed. Panella, f. 265v: "Rogo vos, fratres, propter Deum et vestras sanguinolentas tunicas, quod non differatis tantum nos iuvare, quod sompnus vestre contemplacionis transeat et postea obliviscamini totum et nichil fiat." Cf. ed. Bauer 2021a, 162, § 28. Cf. English trans. George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 170. Commenting upon Job 3:13, Gregory the Great understands Job's sleep as an act of contemplation of God the Creator: hence Riccoldo's metaphor. See Ricoldo da Montecroce, *Libro della peregrinazione*, p. 200, n. 223.

29 Riccoldo, *Epistole*, *Epistola* V, ed. Panella, f. 266v: "In scripturis quippe causas nostras si requirimus, invenimus. Ita enim nobis omnibus in eo quod specialiter patimur comuniter respondetur; ibi vita precedentium fit forma sequencium etcetera." Cf. ed. Bauer 2021a, p. 168, § 8. Cf. English trans. George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 172.

Turning back to the present, Riccoldo explicitly relates the sacredness of Gregory's *Moralia* to the current Muslim conquests and the suffering of Christians. To do so, he resorts to a striking autobiographical episode set in the East, in particular along his route to Baghdad. Its veracity aside, the episode bears witness to the rhetorical strategy adopted by Riccoldo when discussing the various damages made by Islam among Oriental Christians, thus urging a reaction among Western Christians. The threat of Islam affected not just Christian doctrine through the spread of the Qur'an, but also the intellectual and cultural legacy of Christianity, which books emblematically symbolize. Riccoldo goes on by telling of when he personally rescued the above-mentioned copy of Gregory's *Moralia* from the hands of the Mamluks who, after the conquest of Acre, seized it "as if it was a captive slave" and brought it to Niniveh, "the great city". The phenomenon of the material abduction of a Christian book with the consequent risk of its profanation is also expressed in the letters through the example of a Christian missal stolen by the Muslims together with a copy of the Gospels and one of Paul's letters. In Nineveh, "fifty days by camel distant from each side of Christianity", Muslims made use of these books to assemble a timpani and a drum: their binding was destroyed and their text erased. Clearly, Gregory's *Moralia* is put on the same spiritual level of holy books as Paul's letters and the canonical Gospels. This insistence on the removal of authoritative books from the hands of Christians, as well as on the physical isolation of Nineveh amid Islamic lands, underlines the risk for Christianity—unless it reacts in a prompt and adequate way—to find itself confined in a spiritual and physical exile.

Considering the prevailing presence of Gregory in all five letters, I suggest that Riccoldo was inspired by the *Moralia in Iob* also in his interpretation of Muhammad as the forerunner of the Antichrist. The theological Christian conception according to which the rise of Islam is regarded as an earthly plague, God's punishment for Christians' sins and the forerunner of the Antichrist, harkens back to Syriac and Greek literature reacting to the early expansion of Islam, with further development in the West taking place through biblical commentaries and spiritual treatises.[30] Elaborating upon this well-established trope, in Riccoldo's letters the horns of the apocalyptic Beast (Daniel 8:4; Revelation 13:1–7), which arose to persecute the saints and persuade them to deny their faith, are projected onto Muhammad, who in turn acts to bring both Christians and their books into the Islamic realm. Referring to his own days and the last era of Christian salvation history, Riccoldo adds that the Beast's evil power is long lasting.[31] In the second letter, he looks at Gregory's work to confront Muhammad,

30 Ducellier 2001; Flori 2007; Conterno 2014; Potestà 2016.

31 For further analysis of Riccoldo's interpretation of the Antichrist's role in the Christian fight against Islam, see Scotto 2021b, pp. 363–394.

who again is described as the Beast of the Apocalypse. Riccoldo claims that in spite of the fact that Gregory, whom he calls for help, never wrote against Muhammad, he provides great support to Christians when in the *Moralia* he brilliantly argues against the Antichrist and his sect. Considering that "sect" is the same word that Riccoldo, following Peter the Venerable's interpretation of Islam, repeatedly employs to label Muslims, the connection between Gregory's times and the present is clear. Riccoldo coherently dates the rise of Muhammad back to a few years after Gregory's time (AD 590–604) and interpreted it as the devil's revenge for the pope's successful efforts in repelling the Beast and its followers. Since the Antichrist had suffered a shameful defeat by Gregory, he returned to persecute humanity on the earth by means of a new threat, namely the Islamic one. Riccoldo creatively juxtaposes Gregory's call against the Antichrist expressed in the *Moralia* to his own call against Islam expressed in his letters.

FLAUNTING FAITH: THE EXHORTATIVE AIM OF THE LETTERS

As a conclusion, the discussion of how Job's lament is overlaid onto a late 13th-century scenario allows for an examination of Riccoldo's remarks on his own faith when challenged by the Islamic expansion and its success among Oriental Christians. These observations had to be of great importance to Riccoldo's intended audience. The genre largely based on scriptural exegesis and the theological sophistication of this epistolary work suggests that it was primarily addressed to Dominicans based in the Italian Peninsula and in Europe at a broader level. While Pope Boniface VIII and Pope Clement V promoted the crusade without achieving any result,[32] Dominicans were engaged in the debate about the usefulness of preaching and doctrinal refutation for the conversion of Muslims.[33] And yet, with some exceptions, they were generally ignorant or even indifferent to Islamic doctrines and religious practices.[34] Besides his Dominican brethren, Riccoldo might have addressed Franciscan missionaries eager to preach in Islamic lands: he knew about cases of Mendicant martyrs in the Kingdom of Morocco and held towards Franciscans great esteem, asking their founder, "the blessed Francis", to intercede before God next to "the blessed Dominic".[35]

32 Cf. Musarra 2018, pp. 207–234.

33 On the later-established connection between crusade and mission, see the still-fundamental monograph by Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches Toward the Muslims*, 1984.

34 Burman 2018.

35 On the close relationship between Dominque and Francis as intercessors before God in Heaven, see Scotto 2021a, pp. 274–283.

In an article published in 2012, Iris Shagrir interpreted Riccoldo's letter as part of a broader "spiritual crisis" of Christianity that is supposed to explain the primary reasons behind the urgency of writing to God and all the saints dwelling in Heaven. According to this proposal, the fall of Acre dragged Riccoldo into a "crisis of faith" that led him to despair and pessimism. As a Christian believer, "his central values were being undermined" and he found himself "capable of doubt and non-belief".[36] In a more nuanced explanation, Emilio Panella suggested that, while Riccoldo experienced "a true crisis of faith" while he was in Baghdad because of the Mamluks' successes, he was nevertheless able, once back in Florence, to regain his faith and even to enhance it, thus "becoming another person"; hence the decision to write his popular *Contra legem*.[37] Most recently, scholars have expressed doubts regarding the duration of this crisis; still, no analysis has been conducted on the many hints regarding the dynamics of faith Riccoldo skilfully gives in the letters.[38]

If read verbatim and understood without carefully considering the paradoxical character of the rhetorical discourse based on the reading of the Book of Job through Gregory the Great's *Moralia*, a series of quotations from the letters can be easily interpreted in line with this view. More than once, Riccoldo questions God and the saints' will to fight for Christians, for they do not intervene in the world to save them from the Islamic threat. Riccoldo's provoking questions, which Rita George-Tvrtković has brilliantly identified and discussed, would in this sense sound like confirmation of his desperation: Why does God pray for Muhammad? Why do the angels too pray for the Islamic Prophet? Why will Christ convert to Islam at the end of time?[39] And yet, each time Riccoldo fiercely complains about the present, asking for God's help and for the intercession of the Triumphant Church, he adds a concluding remark stressing the persistence of his own faith. Albeit shorter than his complaining tirades, these statements

36 Shagrir 2012, esp. p. 1113.

37 Mérigoux & Panella 1986, p. vi; Panella 1989, pp. 20–21. While stressing the state of "non-believer" reached by Riccoldo in Baghdad, Iris Shagrir seems to agree with Panella regarding the process of losing and regaining faith between his dwelling in the Orient and his return to Florence: "I suggest that the *Letters* make evident that Riccoldo's personal experiences during his years in the East put his religious convictions to the test, and that this is meaningful despite his having later regained his older certainties" (Shagrir 2012, p. 1108).

38 See Musarra 2018, p. 59: "Non saprei dire [...] se Riccoldo abbia davvero conosciuto una crisi di fede. [...] Tutt'al più, la sua potrebbe essere stata una crisi passeggera." In turn, George-Tvrtković has suggested viewing Riccoldo's open questions on God's plan as the reflection of "a serious theological crisis" (George-Tvrtković 2012, pp. 89–90).

39 George-Tvrtković 2012, pp. 94–101.

are rhetorically meaningful and cannot be disregarded in an effort to understand the literary strategy behind Riccoldo's lamentations.[40]

If the concept of "spiritual crisis" helps to situate Riccoldo's lament in the broader framework of the military crisis affecting Christianity at the end of the 13th century, the idea that he experienced a "crisis of faith" instead relies on the projection of modern patterns—disenchantment, depression, agnosticism—onto a medieval mind rather than on the exegetical method and rhetorical devices the author applies to convince his Christian readers. The fact that Riccoldo could have lost his faith because of the fall of Acre is contradicted by the complementary arguments expressed in the letters, which reflect a soteriological discourse based on the equal exchange between suffering and reward, namely on the retribution theology emerging from a critically attentive reading of the Book of Job.[41] Riccoldo recalls a well-known quotation from Anselm of Canterbury's *Prosologion*, chapter 1, which in turn draws on Augustine's doctrine, to explain the ultimate essence of Christina faith: "For I do not seek understanding in order to believe, but I believe so that I may understand. And I believe this because unless I believe, I will not understand."[42] It is true that Riccoldo shows that he does not understand why God has allowed Muslims to subjugate the Christians in the Near East, but—every time he puts into doubts God' intentions—he reiterates that he still believes in His inscrutable will. As for the much-contested relation between faith and reason, he underlines the centrality of faith at the very moment that it confronts God's unintelligible plan regarding the earthly presence of Islam and its victories at the cost of Christian peoples and lands. He must have known that his rhetorical contraposition between the biblical and the Qur'anic salvation plan, brought to the extreme, could have weakened the Christian faith instead of strengthening it in a time of crisis, as it was his intention to do.

Riccoldo's words of sorrow, even when they reach desperate pleas, never result in the modern conception of disenchantment. Regardless of his mounting denunciations against Christian suffering and his incomprehension of God's plan, he increasingly feels the need to show how he will not give up because his faith in the Triumphant

40 See e.g., Riccoldo, *Epistole*, *Epistola* I, ed. Panella, f. 252v: "Scio enim, Domine, 'quoniam benigna est misericordia tua' [*Ps.* 68:17], licet modo non ita clare videam." Cf. ed. Bauer 2021a, p. 98, § 27. Cf. English trans. George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 145: "For I know, O Lord, that your mercy is kind, even if I am not able to see it clearly now." Further examples are analysed in the following paragraphs of this letter.

41 Cf. Ravasi 2020, pp. 54–60.

42 Riccoldo, *Epistole*, *Epistola* I, ed. Panella, f. 249v: "Neque enim quero intelligere ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam. Nam et hoc credo quia nisi credendo non intelligam." Cf. ed. Bauer 2021a, p. 86, § 4. English trans. George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 139.

Church remains firm despite the tragedies suffered on earth by the Militant Church. In the second letter, calling to the Virgin Mary, he explains the reasons behind the temporal prosperity of Islam overturning the common conception of the Islamic expansion *nostris peccatis exigentibus*: "I truly believe that your most wise son did not peacefully concede so many temporal successes to the Saracens; rather it was out of anger that he permitted them. For their successes 'turn on them like the venom of asps from within' [Job 20:14]; after every victory and temporal success they are more strongly confirmed in their errors."[43] In the fourth letter, he relies on biblical typology to describe the recent death of the patriarch of Jerusalem Nicholas of Hannapes, drowned in the Mediterranean during the siege of Acre, as analogous to the martyrdom of "Pope Clement" at the end of the 1st century AD. Here he explicitly clarifies the theological function of sorrow: "Thus will our sadness be turned into joy, when we find this to be an occasion of joy and dignity rather than fear it as a cause of sadness and lamentations. Therefore, rejoice ..."

A last quotation from the third and most extensive of the letters, the one addressed to the Militant and the Triumphant Church, helps further clarifying the retribution dynamic displayed in this epistolary work. On both a material (profanation, destruction, corporal death) and spiritual level (conversion, martyrdom, spiritual death), Riccoldo builds an indissoluble bridge between the earthly world of suffering and the glorious Kingdom of God, which shall set free the righteous, i.e., Job and himself, in the world to come. By creatively combining calls for the intercession of saints and polemics against the Qur'an, Riccoldo complains about those Christians, especially those Dominicans, who have converted to Islam in his days. To enhance this lament, he refers to the Qur'an stating that the great biblical Patriarchs too, from Abraham to Noah, had become Muslims: "O holy patriarchs, O ancient fathers of the Old Testament, why did you become Saracens and imitators of Mahomet?" Riccoldo's use of the Qur'an is rhetorically oriented and theologically sophisticated. According to the Qur'an, since some of these patriarchs had not become Muslims regardless of Noah's call for conversion to Islam, God provoked the great flood on earth to annihilate those who refused to accomplish His plan. Following the Qur'anic rather than the biblical narrative of the Flood, Riccoldo states authoritatively the reasons for God's wrath: "For they [i.e., the patriarchs] were Christians, and they did not wish to become Saracens. Nor do I wish to become a Saracen."

43 Riccoldo, *Epistole*, *Epistola* II, ed. Panella, f. 255r: "Vere tamen credo quod ipse sapientissimus filius tuus multa prospera temporalia non tam concedit placidus ipsis sarracenis quam permittit iratus. Nam prospera eorum [earum cod.] 'vertuntur eis in fel aspidum intrinsecus', quia ex omni victoria et omni temporali prosperitate quam assequuntur, pocius in suis erroribus confirmantur." Cf. ed. Bauer 2021a, p. 110, § 21. English trans. George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 150.

Riccoldo's ultimate intention is to show that his faith is firm, in contrast to the conversions to Islam of many Christians that took place in the past and—including Dominicans and Oriental Christians—in most recent times. Consistently, the excursus on the Patriarchs' conversion precedes an extensive autobiographical narration where readers are told about Riccoldo's personal meeting with two Muslims in the surroundings of Baghdad. Two Muslim Mongols, whom he labels "servants of the devil", beat him and try to force him to convert to Islam, but in the end he succeeds in resisting their violent attempt. This autobiographical episode depicting Riccoldo as a servant and a camel-driver compelled by force—a job that he could hardly have done while dwelling in the East as a Dominican—confirms the author's rhetorical strategy: he aims at boasting about his spiritual resilience against the attractive, force-based, self-styled religion disseminated by the Mamluks. In light of Riccoldo's recourse to his experience as a compelling theological argument, the moral is clear. It incites Christian readers not to give up in spite of the darkness of the times and simultaneously urges them to find other solutions to repulse the Islamic offer: "for the Saracens could make me a camel-driver, but not a Saracen."[44]

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44 Riccoldo, *Espitole*, *Epistola* III, ed. Panella, f. 260r: "Nam camelarium me potuerunt facere sarraceni, non autem sarracenum!" Cf. ed. Bauer 2021a, p. 136, § 49. Cf. English trans. George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 160. Cf. *Epistola* I, where the same episode is narrated in a slightly different form and embellished by a more captivating and equally meaningful finale: "And crying with tears of joy, I said: 'O Lord, I have heard that Mahomet was a camel-driver. Have you not decreed that I, in the habit of a camel-driver, would depose that camel-driver? For regardless of my dress, I will not refuse to fight for you.'" (English trans. George-Tvrtković 2012, p. 142).

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