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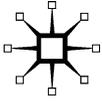
*Vernacular and Latin Literary Discourses of the
Muslim Other in Medieval Germany*
by Jerold C. Frakes

*Heloise and the Paraclete: A Twelfth-Century
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VERNACULAR AND LATIN
LITERARY DISCOURSES OF
THE MUSLIM OTHER
IN MEDIEVAL GERMANY

Jerold C. Frakes

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IN MEDIEVAL GERMANY
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PREFACE

This book takes as its objects of literary analysis Hrotsvit von Gandersheim's "Pelagius," the *Ludus de Antichristo*, Wolfram von Eschenbach's epics *Parzival* and *Willehalm*, and several lyrics by Walther von der Vogelweide. That is, works by medieval Germany's most important dramatist (Hrotsvit),¹ its most important epic poet (Wolfram), and its most important lyricist (Walther). Their work is here linked through the focus on their representation of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, a topic of burning relevance in the texts' tenth, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, and indeed even now in the twenty-first century. The discourse of the Muslim Other is a focal topic that has received much attention from a broad range of medievalists in a variety of subfields in recent decades, although there has surprisingly been little focus by medievalists in German studies. As will become clear in the course of this study, prevailing tendencies in recent research on the medieval European discourses of the Muslim Other (generally focused on England, France, and Spain) prove inadequate in accounting for the representation of Islam in medieval Germany, demonstrating clearly that in what is sometimes (now rarely) mistakenly imagined as a single discursive mode of representing the Muslim Other or even a single linear developmental tradition of that discourse during the European Middle Ages, there is in fact little uniformity. It is precisely this "local" diversity within a larger and generally cohesive discursive corpus that is the focus here. The study attempts to add a missing (medieval German) piece to the puzzle.

★ ★ ★

Several basic issues need to be clarified at the outset. We live in a time when there are many cultures and large segments of the population—by no means all—that advocate and aspire to some practice of tolerance of racial, cultural, and religious difference. In some places the state itself is conceived as a secular guarantor of such practices. Those who share such ecumenical practices customarily react with disappointment if not

outrage when confronted with intolerance of such difference. While limited exceptional status might be granted to court society in Friedrich II's Hohenstaufen Sicily and to some periods and locales in pre-Almohadic Muslim Spain, such tolerance quite simply did not exist in the cultures and period treated by this book, except perhaps as the undocumented practice of unknown individuals. There was no secular state *per se* to be found: *cuius regio eius religio* [the ruler's religion is the state's religion],² and the ruler was conceived as the defender of the faith—whichever one that happened to be. Even those medieval thinkers and writers who are sometimes credited by modern scholars as “progressive” were not so by any modern standards. To expect that of them and to be disappointed or outraged when they fail to satisfy our expectations says more about us than it does about them. At the same time, however, there is obviously no reason for students and scholars of earlier historical periods simply and tacitly to ignore or condone the denigration, physical abuse, cultural erasure, or outright slaughter of individuals or entire communities because of their actual or perceived racial, cultural, or religious differences, as has routinely happened in many times and places, including the European Middle Ages.

I seem then to advocate as a proper response to such practices neither moral outrage nor relativistic indifference. What *is* one then to think, to take a pertinent medieval German example, of Wolfram von Eschenbach's depiction of a caricatured Islam, in which Muḥammad is among the Muslim gods worshipped in the form of wooden idols; Muslim knights are almost without exception black-skinned or have horn-like carapaces instead of skin; a Muslim queen's black skin fills her chivalric Christian champion alternately with physical disgust and disfiguring lust; the offspring of mixed Christian-Muslim marriages are black-and-white striped or spotted; Muslim knights are of a nobility unsurpassed—even by Christian knights—except for the fact that at the very moment of their deaths they are snatched directly into Hell either by Satan's demons or indeed by their own gods. The cultural, religious, and racial bigotry inherent in such commonplaces of western European Christian views of Muslims during the high Middle Ages is both obvious and familiar, since so many clichés have in one form or another survived in modern modes of bigotry. Do we have no right to be outraged? Why is our outrage justified when our contemporaries voice, *mutatis mutandis*, similar idiocies about Muslims (or Inuits, Hindus, Blacks, or Jews), but not when Wolfram does so? Is it really simply a matter of chronology: could Wolfram not have known anything about, and thus not be held responsible for his errors concerning, Muslims? In fact the Qur'ān was available in a (contentious) Latin paraphrase even before Wolfram's lifetime, by which time there had already been a century of contact between Crusaders and Muslims in the eastern Mediterranean littoral and more than four centuries of

Christian-Muslim contact in Iberia. Many thousands of Crusaders who had had direct and long-term contact with individual Muslims and their communities had returned to their central and northwestern European homelands and some of them could have pointed out to Wolfram that, for instance, unlike his literary Muslims, actual Muslims were not all black-skinned and there was not a single idolator among them. But we in fact know nothing about Wolfram's experience with "actual Islam," and even if we did, we know that then as now bigotry rarely responds to empirical evidence, and we must view Wolfram's bigotry not as his own invention but rather, in its cultural context, as a single reiteration of a recurring mode of Euro-Christian responses to the Other, in this case the Muslim Other. In fact it would be useful even at this point to acknowledge that the supposed discrepancy assumed in the previous sentence—between the literary Muslim and the actual Muslim—skews the issue, for, as is treated at some length in chapter two and taken as a fundamental principle of the remaining analysis, it is not after all a matter of Wolfram "getting it wrong" in making his Muslim characters black and idolatrous: his representation of Muslims is not an inaccurate misrepresentation of "actual" Muslims, but rather ultimately a representation, image, and invention that had a life of its own beyond any corroborative value of "actual" Muslims as guarantors of accuracy.

Such an "established pattern" of verbal behavior, which some decades ago Edward Said, following Michel Foucault, termed a *discourse*, was indeed a long-term mode of thinking, writing, and conceiving of the Muslim Other that we find in a variety of related forms—so it may initially seem—almost wherever we look in medieval European texts: in Crusader sermons, in courtly romance, in political lyric, geographical treatises, and maps, in England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Byzantium, and so on. We must, however, guard against reenacting the same forcible straight-jacketing of those practitioners of this discourse that Said found in the Muslim Other as conceived by Europeans: while the basic components of the medieval discourse of the Muslim Other from various periods, locales, and textual genres are recurrently familiar, they neither are in fact always the same, nor do the same words used in different temporal, geographical, and textual contexts necessarily mean the same things. As with most cultural phenomena, the constructed Muslim Other, that is, the discourse of the Muslim Other, in medieval Christendom is complex; when we consider its thousands of iterations from Iceland to Armenia, from Novgorod to Portugal, over the course of almost a millennium, perhaps we would be tempted to say that the discourse of the Muslim Other is not just maddeningly complex, but even hopelessly confused.

While such issues have undergone extensive examination in recent decades especially in medieval English and French studies, the medieval

literature of the German-speaking lands has thus far not been comprehensively studied, although much serious work—on which this study builds—has in fact already been done. The present study seeks to contribute to that larger ongoing interrogation of German materials. It is intended neither to draw up a list of images of medieval Christian bigotry directed against Muslims, which would at most simply tempt the “enlightened” among us to be outraged, nor to enable any facile identification of the bigotry of that period with that of our own. While such discourses of the deformed and defamed Other have been employed to justify a broad range of concrete actions in the world, including military, political, diplomatic, propagandistic, and missionizing projects, those actions and their contexts are not the same from century to century and state to state. It is those local contextualizations of this evolving discourse in an ever-changing geopolitical and intellectual mosaic that is ultimately the point, for it is at those specific sites that practical appeal is made to the discourse and that the discourse then, dialectically, functions to “explain” and justify the praxis. It is at that juncture that twenty-first century politics connects—through multiply refracted offsets—intellectually, politically, and practically to the medieval period and its modes of representing Muslims as the ultimate Other.

The issues treated in this study are for obvious reasons relevant to contemporary political discussions and geopolitical events, and are thus sensitive, for many, even explosive. Whenever the post- and anticolonialist rhetoric directed against Crusaders and their anti-Muslim ideological descendents—whether in the following pages or in contemporary discussions—threatens to become too strident or self-righteous, however, we would do well to remember that only four centuries before the Crusaders began their centuries-long depredations in Muslim territories in the eastern Mediterranean, the Arab conquest itself swept north out of the Arabian peninsula, east into Mesopotamia and Persia, west across north Africa, and then north into Spain and Portugal, subduing all cultures and ethnicities in its path and turning all *اهل الكتاب* *ahl ul-kitāb* [people of the book] (especially Christian and Jews) who did not convert to Islam, into *ذمى* *dhimmi*, that is, tolerated and tax-paying religious aliens. At the time of the Muslim conquest, statistically most of the conquered territories west of the historical Parthian/Persian culture—Syro-Palestine, Asia Minor, and north Africa from Egypt to the west—were peopled predominantly by a multi-cultural mosaic of Christians. While the Arab conquest did not have as its purpose or method the eradication of conquered peoples, and it was in many if not most places the case that the language and culture of the administration immediately after the conquest was the same as before the conquest, there is likewise no question but that gradual and sometimes not so gradual Islamization and linguistic

Arabization was the rule. For instance, in St. Augustine's Hippo, west of Carthage, Christianity was the dominant religion and Latin the language of high culture (while cities were still bilingual in Latin and Punic, and Berber still dominated the countryside) in the centuries before the late seventh-century conquest, while Islam and Arabic systematically and inevitably took over those functions within generations of the conquest (although Berber has persisted up to the present in many areas).

In the course of the century or two following the sweeping Islamic conquest, most Christians in this vast territory, which comprised essentially the extent of the non-European Roman Empire (at its peak), directly converted to Islam or, less directly, in the course of a lifetime simply experienced the withering of their own religious devotion as their community of believers disappeared so that their own offspring in the next generation converted almost by default. The foundational churches of Christian practice around the eastern Mediterranean littoral, dating from the earliest period of the establishment of the religion, withered—even if they were not militantly, actively, and deliberately eradicated—or reduced to vestigial remnants. Language, religion, and cultural traditions were radically transformed and in many cases extinguished—not overnight, of course, but within a relatively brief span of time nonetheless.

Obviously, as just indicated, the Muslim conquest did not explode onto uninhabited territory, but rather moved north, east, and west into territories that had at one time or another been components of the Byzantine, Persian/Parthian, Roman, Medean, Macedonian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Phoenician, and Egyptian empires. The Muslim conquest was thus not the first imperial conquest of these territories, nor were the Crusades the last imperial conquest attempted there. One must keep this longer view of successive waves of conquest and colonization in mind when treating the Crusades as an example of a premodern military conquest and colonization motivated at least in part by religious doctrine. Joshua Praver has indeed astutely noted that since Christians viewed the Holy Lands as their own to be ruled and possessed: "In the eyes of the West, to use a very modern expression, the Crusade was actually a movement of decolonization!"³

The common tendency to tally scores in contests of "whose cultural annihilation was worse?" in the history of colonialism is either naive or disingenuously in the service of contemporary political projects. It is nonetheless salutary to keep in mind that in the centuries immediately following the rise of Islam, historical Muslim culture was no less militaristic and colonialist than were the Crusaders some time later—or than had been the Romans, Assyrians, and so on, some time earlier. The Muslim conquest was, however—and this is of essential historical and ethical importance—in most respects also clearly and demonstrably less

bigoted and certainly less destructive of life, lives, and local cultures, certainly than was the Crusader project. The primary distinction of enduring historical value between the Muslim conquest and the Crusades was, however, ultimately that Muslim colonialization was/has been vastly more enduring.

But while that is the background hum of the present analysis, it is in fact the subject for a different book, not the present one, which is instead indirectly concerned with that later European attempt to conquer Muslim territories in Syro-Palestine and elsewhere through the Crusades, and most directly with the discourse of the Muslim Other that arose in, around, and out of that conflict, specifically in a single subset of European literature of the period: the literature of medieval Germany. The analysis and acknowledgment of racial and religious bigotry does not constitute nor is it intended as a condemnation of Christian or German culture; furthermore, it is neither a defense of Islam, nor yet an apology for the colonial ventures of either party. It is instead a study of literary and political discourse, in which there is, one might hope, significance not just for the period of time under scrutiny—although that would be enough in itself—but also for other times and places where similar (never identical) conditions obtain. While I make no pretense of objectivity, I likewise have no interest in arguing a propagandistic case. As will become clear in the course of the study, the medieval European discourses of the Muslim Other are by no means irrelevant or without connection to the corresponding twenty-first century discourses. There is much to be learned from the constructions of those medieval discourses, and not just by medievalists.

Notes

1. Albeit in a time when drama was all but unknown, and Hrotsvit's accomplishment as dramatist is admittedly limited.
2. This and all other transcriptions and translations in the present study are my own. For the convenience of the Anglophone reader, all primary texts are provided with an immediately following English translation; such translations, whether inset or not, are identified as translations via enclosure in square brackets. Citations from non-English scholarship are included in the main text in English translation, while their originals follow, generally in the footnotes; citations that occur in the footnotes alone place the translation first.
3. Joshua Praver, "The Roots of Medieval Colonialism," in *The Meeting of Two Worlds: Cultural Exchange between East and West during the Period of the Crusades*, ed. Vladimir P. Goss (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1986), p. 24 [23–38].

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