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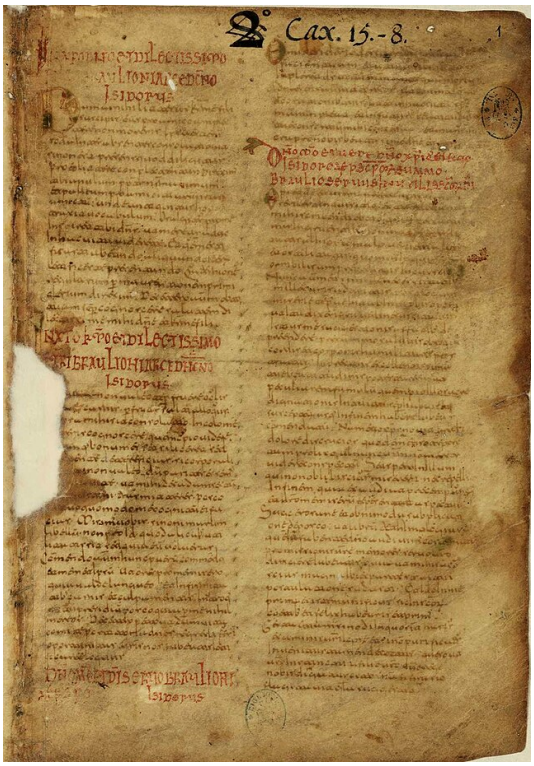
Inventing a “One-language Christianity”. Paul Alvar and the Co-produced Correspondence between Language and Religion



Towards the mid-9th century, in the Umayyad Emirate of Córdoba, the theologian Paul Alvar composed a polemical treatise entitled *Indiculus luminosus* (“The enlightening book”). The author’s aim is to confront the Muslim rulers, portrayed through the sectarian lens of heresiological discourse: they are depicted as invaders from the East, followers of a false prophet, and practitioners of pagan customs (see Sorber 2020).

> At the same time, Paul Alvar directs his polemic against his fellow Christians inclined to adopt Arabic language and customs. According to Alvar, the Christians of *al-Andalus* are becoming increasingly aligned with the Arab-Muslim rulers, also in matters of language. In chapter 35, he declares about young Christians:
>
> Do not all the Christian youth, handsome of face, eloquent in language, conspicuous in demeanour and bearing (*habitu gestu que conspicui, gentilici<a> eruditioni preclari*), outstanding in gentile erudition (*gentilicia eruditioni preclari*), and elevated by eloquence in Arabic (*Harabico eloquio sublimate*) avidly take out, intently read, and keenly examine the volumes of the Chaldeans, and, gathering together with immoderate zeal, make them known by praising them, with ample and constrained language, while, ignorant of ecclesiastical beauty, they disdain as most vile the rivers of the church flowing from paradise? Oh, the pain of it! Christians do not know their

> own law and Latins do not pay attention to their own language (*legem suam nesciunt Christiani et linguam propriam non advertunt Latini*), so that [...] one can find abundant crowds without number that can eruditely set forth Chaldean display of words, to the point that they adorn the final clauses, drawing them together with a single letter, with more metrically erudite song and more sublime beauty than is done by those people themselves. (tr. Wolf 2023)

Alvar's pessimistic view of his period aligns with a well-established classical image: like Sallust and Livy, whom he knew, cited, and emulated, he evokes the moral vigour of earlier times, when Rome, strengthened through conflicts with enemies such as Carthaginians or Numidians, forged its "identity" and virtue. By contrast, both their era and his own appear weakened by luxury and complacency, especially among younger people. It is precisely in this light that he observes how Christian youths no longer read these Latin authors but instead turn to the writings of the "Chaldeans" (i.e. Muslims), composed in Arabic.

Alvar shows clear familiarity with Arabic: indeed, he composes his work in a context that had been under Umayyad rule for nearly a century. Unlike earlier Eastern Christian authors such as Sophronius of Jerusalem, who, during the expansion of the Rashidun, the early successors of Muhammad, portrayed the "Ishmaelites" as uncultured barbarians, Alvar does the opposite: he highlights not their barbarity, but their linguistic refinement, learning, and literary sophistication. This erudition is described as *gentilicia*, that is, rooted in paganism. This idea recalls the attitude of some late antique Christian authors who regarded classical Latin literature as intellectually appealing yet spiritually corrupting. Jerome famously illustrates this tension when, devoted to Cicero's works, he recounts a vision in which God reproaches him: "You are a Ciceronian, not a Christian" (*Letters* 22, 30).

By Alvar's time, the earlier polemic against classical learning largely subsided: authors such as Jerome had already "Christianized" Latin literature, establishing a canon for use in Christian education. Alvar, however, laments that young Christians no longer study these authors. Instead, Christian elite was introduced to Arabic and was becoming increasingly captivated by it. This was not unique to *al-Andalus*: in other Islamic territories, young Christians were likewise educated in Arabic. That is the case, for example, of the 8th century theologian John of Damascus, who came from a Christian family of administrators serving the caliphs. What Alvar underscores is not merely access to Arabic, but a fascination for the language, its literary culture, and even its calligraphy (*khatt*). He notes that some Christians embellished the closing passages of their writings with Arabic monograms. This practice would later appear even among other Christian elites, including the Normans in Sicily, who employed Arabic monograms or calligraphic letters in documents, coins and mantles (Ballan 2019).

In Alvar's view, the abandonment of Latin signals a broader indifference toward the Church and Christian practices. Alongside Cicero and Sallust, in several passages of the *Indiculus* he invokes important figures of Latin Christianity: Jerome, Augustine of Hippo, and, especially for the Iberian context, Isidore of Seville. It is to their teaching that he alludes speaking of the "rivers of the Church flowing from paradise". This assimilation of Latin and Christian "identity" is synthesized in his statement: "Christians do not know their own law, and Latins do not pay attention to their own language". Such a direct link between language and religion has no clear precedent in earlier Christian authors. The Jesus movement arose in an Aramaic environment, later spread into Hellenistic context, and only subsequently into Latin West. By Late Antiquity, Christian communities within and beyond the Roman Empire were using multiple languages (Syriac, Coptic, Aramean, Slavonic, Geʿez, and also Arabic) producing literature, translating Scriptures, and

sharing liturgical and exegetical texts across linguistic boundaries (Minets 2021). Forms of linguistic valorisation also appear among late antique Christian authors. Isidore, for instance, praises Latin as suited to liturgical expression; furthermore, particular languages are used to mark "boundaries" between Christian groups, as Syriac by the so-called Nestorians. However, these examples also illustrate that Christianity was multilingual, shaped by the simultaneous use and valuation of several languages.

For this reason, Alvar's assertion that Latin is *the* language of Christians, at least in *al-Andalus*, emerges as strikingly singular. One reason for this unusual stance becomes clearer when we consider the interlocutors he is opposing. Early Islam developed in an Arabic-speaking environment, and the Qurʾān itself explicitly presents Arabic as the vehicle of revelation and sapiential messages, thus linking language to religious identity. With the rapid expansion of Islam, many non-Arabic-speaking peoples, such as Persians, Copts, and Syriac Christians, became Muslim, and Islamic literary production soon appeared in several languages. Nevertheless, Arabic retained a privileged status as the language of revelation, law, and scholarly authority. This view was consolidated in early Islamic thoughts. The jurist al-Shāfiʿī (7th-8th c.) argued that a proper understanding of the Qurʾān and *fiqh* was inseparable from great skills in Arabic, since the language itself was embedded in the structure of revelation. In the same period, al-Jāḥiẓ praised Arabic as uniquely adapted for intellectual and religious expression, superior in clarity, eloquence, and divine appropriateness. A few centuries after Alvar, this connection between Arabic and Islamic identity is further strengthened in *al-Andalus* by Ibn Ḥazm (10th-11th c.), who extended it into the legal and social sphere. In his juridical writings, he did not merely distinguish between Muslims and non-Muslims but also between Arabic-speaking Muslims and those from non-Arabic linguistic backgrounds, assigning greater authority to the former (see Coope 2017).

Moreover, the idea of a connection between religion and language is also present among Jewish communities of this period. In Jewish tradition, Hebrew had long been regarded as *lashon ha-qodesh*, the holy tongue, and early rabbinic literature often contrasts its sanctity with the merely practical function of other languages. From Late Antiquity onward, this valorisation of Hebrew became increasingly tied to the broader process of the so-called "rabbinization" of Judaism, through which rabbinic norms and texts came to define Jewish religious identity (Smelik 1999).

From this perspective, Alvar's identification of Latin as the language of Christians in *al-Andalus* can be seen as a product of polemical co-production between Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the region. Christians read Arabic texts and adopted the Arabic language – drawn, as Alvar notes, to its literary prestige – but did not regard this linguistic assimilation as a threat to their Christian identity. Alvar, however, responds polemically by appropriating an idea originally articulated by the "Ishmaelites": that religious identity is inseparable from language. He thus argues that Christianity is bound to Latin, and that speaking or writing in Arabic means falling into the same error as the Muslims. This linguistic polemic also intersects with Alvar' attitude toward the Jewish communities of *al-Andalus*. His critique of linguistic and religious "permeability" is sharpened in his polemic against Bodo Eleazar, a former Frankish deacon who converted to Judaism and settled in Córdoba – a case that, for the polemicist, exemplified the dangers of crossing linguistic and religious boundaries. The prominence of Hebrew as *lashon ha-qodesh* within rabbinic Judaism would have further reinforced, in his eyes, the idea that language could define religious identity.

Alvar's polemic targets the very emergence of Mozarabic culture, which, almost from this period, would generate a remarkable literary and artistic production (Tieszen 2013). He is confronting a "new identity" taking shape among the Christians of *al-Andalus*,

characterized by bilingualism, cultural permeability, and creative adaptation. However, in opposing this development, he paradoxically draws on an idea formulated by his rivals: the notion that religious identity is inseparable from language. By reappropriating this principle and applying it to Latin, Alvar tries to reinforce his own position and defend what he considers the authentic Christian tradition. This episode reveals the complexity of religious interactions in the Umayyad Emirate of Córdoba, where exchange did not simply lead to assimilation or resistance, but often to new and unexpected forms of reinterpretation, even within polemical discourse.

Image

Folio 1r of the Isidori Etymologiae Codex Toletanus (nunc Matritensis), BNE Vitr. 14-3. 163, 9th century, from the Cathedral of Toledo.

Further Reading

Ballan, Mohamad, “The Iconography of Royal Power in 12th-c. Norman Sicily”, in *Ballandalus*, 2019, online (link: https://ballandalus.wordpress.com/2019/01/30/the-iconography-of-royal-power-in-12th-c-norman-sicily/).

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Wolf, Kenneth B., *The Indiculus luminosus of Paul Alvarus*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2023.