

Lex Abrahae

The Co-production of a Qur'an-Inspired Concept in Renaissance Christendom

In other words, Abraham is an archetype, the collective symbol of the believer.

Gustav Dreifuss and Judith Riemer,
Abraham, the Man and the Symbol, 1993

On 26 March 2000, at the end of a one-week pilgrimage to the Holy Land celebrating the Church Jubilee, Pope John Paul II addressed Sheikh Ekrima Sa'id Sabri, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the Holy Land, with the following words:

I wish to express my gratitude to you, in your capacity as Chairman of the Islamic Supreme Committee, for receiving me within the Haram al-Sharif which is connected with the memory of Abraham, who for all believers is a model of faith and submission to Almighty God. This visit of mine, as you are aware, is essentially a religious and spiritual pilgrimage. Pilgrimage to holy places is a feature common to many religious traditions, especially to the three Abrahamic religions. I thank God revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims.¹

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¹ John Paul II, *Greeting of John Paul II to the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the Holy Land, Sheikh Akram Sabri*, speech, 26 March 2000.

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The pope used the same concept — ‘the three Abrahamic religions’ — one year later, on the 5 May 2001, at the international airport of Damascus when he addressed the President of the Syrian Arab Republic, Bashar Al-Assad, the civil authorities, Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops, Greek Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox Patriarchs, the Nuncio and the diplomatic corps before starting his journey across ‘the Holy Land’ in the footprint of the apostle Paul:

We all know that real peace can only be achieved if there is a new attitude of understanding and respect between the peoples of the region, between the followers of the three Abrahamic religions.²

Recourse to the concept of ‘Abrahamic religions’ is unprecedented to papal discourses.³ This lexicon was not coined by John Paul II, but certainly it was brought to institutional and media attention through the mouth of a pope, who stood as a charismatic figure in the eyes of the Catholic and the global community for over thirty years. Looking backward, the emergence of this concept in a papal speech from the beginning of the third millennium bears witness to the long-lasting influence of the debate on non-Christian religions — Judaism and Islam in particular — that was held before and during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and which John Paul II apparently kept in mind when addressing interfaith issues.⁴ The concerns of the Conciliar Fathers regarding Islam appeared into two ecclesiastical documents: chapter 2, paragraph 16 of *Lumen gentium*, issued in 1964, and chapter 3 of *Nostra aetate*, approved in 1965, two months before the end of the Council. In both documents, Muslims are defined according to their self-proclaimed descent from Abraham.⁵ Later theologians and scholars of Islam, down to

² John Paul II, *Welcome ceremony in Damascus: Address of John Paul II*, speech, 5 May 2001.

³ John Paul II’s diplomatic addresses given in Islamic countries display a specific insistence on presenting Abraham as a shared figure of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The pope recalls Abraham’s role, with different exegetical nuances, in at least four speeches given between 1979 and 2000: in the address to the Catholic community of Ankara, Turkey, 29 November 1979; in the address to the young Muslims of Morocco, 19 August 1985; in the address to Islamic leaders of Senegal, Dakar, 22 February 1992; finally, in the address to the ambassador of the Arab Republic of Egypt, 7 September 2000. However, it is just from 2000 on, with the celebration of the Jubilee, that in his diplomatic speeches the pope turns from the figure of Abraham to the concept of ‘Abrahamic religions’.

⁴ On 27 October 1986, on the 25th anniversary of the end of the Second Vatican Council, John Paul II chaired in Assisi the so-called Day of Prayer for Peace or Meeting of World Religions, an interfaith encounter of 150 representatives of twelve world religions, including several Muslim leaders. The choice of the Council’s anniversary as the date for the interfaith meeting is clear proof of the symbolic continuity the pope intended to foster. On the event and its implications, see Buridana, *La pace di Assisi*.

⁵ The available studies on the preparation of *Nostra aetate* and the paragraph regarding Islam, as useful and timely as they are, are mostly conducted by the same promoters of the Vatican II’s programme and are thus necessarily drafted in continuity with the pastoral agenda it implies. See Caspar, ‘La religion musulmane’, pp. 201–36; Borrmans, ‘The Emergence of the “Nostra Aetate” Declaration’, pp. 9–28.

recent times, have seen in these paragraphs the influence of the eminent French orientalist, Louis Massignon.⁶ While a direct intellectual debt is far from obvious and should be investigated further, it cannot be denied that Massignon, in the aftermath of the Second World War, brought to scholarly attention the concept of the 'Abrahamic religions' against the backdrop of an interpretation of the Qur'an's phenomenological and mystical character.

Massignon's approach to the Qur'an is the object of an investigation I have recently conducted: here I just want to underline one aspect of his working method that allows us to bridge the ecclesiastical concerns of the Second Vatican Council with the hermeneutical approach and political agenda of two Renaissance scholars with whom I shall engage in this chapter. The Qur'an was understood and investigated by Massignon not from a historical-critical perspective but starting from its character as *textus receptus*. It was not the search for mutual influences and intellectual debts between scriptural and post-scriptural traditions that prompted his reflections, but rather the century-long production of the meanings of the Qur'an by the religious communities which used its text in liturgical, ritual, and homiletic contexts. Despite being a pupil of the Hungarian orientalist Ignác Goldziher and recognizing his teaching as fundamental, Massignon had almost no interest in the role of Christological debates and Talmudic literature in the formation of the Qur'anic text, a well-established line of research which traces from Theodor Nöldeke's school to Angelika Neuwirth's work of the last twenty years. Massignon disprized 'orientalists' and 'European critics' for their 'analytical and static exegesis' as well as for their 'nominalistic' approach to the Qur'an. Leaving aside the philological questions behind the composition of the Qur'anic text, the French scholar, based at the Collège de France, tried to see through the eyes of Muslims in order to understand what they felt, experienced, and believed when reading and reciting the Qur'an. While never going so far as to recognize its superiority over Christianity, he felt so close to Islam — as a spiritual current that sprang from the same source of revelation and then deviated in the course of history due to Jewish and Christian blindness — that he calls it, with pity, an 'Abrahamic schism'.⁷

6 It is a decade-long conviction, which was mainly promoted by the White Fathers and the Dominicans, and ranges from the ground-breaking studies of Robert Caspar and Georges Anawati (see respectively Caspar, 'La vision de l'Islam', pp. 126–47; and Anawati, 'Christianisme et Islam, point de vue chrétien', pp. 86–94) to a recent coming back on the topic by Iggrave, 'Provocation and Resonance', p. 498. A well-grounded reconstruction of the possible, indirect influence of Massignon on *Nostra aetate* — through his friendship with a Dominican scholar of Christian-Muslim relations like Anawati — is provided by Olliivry-Dumairieh, '50 ans après Vatican II', pp. 189–217.

7 For further observations on this point, see Scotto, 'From the *Textus Receptus* to an "Abrahamic" Interpretation of the Qur'an'. Neuwirth's decade-long investigations resulted into the monumental monograph *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike*. Some remarks on Massignon's relation with Goldziher can be found in Mason, 'Foreword to English Edition', pp. xxii–xxiii. See also Kraemer, 'The Death of an Orientalist', p. 192.

My argument is that, while the adjective 'Abrahamic' reflects on both a political and a lexical level scholarly and Church concerns from the twentieth century, the debate on the role of Abraham as a claimed, shared, or contested 'lawgiver' of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam harks back to centuries before Massignon and his followers at the Vatican Council. In his most recent studies, Guy Stroumsa has showed that the discipline known today as 'history' or the 'study of the Abrahamic religions', which he has been teaching for five years at the University of Oxford, owes a fundamental epistemological debt to the eighteenth-century philosophical debate on the relations between three revelations or laws which identify themselves with Abraham. The popular drama *Nathan der Weise*, written by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in 1779, is the most paradigmatic example of this tripartite or, better, quadripartite perspective. Influenced by Boccaccio's version of the celebrated narrative of the three rings (1349–1353)⁸ and by Nicholas of Cusa's *De pace fidei* (1453),⁹ Lessing outlined a hermeneutical scheme wherein the Christian tradition is not deemed to be theologically or culturally superior to Judaism and Islam. Instead, a fourth, apparently neutral and philosophically detached point of view is posited, according to which the three religions — starting from their respective laws and lawgivers — are equally discussed and assessed.¹⁰

Despite Stroumsa's compelling argument, it seems questionable to trace the theological roots of the modern concept of 'Abrahamic religions' only back to the philosophical debate about the distinctions and analogies between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that broke out through the European Enlightenment and the establishment of the 'science of religion' as a research field.¹¹ On closer inspection, the concept is much older than the Enlightenment, draws on distinct philosophical and linguistic tools, and certainly does not prefigure the same political agenda. The twentieth-century recourse to the concept of 'Abrahamic religions', on closer inspection, is just the frond of a late medieval and early modern discussion with roots planted firmly in the mid-twelfth-century translation of the Qur'an from Arabic into Latin. This translation was accomplished in the Ebro Valley in 1143 as part of an ambitious editorial programme promoted by the abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, and is known today as *Corpus Cluniacense*.¹² It is within this collection of writings and translations from Arabic into Latin, which include Christian-Arab and

⁸ On the dissemination of Boccaccio's and other versions of this narrative, see Shagrir, *Parable of the Three Rings*.

⁹ Euler, 'Il "De pace fidei" di Nicolò Cusano', pp. 59–74; Euler, 'Religionsfriede und Ringparabel', pp. 3–24; Scotto, 'Baptismales lotiones', p. 447.

¹⁰ Stroumsa, *Religions d'Abraham*, pp. 63–87. A reflection on the implications of Lessing's drama for the present interfaith debate is provided in Tück and Langthaler, eds, 'Es strebe von euch jeder um die Wette'.

¹¹ On this scholarly context, see Engelstein, 'Coining a Discipline', pp. 221–46.

¹² For the most recent research outcomes on the *Corpus*, see Cándida Ferrero and Tolan, eds, *The Latin Qur'an, 1143–1500*.

Christian-Latin polemics against Islam, that the Qur'anic syntagma *millatu 'Ibrāhīm* — 'the religion' or 'the creed of Abraham', appearing as such eight times in the Qur'an¹³ — was Christianized for the first time by means of the Latin expression *lex Abrahae* ('the law of Abraham'). Evidence of this semantic transfer can be found in two of the translations included in the *Corpus*: first, in the full translation of the Qur'an into Latin drafted by the English astronomer Robert of Ketton;¹⁴ second, in the Latin translation by Peter of Toledo and Peter of Poitiers — Peter the Venerable's personal secretary — of the pseudo al-Kindi's *Risāla*, an allegedly ninth-century Christian polemic against Islam written in Arabic and handed down in Latin manuscripts with the title of *Epistula Sarraceni, Rescriptum Christiani*.¹⁵

In his Latin version of the Qur'an, Ketton translated the Arabic expression *millatu 'Ibrāhīm* as *lex Abrahae* four times. Twice he did it while working on Surah 2, 'al-baqara', where 'the creed of Abraham', who is labelled 'the most righteous', is regarded as the only way to achieve salvation and is clearly distinguished from the ways followed by Jews and Christians.

Quisquis igitur legem Abrahae neglexerit dereliqueritue brutus erit. Qui, a Deo rogatus ut crederet, confessus est se in Deum totius mundi regem credere. Unde hic a Deo dilectus inter bonos summa corona condecoratur.

(Whoever, therefore, neglects and forsakes the law of Abraham will be a brute. Who [i.e. Abraham], being asked by God to believe, confessed that he believed in God, the King of the whole world. Wherefore this beloved of God among the good is adorned with the highest crown.¹⁶)

Nunc quidem Iudei et Christiani gentem tibi commissam abstrahere nitentes, ut suam amplectatur legem et illam profiteatur, ammonent. Eorum enim uterque suam legem tantum bonam esse confirmat. Illa vero se legem Abrahe, non aliam amplecti iuste profitetur, viri iustissimi.

(Now indeed the Jews and Christians, endeavouring to draw away the nation entrusted to you, warn them to embrace their own law and profess it. For each of them affirms that only his own law is good. But it justly professes to embrace the law of Abraham, the most righteous, and not another.¹⁷)

Once the expression *lex Abrahae* is used to translate a passage from Surah 'an-nisā', where Abraham is given the well-known title of God's friend (*khalil Allāh*), rendered by Ketton in Latin as 'the chosen one':

¹³ See Q.2. 130, 2. 135, 3. 95, 4. 125, 6. 161, 12. 38, 16. 123, 22. 78.

¹⁴ Gázquez and Múñoz, eds, *Alchoran siue lex Saracenorum*.

¹⁵ *Exposición y refutación*, ed. and trans. by Muñoz.

¹⁶ See Gázquez and Múñoz, *Alchoran siue lex Saracenorum*, p. 220, ll. 203–05. See Q.2. 130–31.

¹⁷ See Gázquez and Múñoz, *Alchoran siue lex Saracenorum*, pp. 220–21, ll. 213–16. See Q.2. 135.

Ubi reperiri potest lex melior quam hominis humilis, Deo penitus devoti, sequentis legem Abrahae, quem electum sibi Deus omnia complectens, omnia possidens dilexit?

(Where can a better law be found than in a humble man, completely devoted to God, following the law of Abraham, whom God loved as his chosen one, encompassing all things, possessing all things?¹⁸)

Finally, a fourth time the expression is used for Surah 16, ‘an-nahl’, where the Qur'an remarks that Abraham, again evoked as the righteous, was immune to the attractions of polytheistic cults. The explicitly anti-polytheistic nature of Abraham is omitted in Ketton's translation:

Postea te misimus, ut ipsius Abrahe legem sequareis, nusquam disgradiens, ne sis incredulus.

(Afterwards we sent you to follow the law of Abraham himself, never deviating from it, lest you be unbelieving.¹⁹)

For Surah 6, ‘al- an-‘ām’, Ketton renders *millatu Ibrāhīm* as *via Abrahae*, alluding to ‘way to salvation’, namely divine revelation, thus coming back to one of the meanings which the Latin word *lex* has in medieval Christian theological literature.²⁰ Instead, in two cases the English astronomer translates *millatu Ibrāhīm* not as *lex* or *via Abrahae*, but as *secta Abrahae*. Both *loci* seem to be significant. The first regards the pivotal passage of Sura 3, ‘al-‘imrān, focused on the foundation of the Ka‘ba by Abraham and to the establishment of the pilgrimage to Mecca as a fundamental religious practice for Muslims. Given the importance of this episode in Islamic tradition, Ketton must have chosen to underscore the nature of *secta* ascribed to Islam by twelfth-century Christian scholars — including his sponsor, Peter the Venerable — to make clear the Christian distance from a Qur'anic passage that provides a radically different interpretation of Abraham's role in salvation history.

Tu vero ceteris intima Deum veraciter iniunxisse, quod Abrahe sectam imitentur, qui, nec incredulus, nec ydolatra, primam orationis domum, Beccham scilicet, locum benedictum, ubi ex ipsius Abrahe edificio virtutes sunt manifeste, primo fundavit. Quo quilibet ingressus, omnis timoris expers, quietus existit. Huncque locum ab omnibus honorari et a quolibet, sua facultate permittente, peti Deo summe placet. Incredulos autem minime curat.

¹⁸ See Gázquez and Múñoz, *Alchoran sive lex Saracenorum*, p. 261, ll. 84–86. See Q.4. 125–26.

¹⁹ See Gázquez and Múñoz, *Alchoran sive lex Saracenorum*, p. 346, ll. 189–90. See Q.16. 123.

²⁰ See Gázquez and Múñoz, *Alchoran sive lex Saracenorum*, p. 286, ll. 108–09: ‘Ego quidem, cui Deus viam rectam atque directam, illam scilicet Abrahe non increduli, patefecit et inmisit [...].’ See Q.6. 161.

(But you intimated to the rest that God had truly commanded them to imitate the sect of Abraham, who, neither an unbeliever nor an idolater, first founded the first house of prayer, that is, Mecca, a blessed place, where virtues are evident from the building of Abraham himself. Where everyone enters, freed from all fear, there is peace. And this place is most pleasing to God to be honoured by all, and to be sought by everyone, if his ability permits. But he does not care at all about unbelievers.²¹)

The second regards an equally important 'āya of Sura 12, 'Yūsuf', where Abraham is regarded as the head of a chain of prophets leading to Muhammed's prophethood. Again, the Qur'anic claim that Muhammed, rather than Christ, descends from Abraham and that Muslims, for this very reason, are urged to follow 'the creed of Abraham', must have prompted Ketton — concerned with underscoring the genealogical distinction between Muslims and Christians — to render *millat* as *secta*:

sectam patrum meorum secutus sum, scilicet Abraham et Ysaac ac Hismael atque Iacob, nec cuiquam nostrum accidit ut Deo socium statueremus. Hec est enim eius super nos voluntas, sed plures hominum ingratit sunt.

(I followed the sect of my fathers, that is, Abraham and Isaac and Ismael and Jacob, and it shall not occur to any of us that we set up a partner with God. For this is his will for us, but most men are ungrateful.²²)

The last Qur'anic occurrence of *millatu 'Ibrāhīm* is in Surah 22, 'al-ḥagg', but in this case Ketton did not translate it at all. To be sure, the whole 'āya is deeply modified on the level of contents. Still, here again it appears a meaningful choice. This Qur'anic passage is of the utmost importance not only because it points to the establishment of prayers, alms, and fasting as Muslim devotional practices, but also because it underscores the idea that God lays upon Muslims no hardship in terms of religious requirements and simultaneously that he provides the formal definition of Muslim as 'the ones who submits'. These two tenets completely disappear in Ketton's translation, together with the Qur'anic reference to 'the creed of Abraham' as central to Muslims.

Hoc enim precipit Deus, nil nisi iustum in lege disponens. Quam pater vester Abraham tenens, vos fideles et credulos primo vocavit. Unde testis est hic vester propheta, sicut et vos ceterarum gentium testes eritis. Orationes igitur et elemosinas ac decimas faciendo, Deo coherete, qui est dominus vester bonus et iudex optimus.

(For God commands this, nothing but arranging the just in the law. As your father Abraham held, he first called you faithful and believers.

²¹ See Gázquez and Muñoz, *Alchoran siue lex Saracenorum*, p. 245, ll. 6–11. See Q.3. 95–97.

²² See Gázquez and Muñoz, *Alchoran siue lex Saracenorum*, p. 328, ll. 77–80. See Q.12. 38.

Wherefore this prophet of yours is a witness, as you also will be witnesses of other nations. Therefore, by giving prayers and alms and tithes, cleave to God, who is your good Lord and the best judge.²³⁾

One mention of the syntagma *lex Abrahae* can be found also in the *Epistula Sarraceni, Rescriptum Christiani*, part of the same *Corpus* of writings promoted and financed by Peter the Venerable in 1143. In chapter xxiv of the *Epistula*, its anonymous author describes a series of religious duties which good converts to Islam must accomplish. Between a paragraph on marriage and divorce, and one on Ramadan, the anonymous Muslim lingers on the practice of circumcision, which he sees as the proof of the faithful's coming back, as if in a state of restored purity, to the 'law of Abraham' and 'the law of Ishmael', regarded as the two pillars of the same religious system.

Circumcideris vero ad suscitandam legem Abrahe dilecti Dei misericordis, et legem Hismahelis patris tui, orationes Dei super eos, et a pollutione somnii lavaberis.

(Thou shalt be circumcised to restore the law of Abraham, beloved of the merciful God, and the law of Ishmael, thy father, God bless them, and shalt purify thyself from the defilement contracted in sleep.²⁴⁾

This examination shows that the Latin expression *lex Abrahae* was correlated to Islamic practices and doctrines for the first time with the *Corpus Cluniacense*: it was linguistically forged to serve the comprehension and refutation of the Qur'an among Christians. No remark nor any theological elaboration of this definition, however, is provided in the writings of the *Corpus* which accompany Ketton's translation. For a theologically sophisticated and politically oriented discussion of the meaning of *lex Abrahae* one must wait a further three centuries for the dissemination of Christian treatises on Islam and the potential conversion of Muslims triggered by the conquest of Byzantium by the Ottoman Turks (29 May 1453). It is only then that Christian scholars of Islam made of the contention around Abraham a pillar of the post-1453 debate on the revelationist nature of the Qur'an by drawing on Ketton's translation, kept in several manuscripts of the *Corpus* produced or spread during the Council of Basel (1431–1449). The expression *lex Abrahae*, which till then had been silently transmitted through the Latin text of the Qur'an but had not been elaborated by any scholar, became a well-defined concept at the core of a debate revolving around the figure of Abraham and based on the close comparison of the Bible with the Qur'an from the point of view of revelation history.

Between the Duchy of Savoy, the Empire and Rome, two former members of the Council of Basel (1431–1449) engaged in this debate to persuade the

²³ See Gázquez and Muñoz, *Alchoran siue lex Saracenorum*, p. 381, ll. 124–28. See Q 22. 78.

²⁴ See Muñoz, *Exposición y refutación*, p. 21.

Church authorities, first and foremost the pope, that an interfaith discussion on the two ‘laws’ — *lex Evangelii* and *lex Alkorani* — could have prompted the conversion of Muslims in opposition or in parallel to the Crusade. I am referring to the Castilian theologian Juan de Segovia (1393–1458), known for his participation in the Council of Basel and for the trilingual edition of the Qur'an drafted with the help of the Muslim *faqih* Iça ibn Gâbir, and of the German humanist and cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), well-known by historians of interfaith relations for his *De pace fidei* and *Cibratio Alkorani*. Committed to finding the most effective solution to arrest the Islamic expansion in the Mediterranean and the Balkans, both were convinced that Muslim *fuqahā* could be rationally persuaded to join Christianity, leading other Muslims to follow their example. Shocked by the conquest of Byzantium by the Ottomans, they engaged in an epistolary exchange of writings and ideas on Islamic doctrine. Towards the end of September, Cusa sent to Segovia, at that time isolated at the Benedictine monastery of Aiton in the Duchy of Savoy, the first manuscript of his recently drafted *De pace fidei*. The relevance of this manuscript testimony — the actual MS 19, fols 126^r–139^v, of the Biblioteca Histórica of the University of Salamanca — is confirmed by the autograph initials of Nicholas of Cusa's name as well as by the signature of Peter of Ercklentz, one of his secretaries, in the colophon (fol. 139^v).²⁵ In the same month of September, Segovia drafted an extensive treatise on the peaceful conversion of Muslims, *De gladio divini spiritus in corda mittendo Sarracenorum* (1453),²⁶ which Cusa received, whether in a complete or a partial version is hard to say, in the course of 1454.²⁷ What is certain is that on 4 December Segovia sent an extensive letter to Cusa, in fact a well-organized treatise made of twenty-one chapters, where he conveyed to his former colleague at Basel his deepest thoughts on Islam in light of the military and spiritual crisis triggered by the Ottoman expansion. In this letter, Islamic history and doctrine are tackled from a soteriological perspective, the Crusade and other conversion strategies are rejected as useless, and the conversion of Muslims *via pacis et doctrinae* is seen as the only solution to arrest the century-long wars between the Christian and the Islamic worlds.²⁸

In chapter 3 of his letter, Segovia outlines a definition of the *secta Mahumeti* based on the close connection between Muslims and Abraham by reworking a series of remarks previously provided in *consideraciones* 19–22 of *De gladio divini spiritus*. The *summarium* of chapter 3 is eloquent:

²⁵ Scotto, ‘Sulla soglia della “Cibratio”’, pp. 257–58.

²⁶ Juan de Segovia, *De gladio divini spiritus in corda mittendo Sarracenorum*, trans. and ed. by Roth.

²⁷ Nicolaus de Cusa, *Épistola ad Ioannem de Segobia*, p. 94, ll. 1–3: ‘Cum indicem eorum quae tangis legerem, comprehendi perfectionem gloriosi laboris’. Cf. Scotto, *Juan de Segovia e il Corano*, p. 110. For an English translation, see Scotto, *Juan de Segovia and the Qur'an*.

²⁸ Ed. by Scotto, “*Via pacis et doctrinae*”, pp. 2–79. On Segovia's arguments, see Scotto, *Juan de Segovia e il Corano*, pp. 107–57.

Notificatur error principaliter intentus in secta Mahumeti, ut preteritis misteriis de Trinitate ac redempcione humani generis. Item veritate legis Scripture et gracie, attendatur solum ad fidem et legem Abrahe, videlicet solum credendo unum Deum et servando legem nature. Insinuatur vero causa precipua quare in brevi tempore, tam infinita multitudo populi ex Christianis, Iudeis et paganis Sarracenorum sectam suscepit.

(The main error within the Mohammedan sect is noted, that passing over the mysteries of the Trinity and the redemption of humanity, and the truth of the written law and of grace, they pay attention only to the faith and law of Abraham. That is to say, they believe in one God and follow the law of nature. This is shown to be the main reason why such a huge number of people, Christians, Jews and pagans, adopted the Saracens' sect in a short space of time.²⁹)

As is apparent, it is the same hermeneutical scheme — defining Muslims through their self-identification with Abraham — which the Second Vatican Council and later John Paul II resorted to in the last sixty years, though with distinct pastoral and political aims. While in recent scholarship and theological debate following the Council's turn the sharing of Abraham's legacy is presented as a constructive starting point for the development of Christian-Muslim relations, it was not so — to the contrary, rather — in a time when world destiny and the salvation of mankind depended on the definition of true religion (*vera religio*). In mid-fifteenth-century Latin Christendom, indeed, the core of the perceived diatribe between the Bible and the Qur'an turns out to be the contention about the definition of Abraham's creed. After thirty years spent in searching for the Qur'an, Segovia believed that the actual reason for the successful spread of Islam in the global scenario was the attempt made by Muhammad to bring Jews and Christians back to 'the law of nature' (*lex naturae*) by embracing the Qur'an. In his opinion, Muhammad had deluded Jews and Christians into believing that, by following the Qur'an, they would thereby perfectly observe the law of Abraham, which was at the core of their own Scriptures:

Etenim cum vestra concessione librum ipsum Alchoran habuerim anno XXXVII° sepeque in eo legeram et errores excerpteram, minime tamen adverteram ad fundamentum, verius autem fluximentum secte illius, que a veritatis conspectu fluit sicut cera a facie ignis. Sed et postquam studiose videre cepissem, plures transierant iam menses: quantum autem videre videor secta hec profundum pelagus perditionis animarum! Id principaliter omninoque intendit et hoc est virus nequicie sue, quod legem gracie, Scripture quoque preposcerat, suos reducens cultores ad legem nature.

²⁹ Segovia, *Epistola ad Nicolaum, Summaria capitulorum*, in Scotto, "Via pacis et doctrine", p. 73, ll. 22–29. The English translations of the letter's excerpts quoted in the text are mine.

(Having in fact received the book of the Qur'an in 1437 by your courtesy, having read it often and having excerpted its errors, nevertheless, I had not grasped the ground, in fact the groundlessness of this sect, which melts before the truth like wax before the fire. Since I began to look into it scrupulously, however, many months had already passed: what a deep abyss of perdition of souls I have the impression to observe in this sect! This is its ultimate and main purpose, this is the virus of its wickedness, that is, to reverse the law of grace and that of Scripture, bringing its followers back to the law of nature.³⁰)

Segovia aims to clarify the intentions and strategies of persuasion enacted by the *spiritus Mahumeti* or *spiritus erroris* through the composition of the Qur'an — an allusion to the Antichrist according to 1 John 4 and its use in John of Damascus's description of Islam.³¹ It is no coincidence that the origins of the Qur'an are discussed at the beginning of the letter, in the third of twenty-one chapters, before outlining the doctrinal 'mistakes' (*errores*) of Islamic law and four Christian ways (*viae*) to achieve Muslim conversion. Summarizing the main stages of Christian salvation history — from Abraham's times in Haran to the Flood and from the deliverance of the Law of Moses on Mount Sinai to Christ's death and resurrection — Segovia states that Muhammad presented Abraham as a lawgiver, and hence as the father of the Qur'an, with the aim of legitimizing his message in the eyes of the new faithful:

tanquam calidior omnibus animantibus que super terram moventur, de quo eciam ipse spiritus Mahumeti seductor quod talis sit in libro Alchoran gloriatur, adinvenit huiusmodi viam quod servanda dumtaxat lex esset, quam fingit Abrahe datam fuisse multimodis ab eo laudatam presertim ex persona Abrahe Deo fidelis.

(like the most astute of the beasts that move on earth — as the very spirit of Mohammed, the seducer, boasts of appearing in the Qur'an — he discovered the way in which only the law that he pretends to have been handed over to Abraham and that he praises in many ways, in particular as it derives from the person of Abraham, faithful to God, should be observed, so to extinguish the Gospel and the law of Moses.³²)

Segovia follows up by providing his view of the composition of the Qur'an. Since Abraham had successfully imposed the adoration of one God on all Oriental nations in a time when people worshipped a plurality of gods, at the beginning of his preaching Muhammad cleverly followed the patriarch's example by harmonizing thousands of doctrinal and ritual differences affecting

³⁰ Segovia, *Epistola ad Nicolaum*, III, in Scotto, "Via pacis et doctrine", p. 8, ll. 4–14.

³¹ See, most recently, Schadler, *John of Damascus and Islam*.

³² Segovia, *Epistola ad Nicolaum*, III, in Scotto, "Via pacis et doctrine", p. 9, ll. 11–16.

the Jewish and Christian communities in the Near East. Against this disorder, Muhammad kept the only principle which everyone shared, namely that God was one, and that he was worshipped through the works of men. Hence, he wrote the Qur'an — a common opinion among medieval Christians — with the aim of pacifying doctrinal controversies and simplifying moral bounds 'ut incerta dimittendo, quod certum erat, esset tenendum, videlicet fidem quam Abraham tenuit veram esse et legem quam servavit fore satis' (so that, abandoning the uncertainties, what was certain would be preserved, namely that the faith which Abraham kept was true and that the law he observed would suffice).³³

In Segovia's view, Muhammed brandished this compelling argument to ultimately uproot Judaism and Christianity: if all laws, he claims, that came after the law of Abraham could be perfectly brought back to the law of nature, there was no need to observe those laws anymore and they could be legitimately abrogated. This was true not only for the 'law of Moses', but also for the 'law of Christ', especially regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, which, as Muhammad perfectly understood, was barely comprehensible for the faithful. Aware that the Jews rejected the Trinity and that Oriental Christians polemicized around it, Muhammad omitted this doctrine in the Qur'an to easily achieve political agreement and doctrinal concordance between the disoriented faithful. In the same fashion, he silenced the doctrine of the Incarnation, which proved useless compared to the easier path of salvation entailed by the pre-existing law of nature. According to Segovia, Muhammad praised God's blessing on Abraham to flatter the Jews and simultaneously honoured Christ to blandish the Christians:

Studium igitur Mahumeti quia non fuit declarare fidei misteria, sed aggregare principatu suo populos multos, hinc in lege sua tradere curavit de quibus inter Christianos et Iudeos vix differencia erat, similiter et inter Christianos ipsos omnibus confitentibus Ihesum Marie fuisse Filium.

(Therefore, since Mohammed's intention was not to profess the mysteries of the faith but to incorporate many peoples into his empire, he committed to introduce into his law those elements in which there was almost no difference between Christians and Jews or among Christians themselves, since everyone believed that Jesus was the son of Mary.³⁴)

Giving the example of Jesus being the son of Mary for both Christians and Muslims, Segovia finally describes the strategy which Muhammad enacted to attract a multitude of new followers: with the Qur'an, 'the pseudo prophet' — another common idea about Muhammad among medieval Christians —

33 Segovia, *Epistola ad Nicolaum*, III, in Scotto, "Via pacis et doctrine", p. 10, ll. 4–7.

34 Segovia, *Epistola ad Nicolaum*, III, in Scotto, "Via pacis et doctrine", p. 11, ll. 20–25.

established new doctrines and rites, easier to observe, comprehensible, and compatible with all Oriental nations. In doing so, he was able to dissimulate the disruptive reality of Islam, as if Islamic doctrines and rites had existed since the time of Abraham, thus proving perfectly consistent with Judaism and Christianity:

Datoque principio isto, quod lex Abrahe esset Mahumeto destinata a Deo, consequenter hiis agens omne quod reperit fuisse in usu Abrahe temporibus, illud asserit legem Dei, pote de uxorum multitudine et concubinarum deque bellorum frequencia, in quibus Ysmael ab eo propheta vocatus omnino crassabatur et forte ea causa circumcisionem observant, quamvis de illa in libro suo Mahumetus nec unum fecerit verbum.

(Considering this principle, namely that the law of Abraham was destined by God to Muhammad, acting accordingly to these arguments, he maintains that it must be considered lawful everything that is in use in the time of Abraham, such as the plurality of wives and concubines, and the frequency of wars, through which Ishmael, whom he defined as a prophet, devastated everything, and for this reason perhaps Muslims observe circumcision, even if Mohammed, in his book, made no mention of it.³⁵)

Segovia was a passionate promoter of the methods of debate and negotiation experienced at the Council of Basel. At the same time, his approach to the Qur'an owed a substantial debt to the revival and renovation of biblical studies at the Council, and most particularly to the use of the Bible in conciliar debates of ecclesiological and political nature.³⁶ His theological interpretation of the 'law of Abraham' according to the Qur'an is the result of his participation in this intellectual milieu. The Near Eastern context in which Muhammad, in Segovia's opinion, undertook his preaching campaign to persuade Jews and Christians of the divine and self-sufficient nature of the new revelation was analogous to the divided and divisive nature of the Church of his days, affected by internal conflicts between the pope and the Council and a series of doctrinal divergencies regarding rites and doctrines which, if openly revealed to Muslims, would discourage them from converting to the Christian faith. Segovia saw the Qur'anic revelation as a brilliant intellectual stratagem to conceal divisions, the result of a successful negotiation on doctrinal divergencies based on omission, reduction, and simplification of the Scriptures.

On 29 December 1454, Nicholas of Cusa answered Segovia from Innsbruck, where he was involved as bishop of Brixen. In his brief response, the German cardinal lingered on the potentials of Muslim conversion through doctrinal teachings and suggests involving some *religiosi nostri* — experts of Arabic

³⁵ Segovia, *Epistola ad Nicolaum*, III, in Scotto, "Via pacis et doctrine", p. 12, ll. 6–13.

³⁶ See Prügl, 'Das Schriftargument zwischen Papstmonarchie und konziliärer Idee', pp. 219–42; Mann, 'Reading the Bible in the Fifteenth Century', pp. 115–34.

based at Cairo, Alexandria, and Haifa — in a diplomatic expedition to Islamic lands, but did not linger on the role of Abraham in the Qur'an nor on other issues related to the Qur'anic text.³⁷ Things had changed seven years later, when Segovia had already been four years deceased and Cusa was involved in the promotion of the Crusade against the Turks at Pope Pio II's side. Based at the Roman Curia in the company of his books, Cusa discussed in detail the Qur'anic understanding of Abraham in eight chapters (III, 11–18) of his *Cibratio Alkorani* ('Sifting of the Qur'an'). In so doing, he produced, to my knowledge, the most extensive reflection on Abraham as the claimed and contested father of Christianity and Islam conceived in the Middle Ages. The *Cibratio* was finished at the beginning of 1462 and offered to Pius II, depicted in the dedicatory letter as the *novellus* Pope Leon III fighting against the *novelli* Nestorians.³⁸ While the eight chapters on Abraham sound like a posthumous answer to Segovia's concerns, the interpretation of the Qur'an is clearly different from that of his former colleague and friend from Castile. Remarkably, Cusa does not explicitly undermine the revelationist nature of the Qur'an, but rather insists on the salvific uselessness of the law of Abraham. His attack is against the soteriological prominence of Abraham over Christ rather than against the soteriology of the Qur'an in its own right, which he deemed to be close, once purified by the interpolations introduced into it over time, to the soteriology of the Bible.

Chapter 11 of Book 3 of the *Cibratio* is written 'against [the idea] that the law of the Qur'an is the law of Abraham.' Aware that the Qur'an distinguishes between the 'law of Moses' contained in the 'Testament' and the 'law of Christ' contained in the Gospel, Cusa reacts by opposing what he sees as a dangerous legal pluralism with his view of a unified law (*una divina lex*) of allegorical character. Following a typological interpretation of the 'Old Law', he claims that the 'Testament' has not been abrogated but perfected by Christ 'by manifesting the spiritual understanding of the law — [something] which is contained beneath the letter but [which] was not recognized'. While the Qur'an claims to imitate and match the law of Abraham, Cusa regards the latter as chronologically and soteriologically superseded, and thus completely useless for salvation, having been replaced by the spirit of the law disclosed

³⁷ Nicolaus de Cusa, *Epistola ad Ioannem de Segobia*, II, p. 97, ll. 15–18: 'Verum quia in terris Sarracenorum reperiuntur multi zelosi fideles, qui et mores atque fundamenta eorum optime sciunt et semper student ipsis obviare, illos colligere ex Kayro, Alexandria et Caffa expedire, et mercatores modum haberent eos adducendi'. The literature on Cusa and Islam is as abundant as it is often critically deficient. Among the most useful contributions of the last years, see Costigliolo, 'Qur'anic Sources of Nicholas of Cusa', pp. 219–38; the essays collected in *Nicholas of Cusa and Islam*, ed. by Levy and others and in *Responding to the Qur'an*, ed. by Duclow and others.

³⁸ The date of the work has been clarified thanks to José Martínez Gázquez's study of the recently discovered marginal notes by Cusa in one of his two manuscript copies of Ketton's Latin Qur'an. See Gázquez, 'A New Set of Glosses to the Latin Quran', pp. 295–309; Gázquez, 'Las glosas de Nicolás de Cusa al "Alchoranus Latinus"', pp. 473–92.

by Christ once and for all: 'Therefore, nothing remains to be explicated regarding the law of Abraham.'³⁹ Concerned, like Segovia, with the Qur'anic understanding of Abraham as a lawgiver, the cardinal rails against the idea that God provided mankind with a plurality of ways to achieve salvation. This switch from typological to supersessionist thinking allows Cusa to honour and, at the same time, to dismiss the law of Abraham in light of Christ's advent.

At first glance, Cusa's polemic against the legal pluralism of the Qur'an may seem inconsistent if not contradictory with respect to the arguments on the coexistence of distinct laws and rites he made in *De pace fidei* — the much-debated literary dialogue between Christ, the apostles Peter and Paul, and fifteen representatives of *religiones* and *nationes* of the world, which several scholars in the last forty years have regarded as a manifesto of tolerance *ad litteram* or *ante litteram*.⁴⁰ But in fact, *De pace fidei* and *Cibratio Alkorani* point to the same Christological and Christocentric scheme.⁴¹ Indeed, Cusa describes and accepts the existence of a plurality of religious rites, claiming that they provide distinct and equally useful ways to worship God: but this is true only from a Christocentric perspective, as long as the sacrament of baptism is administrated to non-Christians and the Trinitarian concept of God, implicated in the *cultus latiae*, is acknowledged; for this reason, he cannot accept what he read in Surah 2. 62 on the plurality of ways which

39 Nicolaus de Cusa, *Cibratio Alkorani*, III, 11, ed. by Hagemann, p. 156, § 195, ll. 10–13: 'Non sunt duae leges testamenti et evangelii, sed una divina lex, quam Christus non solvit, sed complevit ostendendo spiritum intelligentiae legis, qui sub littera continetur et non cognoscetur', and l. 19: 'Nihil igitur de lege Abrahae restat explicandum'. The English translations from *Cibratio* mentioned in the text are drawn from *Nicholas of Cusa's De pace fidei and Cibratio Alkorani*, trans. by Hopkins, p. 1074 (for both quotations).

40 I provided an example of the implications of projecting modern (Lutheran) and contemporary (Catholic) expectations onto the *De pace fidei* in Scotto, 'Baptismales lotiones', but much more should be done in this regard starting from Cusa's sources, working method, theological and political concerns as reflected also (but not only) in his manuscripts.

41 Nathan Ron recently envisaged a radical distinction between *De pace fidei*, which he labelled irenic according to the above-mentioned historiographic perspective, and *Cibratio Alkorani*, which he sees as a manifesto of intolerance and as the ultimate proof of Cusa's aggressive and belligerent attitude. This argument, repeated time and again along the booklet, is based on a purely abstract comparison between passages of the two works regarding the same topics (Abraham, the Jews, circumcision, etc.). No substantial clue about the different historical contexts wherein the two works were written, however, is provided, not to speak of their distinct literary genres, the sources they draw from, the Latin lexicon they resort to and the manuscripts which transmit them; none of these aspects are considered at all. Even the drafting date of the two works is mistaken: *De pace fidei* was written in September, not in December 1453; *Cibratio*, as Martínez Gázquez showed by investigating Cusa's *marginalia* to Ketton's Latin translation of the Qur'an according to Vat. Lat. 4071, was not finished before the beginning of 1462. Ron's methodological levity is surprising especially given his peremptory remarks to the effect that coming back to the context — against 'idealist scholars' rebuked in the introduction — was the key to his research method. Cf. Ron, *Nicholas of Cusa and Muhammad*.

God provided for the salvation of mankind. The legal pluralism underlying the Qur'an is the result, in his opinion, of its attempt to merge the law of Abraham with the Jewish and the Christian laws, and must therefore be rejected. In *Cibratio*, Cusa urges Muslims to exclusively observe 'the law of Christ', the only one which has perfected and incorporated 'the law Abraham':

Oportet igitur ut fatearis non esse nisi unam legem et Abrahae et Moysi et Christi, quae servantibus summam remunerationem aeternae vitae promittit. Neque possunt plura esse perfectissima, cum quodlibet possit esse perfectius. Sola una est perfectissima via seu lex ad unicum perfectissimum finem perducens, quae alia esse non potest quam illa, per quam Christus, qui omnium perfectissimus, ivit et docuit eundum.

(Therefore, you must acknowledge that there is only one law — [the law] of Abraham and of Moses and of Christ — which promises to those who keep [it] the supreme reward of eternal life. And there cannot be many most perfect things, since each [of the many] would be able to be more perfect. There is only one most perfect way, or law, that leads to a single and most perfect end. This [way] cannot be other than [the way] by which Christ proceeded (who is the most perfect of all [men]) and [by which,] as He taught, we must proceed.⁴²)

Unlike Segovia, Cusa saw the coming back to the law of Abraham sponsored by the Qur'an as the consequence of the doctrinal deviation that Muhammad underwent after his conversion to the Nestorian faith due to the wicked influence of the Jews.⁴³ To counteract the Qur'anic interpretation of the law of Abraham, the cardinal summarizes the narrative of Abraham's life given in the Book of Genesis — from his flight to Canaan to his marriage with Sarah, and from the birth of Isaac to his binding on Mount Moriah, up to the patriarch's death at the age of 176 (Genesis 12–26). This hermeneutical strategy, as we know, allows him to distinguish the purely Christian elements of the Qur'an from what he deems to be omitted, distorted, or interpolated sections of its text.⁴⁴ He labels these differences *variationes* and claims that they are due to the Jews, who, at the time of Muhammad, possessed a manuscript copy of the Qur'an and forged it before the actual version was produced. The result of this reasoning is a charge against the nefarious co-production of old Jewish ideas and new corrupted ideas by a heterodox Christian and an apostate who denied his previous faith because of external influences. As Michelina di Cesare has recently showed, the anti-Jewish understanding of the origins of

⁴² Nicolaus de Cusa, *Cibratio Alkorani*, III, 11, pp. 156–57, § 196, ll. 1–7. English trans. by Hopkins, p. 1074.

⁴³ For a first insight into a topic which is worth investigating further, see Heyden, 'Der Beitrag historisch-theologischer Hermeneutik zur interreligiösen Verständigung', pp. 242–46.

⁴⁴ According to the hermeneutical scheme clearly outlined by Hopkins, 'The Role of "pia interpretation" in Nicholas of Cusa's Hermeneutical Approach to the Koran', pp. 251–73.

the Qur'an is peculiar to the Arab-Christian polemics against Islam collected in Peter the Venerable's collection of writings on Islam:⁴⁵ Cusa proves to owe a substantial intellectual debt to the Cluniac tradition of combining anti-Jewish and anti-Islamic polemics.⁴⁶

As a conclusion of his reflection on the law of Abraham, Cusa resumes the well-established genealogical interpretation of Genesis 17 and 22, according to which Muslims descended from the wild and violent Ishmael, while Christians descended from Isaac, the *typos* of Christ. The Jewish Bible, within this scheme, is simply instrumental and in fact disappears. Reworking the dualism between faith and law underlying Paul's letter to the Galatians, the German cardinal ascribes to Christians the adherence to 'the faith of Abraham' and to Muslims that to 'the law of Abraham'. By observing Abraham's law alone, present Muslims — who not by coincidence are labelled 'Arabs' rather than 'Saracens' by Cusa — are genealogically excluded from God's salvation plan:

Vos vero, o Arabes, non creditis Abraham talem mercedem a deo pro sua iustitia et oboedientia assecutum, minus igitur de Abraham creditis quam Christiani veri Abrahae filii. Non eritis igitur coheredes Christi filii Abrahae, qui fideles Abrahae filii esse recusatis.

(Therefore, you believe something less regarding Abraham than do Christians, who are true descendants of Abraham. Therefore, you who refuse to be believing descendants of Abraham will not be joint heirs with Christ, who Himself is a descendant of Abraham.⁴⁷)

The conclusion of the posthumous conversation between Segovia and Cusa does not come *ex abrupto*. The co-production of the concept of *lex Abrahae* as a means to understand Islam is inconceivable without the original, groundbreaking Qur'anic discourse on the *millatu 'Ibrāhīm*. However, the transfer of this concept to Christianity rests upon three intellectual debts of the Christian exegetical and theological tradition that substantiates both Segovia's and Cusa's works.

The first regards the linguistic and hermeneutical implications of translating the Qur'an into Latin. To detect the 'āyat mentioning the concept of *millatu 'Ibrāhīm*, both Segovia and Cusa read Robert of Ketton's Latin translation of the Qur'an. Cusa possessed two manuscript testimonies of it, kept today at the Library of the Hospital of Kues (Cod. Cus. 108, fols 31^r–107^r) and the Vatican Library (Vat. Lat. 4071, fols 23^v–127^r) respectively, both autographically annotated and used to draft, between September 1453 and the beginning of 1462, *De pace*

45 Di Cesare, "Adiutores Mahumet compilauerunt Alchoran", pp. 14–47.

46 On this combination, see Iogna-Prat, *Ordonner et exclure*; Scotto, "I Invite You to Salvation", pp. 239–62.

47 Nicolaus de Cusa, *Cibratio Alkorani*, III, 15, p. 170, § 215, ll. 9–13. English trans. by Hopkins, p. 1083.

fidei and *Cibratio Alkorani*.⁴⁸ In the margins of the Kues manuscript, where the above-mentioned translation by Ketton of Q.2. 135 states that the law of Jews and Christians ‘justly professes to embrace the law of Abraham, the most righteous, and not another’, Cusa wrote down the following note: ‘Behold: the Muslims profess the law of Abraham’.⁴⁹ Moreover, besides Ketton’s translation of Q.4. 125–26, which I have in turn discussed above — a eulogy of those who follow the law Abraham — Cusa pointedly noticed: ‘Behold: [the Qur’ān] prefers those who follow the law of Abraham’.⁵⁰ Finally, in the margins of the Vatican manuscript, where the already-mentioned translation by Ketton of Q.2. 130 states that ‘whoever, therefore, disregards the law of Abraham and forsakes it, will be [regarded as] a brute’, Cusa wrote down this meaningful note, which confirms the hermeneutical strategies he had enacted ten years before by annotating the Trier manuscript: ‘against the transgressors of the law of Abraham’.⁵¹ When the German cardinal read Ketton’s translation, one of his main concerns was the fact that Muslims presented themselves as the legitimate observants of Abraham’s law and grounded eight chapters of his *Cibratio Alkorani* against this very claim.

During his time at Basel, Juan de Segovia in turn was able to collect three copies of Ketton’s translation — all unfortunately lost — and later to keep them in his library at the Aiton monastery until his death:⁵² we know that he compared them and used them extensively in his works on Islam before turning to his and Yça Gidelli’s retranslation from Arabic, which he finally introduced into the trilingual edition of Qur’ān.⁵³ Ketton’s choice of translating four times the Arabic word *millat* into the Latin word *lex* gave priority to the legal and revelationist nature of Abraham’s creed rather than to its religious and spiritual nature. In doing so, Ketton influenced the way the religious experience of Abraham and his relation to God according to the Qur’ān were perceived by Christians in the late Middle Ages — a fundamental step in the process of co-production of a Christian Qur’ān.

The second debt regards recourse to biblical exegesis to understand the Qur’ān. Cusa and Segovia’s discussion of the law of Abraham against the backdrop of Christ’s death and resurrection is heavily indebted to Paul’s

⁴⁸ See Biechler, ‘Three Manuscripts on Islam from the Library of Nicholas of Cusa’, pp. 91–100; and Martínez Gázquez’s studies mentioned above, n. 38.

⁴⁹ Bernkastel-Kues, St Nikolaus-Hospital, Cod. Cus. 107, fol. 33^r: ‘nota: Mahumetani legem Abrahe profitentur’. For the Latin text by Ketton, see footnote 17 above.

⁵⁰ Bernkastel-Kues, St Nikolaus-Hospital, Cod. Cus. 107, fol. 43^r: ‘nota: sequentes legem Abrahe prefert’. For the Latin text by Ketton, see footnote 18 above.

⁵¹ Vatican City, MS Vat. Lat. 4071, fol. 26^v: ‘contra transgressores legis Abrahe’. For the Latin text by Ketton, see footnote 16 above.

⁵² Muñoz, ‘Juan de Segovia y los manuscritos de la traducción latina del Corán de Robert de Ketton’, pp. 73–80.

⁵³ Roth and Glei, ‘Die Spuren der lateinischen Koranübersetzung des Juan de Segovia’, pp. 109–54; Roth and Glei, ‘Eine weitere Spur der lateinischen Koranübersetzung des Juan de Segovia’, pp. 221–28.

supersessionist interpretation of the 'Old Law'. According to chapter 3 of Paul's letter to the Galatians, the spiritual legacy of Abraham sanctioned by God's promise to him and his descendants — not by the rite of circumcision — was taken on by Christ. The dualistic and polemical understanding of 'Jewish Law' provided in Paul's letter to the Galatians, his letter to the Romans and the Epistle to the Hebrews is at the core of a long-lasting exegetical tradition going from Church Fathers like Jerome and Ambrose to medieval biblical commentaries such as Nicholas of Lyra's *Postillae*, which both Segovia and Cusa read and possessed among their books. This medieval tradition is essential to understanding the Christian interpretation of Islam from the fifteenth-century debate to the twentieth-century declarations of the Vatican Council. Indeed, only one *locus* in the Vulgate, following Paul's letter to the Romans, attests to the *syntagma fides Abrahae*, while no mention is made of *lex Abrahae*:⁵⁴ it is the early medieval exegetical tradition that introduced the latter concept into the Christian discourse on salvation. In Bede the Venerable's ninth-century commentary on the Pentateuch, for example, *lex Abrahae* is used to claim that the 'law of Abraham' has replaced 'the law of Adam', whose violation urged God to deliver a new law.⁵⁵ Drawing on this extensive literature, in the late Middle Ages the dichotomy between an old and a new law, based on the contention around the spiritual legacy of Abraham and involving Judaism and Christianity, was projected onto the Christian understanding of the Qur'an.⁵⁶

Finally, a third and last debt can be detected in the medieval development of theology of revelation. Again, a hermeneutical pattern which had been conceived by the Church Fathers to resist the challenge posed by the persistence of Jewish doctrines and rites among newly converted Christians was reworked — ten centuries later — to make sense of Islam. Cusa and Segovia situate the Qur'an-inspired concept of *lex Abrahae* within the scholarly debate *de fide et legibus* that broke out in Europe at monastic schools and universities against the backdrop of the works by German scholars of the Bible such as Hugh of Saint Victor and Anselm of Havelberg, as well as such an influential Parisian theologian as William of Auvergne.⁵⁷ One of the aims of this debate on faith and laws was to demonstrate the supersession of Judaism by Christian doctrine in terms of both salvation and universal history. The tripartite scheme used to elaborate upon the history of revelation — *ante legem, sub lege, sub gratia* — was converted by

⁵⁴ Romans 4. 9: 'Beatus ergo haec in circumcisione tantum manet, an etiam in praeputio? Dicimus enim quia reputata est Abrahae fides ad justitiam'.

⁵⁵ Bede the Venerable, *Commentarii in Pentateuchum*, XVII, ed. by Migne, col. 0237D: 'Haec autem lex Abrahae non donaretur, si Adam custodisset legem sibi datam'.

⁵⁶ This rework — in fact a legalizing and moralizing process — of Paul's thinking had a long-lasting impact on the shaping of interfaith coexistence in late medieval Iberia: see Scotto, 'The Conflation of Judaism and Islam', pp. 293–328.

⁵⁷ See Giardini, 'Ante legem, sub lege, sub gratia', pp. 3–47.

scholars like Cusa and Segovia into the ‘Abrahamic’ tripartition, equally supersessionist, *lex Moyses*, *lex Christi* and *lex Mahumeti*.⁵⁸

Dramatic political events such as the conquest of Byzantium by the Turks and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire towards Europe’s Eastern borders prompted the theological debate on the potential coexistence of distinct religious laws, playing a pivotal role in the intellectual co-production of the concepts of *lex Abrahae*. However, without the three hermeneutical debts I have outlined — the translation of the Qur’ān from Arabic into Latin, the reception of Paul’s supersessionist thinking and its application vis-à-vis Islam, and the medieval view of history of revelation — it is impossible to understand why and how a specific discussion on the law of Abraham broke out in fifteenth-century Christendom triggering a plurality of interpretations of the relations between Christianity and Islam which, especially after May 1453, had relevant political implications for the future of Europe. The Latin expression *lex Abrahae*, from both a lexicological and a theological point of view, can be historically understood as a co-production process involving the reworking of the Jewish Bible by Paul (Genesis/Galatians), the impact of the Qur’ānic concept of *millatu ibrāhīm*, and the medieval Christian obsession with a potentially sharable, but in fact jealously safeguarded and harshly contended, perspective on salvation.

⁵⁸ See Madrigal Terrazas, ‘Lex Christi, lex Moysi, lex Machometi’, pp. 339–65.

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