

OZDEN MERCAN

**CONSTRUCTING A SELF-IMAGE IN THE IMAGE OF
THE OTHER:
POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF POPE
PIUS II'S LETTER TO MEHMED II (1461)**

MA Thesis in Medieval Studies

Central European University

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May 2008

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by

OZDEN MERCAN

(Turkey)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,
Central European University, Budapest, in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the Master of Arts degree in Medieval Studies

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU

Chair, Examination Committee

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ABSTRACT

Constructing a Self-Image in the Image of the Other: Political and Religious Interpretations of Pope Pius II's Letter to Mehmed II (1461)

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This study analyzes the puzzling letter written by Pope Pius II to the Ottoman sultan Mehmed the Conqueror in order to convert him to Christianity. This letter was written in 1461, however it was never sent to Mehmed and it was made public in Europe only after the death of Pope Pius. This fact makes the intended audience and the purpose of the letter rather problematic. Due to these ambiguities, this letter has led to debates among scholars about its main purpose. A close analysis of the letter and its comparison with the previous papal letters written to Muslim rulers reveals that, more than a conversion letter, Pope Pius planned this letter as a propaganda tool and ideological support for Christians in their fight against the Ottomans. In order to revive the crusading spirit in Christian princes Pope Pius made use of medieval polemical rhetoric against Islam and constructed a European self-image through the image of the Ottomans and Islam. Combining medieval attitudes towards Islam with humanist rhetoric, Pius' letter is a fascinating representative of the concerns and attitudes of the fifteenth century humanists in the face of the Ottoman peril.

I, the undersigned, **OZDEN MERCAN**, candidate for the MA degree in Medieval Studies declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Budapest, 26 May 2008

Signature

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INTRODUCTION:

The conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire in 1453 stirred Europe deeply and attracted the attention of the Europeans considerably to a growing Ottoman threat nearby. While the question of organizing a crusade against the Ottomans became more urgent, the humanist circle especially appealed to it with an immense production of literature that reflects the contemporary worries and fears caused by the new alien presence in Europe. The humanists expressed their concerns in various ways. Drawing on earlier examples, both ancient and medieval, they applied similar stereotypes to the Ottomans. Not only did they employ the medieval religious perception by identifying the Ottomans as the enemies of the faith, but they also made use of cultural stereotypes rooted in the ancient distinction between the civilized and the barbarian and thus, presented the new enemy as barbarian destroyer of the Western civilization.

Although the recent scholarship argues that the emphasis on the barbarity of the Turks put a new dimension on the perceptions of the Ottomans and resulted in a “more secular discourse”¹ on the Ottomans, it is hard to stretch this assumption to all the literary works of the period, especially to those produced in ecclesiastical circles. After all, during this period, the necessity to organize a crusade against the Ottomans became a priority for the papacy. For this sake, there was a remarkable production of religious treatises in which the traditional themes of medieval Christian polemics

¹ Nancy Bisaha, “New Barbarian” or Worthy Adversary?: Humanist Constructs of the Ottoman Turks in the Fifteenth-Century Italy,” in *the Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Michael Frassetto and David Blanks (London: Macmillan, 1999)185-207. She discusses this issue more fully in her book, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

against Islam maintained its dominance and the medieval rhetoric on the Saracens was directly adapted to the Ottomans as contemporary infidels. In this sense, Pope Pius II's letter to Mehmed II, seemingly written with the purpose of converting the Ottoman sultan to Christianity, provides a good example.² When evaluated in the context of its period, this letter does not seem to carry any of the characteristics of the humanists' "secularized crusading literature."³ It rather demonstrates that there was not a sharp break between medieval and Renaissance perceptions of the Other. The images and rhetoric of polemics against Islam, especially, represent prevailing examples of continuity between medieval and Renaissance perceptions of the Other.

In the light of these arguments, the purpose of this study is to investigate what kind of role the letter of Pope Pius might have been intended to play in the context of the period. The fact that this letter was never sent to Mehmed and even not made public in Europe during Pius' lifetime makes it difficult to reach any precise judgment about its purpose. For this reason, this letter has led to many debates among scholars concerning its sincerity. The focus of this study will be to re-evaluate all these arguments and re-consider the intentions of Pope Pius in the political and religious context of his times. For this sake, one of the objectives will be to examine the letter in the light of Pius' general attitude towards the Ottomans and his crusading activities. In order to add a new dimension to the study, there will be also a comparison between Pius' letter and previous papal letters written to Muslim rulers. Such a comparison will show whether Pius' letter can be placed in the same category as those letters. Lastly, the letter will be examined in the context of Christian polemics against Islam.

² Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II), *Epistola ad Mahometem II (Epistle to Mohammed II)*, ed. and tr. Albert R. Baca (New York: Peter Lang, 1990).

³ James Hankins, "Renaissance Crusaders : Humanist Crusade Literature in the Age of Mehmed II," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 49 (1995): 111-207.

The intended aim of such a study is to point out certain aspects of the letter that indicate a particular purpose without suggesting that necessarily all parts of the letter indicate that same purpose. After all, it is impossible to know Pope Pius' real intentions in writing his letter. Therefore, this study will not go beyond offering some interpretations and propositions concerning Pius' aims with such a letter.

CHAPTER I:

POPE PIUS II'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE OTTOMANS

Pope Pius II (Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini) was one of the outstanding figures of the Renaissance and the most passionate supporter of the idea of crusade in the fifteenth century whose activities deserve close examination in understanding Renaissance attitudes towards the Ottomans. Throughout his life he was an unyielding opponent of the Turks. He first emphasized the Ottoman threat at the Council of Basel in 1436. After the Fall of Constantinople, he wrote letters to the Popes Nicholas V and Calixtus III to organize or lead a crusade against the Turks. When he became pope, in 1458, one of his first acts was to assemble a conference of a number of Christian princes at Mantua with the aim of organizing a large-scale crusade. The meeting did not yield any results, but the pope proceeded with his plans. These ended in failure; he died in Ancona in 1464, about to embark upon the crusade he had organized on his own.⁴ Pius II, as a humanist scholar and a pope, used all his skills —literary, rhetorical, diplomatic, and political — to promote the idea of the crusade.

Among his works, his autobiographical *Commentaries* (1458-1464) is the longest and the most famous. In this, Piccolomini described the Turks as the destroyers of the ancient Greek heritage and civilization and despised their religion, Islam, as heretical. He showed how this “race,” which had once migrated from eastern Scythia, besieged Constantinople and sacked it. According to Piccolomini, the ruler of the Turks, Mehmed resolved to defeat all Christian peoples and utterly annihilate the Holy Scriptures and the divine law of Christ because, as a nation, the Turks were

⁴ Nancy Bisaha, “Pope Pius II and the Crusade,” in *Crusading in the Fifteenth Century: Message and Impact*, ed. Norman Housley (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2004), 39-52.

“foes of the Trinity.” They followed a certain false prophet called Mahomet, “an Arab imbued with gentile error and Jewish perfidy, who listened to Christians infected with Nestorianism and Arianism.”⁵ Mahomet was acquainted with the Old and the New Testament, but he perverted them both; he claimed that he was a prophet and that talked to angels and he cast such a spell over ignorant peoples that he was able to give them a new law and persuade them to abandon Christ, the Savior.

Concerning Islam, Pope Pius followed a similar pattern of argumentation to that of medieval Christian polemicists. For him, the Prophet Mahomet made use of magic and by permitting lust and incest he easily won over the common people, who tended to sensual pleasure. Although Mahomet’s law admitted that Christ was inspired by God, born of a Virgin, and able to perform miracles, it denied that “He was divine and that He suffered the agony of death for our redemption.” According to Pius, the influence of this “monstrous doctrine” made its way with the Turks into Europe.⁶ Thus, the victory over the Turks seemed to him a task for all Christendom.

In another work, *Asia*, or *Cosmographia* ⁷ Pius traced the origins of the Turks back to the Scythians and emphasized their barbarous and violent nature. In fact, from the 1450s onwards humanists undertook a mission to highlight the barbarity of the Turks by developing an historical narrative of identity that placed the Turks firmly

⁵ Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (Pope Pius II), *The Commentaries of Pius II*, tr. Florence Alden Gragg and int. Leona Gabel (Northampton: Smith College Studies in History, 1940), Bk. II, 116.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Pius wrote *Asia* between 1461 and 1462, after his election to the papacy. He drew his knowledge about Asia from an impressive range of Classical authorities including Strabo, Ptolemy, Pliny, and Solinus. *Asia* traverses the continent from east to west, starting with the distant lands of the ancient Seres, passing through Scythia and the countries of the Caucasus, and ending with the ancient kingdoms of Parthia, Armenia, and the Mediterranean provinces of Asia Minor. This work was unfinished; the part on India, Persia and Arabia to Syria and Holy Land remained unwritten. Margaret Meserve, “From Samarkand to Scythia: Reinventions of Asia in Renaissance Geography and Political Thought,” in *Pius II, “el piu expeditivo pontifice”: Selected Studies on Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini*, ed. Zweder Von Martels (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 17.

beyond ancient civilizations.⁸ They located the ancient Turks in Scythia and fixed their early history in an established pattern of barbarous behavior. This scholarly enterprise intended to prove the uncivilized ancestry and inborn savage character of the Turks. Pius II was one of the originators of this attempt. In his *Asia*, he drew a connection between the Turks and the Scythians, describing the Scythians as “a fierce and ignominious people, fornicators, engaging in all manner of lewdness and frequenters of brothels, who ate detestable things: the flesh of mares, wolves, vultures and what is even more horrifying aborted human fetuses.”⁹ The description of Scythians as a savage and uncouth people and their association with the Turks contributed a great deal to constructing the image of the Turks as immoral and backward. This emphasis on the barbarity of the Turks added a different color to the Turkish image, already depicted as the infidels and the enemies of the Cross, and it drew a clear distinction between Western civilization and Ottoman barbarity.¹⁰

Pius’ most interesting and problematic writing on the Turks was written in 1461. This was a letter written to Sultan Mehmed II (1451-1481) in order to persuade him to become a Christian. It sounds like a turning point in the pope’s generally hostile attitude to Turks because Pius praises Mehmed for his noble Scythian ancestry by saying “you, an excellent man, illustrious scion of noble ancestors, famous for the glory of your deeds, endowed with a great empire, and eminent because of your many natural gifts.”¹¹ Moreover, he compares Mehmed with Constantine the Great and offers him the legitimate rule of the whole Eastern kingdom in return for “a little bit

⁸ Margaret Meserve, “Italian Humanists and the Problem of the Crusade,” in *Crusading in the Fifteenth Century: Message and Impact*, ed. Norman Housley (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2004), 27; Nancy Bisaha, “New Barbarian” or Worthy Adversary?: Humanist Constructs of the Ottoman Turks in the Fifteenth-Century Italy,” 197-203.

⁹ Pius’ reasons for inquiring into the geography and history of Scythia was certainly due to his concern to vilify the Turks as barbarian Scythians and thus to strengthen his case for mounting a military expedition against them. Nancy Bisaha, “Pope Pius II and the Crusade,” 46.

¹⁰ Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks*, 85-7.

¹¹ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 38.

of water” by which he might be baptized and brought to Christian rites and to belief in the Gospel. He proclaims that if Mehmed receives this, there will not be any leader in the world “who can surpass him in glory or equal him in power” and they will call him “ruler over the Greeks and the East;”¹² he will legitimately possess what he had taken by force and injustice. When considered in the context of the fierce hostility of the pope against the Ottomans, it is indeed puzzling that he put such laudatory statements to the sultan in his letter.

As to the date and the authenticity of the letter, there is no doubt that it was written in 1461 and that it is genuine. Although this letter was addressed to Mehmed II, it was never sent to him, and interestingly it became known only after Pius’ death.¹³ Even in his longest and most enduring work, the *Commentaries*, which is the story of his life, Pope Pius did not mention this letter. Moreover, none of the Ottoman sources mentions the reception of such a letter by the sultan.¹⁴ This fact makes the intended audience and purpose of the letter rather problematic. Due to these ambiguities, this letter, seemingly written with the aim of converting Mehmed II to Christianity, has led to debates among scholars about its main purpose.

Previous Arguments Concerning the Letter

Some scholars argue that Pius’ letter was directly addressed to Mehmed and was written as a sincere attempt to bring peace to Eastern Europe and to unify Christendom. According to James Hankins, “in a mood of despair and within a well-

¹² *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 18.

¹³ The letter was first published in Cologne in 1464, other editions are subsequently in Cologne in 1470, Treviso in 1475, Rome in 1477.

¹⁴ I reached this conclusion not only by my own examination of some Ottoman sources such as Kritovoulos *History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, tr. Charles T. Riggs (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1954) and Tursun Beg *The History of Mehmed the Conqueror*, tr. Halil Inalcık and Rhoads Murphey (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1978) but also through my conversation with Prof. Halil Inalcık who is one of the most important Ottoman specialists on the age of Mehmed the Conqueror.

established missionary tradition,”¹⁵ the pope wrote this letter indeed to Mehmed and tried to convert him. At first, this argument seems quite reasonable because after the disappointment of the Council of Mantua, the pope might have felt hopeless about organizing a crusade against the Turks. So he decided to employ peaceful methods to solve what he saw as an Ottoman problem. One point Hankins seems to ignore, however, is that this letter was never sent, even if one assumes that it was intended to be sent; its content and language on the whole demonstrate that it was less meant to persuade someone to convert than to show the superiority of Latin Christendom and Western Europe. Moreover, in 1462, soon after the pope wrote this letter, he assembled his cardinals and declared his intention to organize a new crusade. He told his cardinals that “he was ashamed to sit inactive while the Turks were besetting more and more closely now Pannonia, now Dalmatia in unremitting war.”¹⁶ Determined to go to war against the Turks, he summoned Philip, Duke of Burgundy, who had already made a vow that he would fight against the Turks. Thus, clearly from the beginning the pope was zealous about crusading and it would be quite strange for him to change his attitude so quickly.

Another scholar who takes this letter as a sincere attempt of conversion is Franz Babinger. His reasons are more interesting than Hankins’. According to him, Pope Pius heard that Patriarch Gennadius had composed a treatise summarizing the principles of Christian teaching at the request of Mehmed.¹⁷ This rumor implied that the sultan had an inclination towards Christianity. Moreover, due to the fact that Mehmed’s mother was Christian, it was claimed that she educated him in Christian

¹⁵ James Hankins, “Renaissance Crusaders : Humanist Crusade Literature in the Age of Mehmed II,” 129.

¹⁶ Zweder Von Martels, “‘More Matter and Less Art’. Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini and the Delicate Balance between Eloquent Words and Deeds” in *Pius II, “el piu expeditivo pontifice”: Selected Studies on Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 224.

¹⁷ Nothing is known about this treatise of Gennadius. Although most secondary sources mention that Mehmed ordered it to be written, it is not known whether a copy of it remains extant.

teachings and “he could recite the *Pater Noster* by heart” as a child. All these claims increased the possibility of Mehmed already having been converted to Christianity. Thus, for Babinger the pope decided to write this letter in order to convince Mehmed of the superiority of Christian teachings over Islam.¹⁸

When the relationship between Orthodox and Latin Christians at that time is taken into consideration, this argument seems somewhat unlikely. It was Mehmed himself who appointed Gennadius as patriarch, and in this choice, Mehmed considered the fact that Gennadius was the chief opponent of an ecumenical union with Rome. His decision was a measure against the danger that his Christian subjects might be influenced by the pope. Therefore, by choosing someone who was a strong opponent of the union of churches, Mehmed tried to sever all the ties between Eastern and Western Christianity. In fact, this was not a difficult task because there was already strong resistance towards Catholics among the Orthodox Byzantines. On the eve of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, except for some Greek intellectuals, many Byzantines refused to compromise with the Latins and even refused to support the defense.¹⁹ The famous dictum of Lucas Notaras, the last emperor’s chief councilor, expresses this enmity very well: “It is preferable to us to see the Turkish turban prevailing in the midst of the City rather than the tiara of the Latin cardinal.”²⁰ In that sense, the close relations of the Ottomans with the Orthodox Christians whom Pope Pius described in his letter as people, who “had abandoned the unity of the Roman Church and were in error,”²¹ could hardly have been a motive for his attempt to write it.

¹⁸ Franz Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), 198-99.

¹⁹ Robert Schwoebel, *The Shadow of the Crescent: The Renaissance Image of the Turk* (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1967), 16.

²⁰ Georgiades Arnakis, “The Greek Church of Constantinople and the Ottoman Empire,” *The Journal of Modern History* 24, No. 3 (1952): 236.

²¹ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 17.

Another issue that needs explanation here is the assumption of Mehmed's inclination towards Christianity. Mehmed the Conqueror is perhaps one of the leading Ottoman sultans about whom every kind of assumptions have been made by European historians. His interest in Italian Renaissance culture and Christianity led some historians to regard him as a true Renaissance ruler and even a crypto-Christian. There is no doubt that in his palace he gathered Greek and Italian scholars such as Amirutzes of Trebizond, Critobolus of Imbros and Ciriacus of Ancona; he created a palace library of Classical Latin and Greek works; he invited Gentile Bellini from Venice to paint frescoes for the palace and his own portrait, and he ordered Gennadius to compose a treatise on Christianity so that he could learn the principles of the Christian religion from a qualified person.

However, it is misleading to interpret all these efforts as a sort of emulation of Christianity or Western culture. Mehmed was simply conscious that he was sultan of a large Christian population, including various Christian groups, not to mention the Jews as well. It was both justifiable from a Muslim religious point of view and politic of Mehmed to take an interest in and even to patronize his non-Muslim subjects. After all, he was an Ottoman Muslim *ghazi* sovereign, whose rule aimed to establish the world's most powerful empire. He received an Islamic education and he was mostly influenced by Molla Hüsrev and Hocaade.²² Therefore, his interest in the Christian world emerged precisely from "a desire to become its conqueror and ruler."²³ In this sense, for a sultan known as "the greatest Islamic sovereign since the first four caliphs,"²⁴ it is hard to imagine the possibility of a leaning towards Christianity.

²² Other Muslim intellectuals were Molla Gurani, Molla Iyas, Siraceddin Halebi and Molla Abdülkadir. Halil Inalcık, "Mehmed II", in *Islam Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 7, 506-535.

²³ Halil Inalcık, , *The Ottoman Empire* (London: Phoenix, 1994), 181.

²⁴ Halil Inalcık, *The Ottoman Empire*, 56; Stanford Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 59.

Hankins and Babinger are not the only scholars arguing for the genuine intentions of this letter. Richard Southern sees it as the “magnificent composition” of a humanist, written with “the attempt of persuasion.”²⁵ Keith Mitchell also suggests that the letter was written as “an exercise in the art of rhetoric and the skillful arrangement of arguments aiming to persuade Mehmed for conversion.”²⁶ Kenneth Setton is no different in his argument. He also regards this letter as a sincere attempt to convert Mehmed as he suggests that Pius thought Mehmed might be converted “if only he could be made to understand that Christ was the redeemer.”²⁷ The problem with all these arguments is that, as already emphasized, the content of the letter is far from revealing an intention to invite conversion. The strongest evidence against this argument is the comparison of the letter with previous papal letters written to other Muslim rulers. Both their content and rhetoric show great difference from Pope Pius’ letter. This will be examined in detail in the following chapter.

A close analysis of the letter gives an insight into the approaches and methods of the leading mind of Christendom, Pope Pius II, in his dealings with the Ottomans. It can be proposed that more than a conversion letter, the pope probably planned this letter as a propaganda tool and ideological support for Christians in their fight against the Muslims. This Christian audience constituted specifically the princes who had disregarded the pope’s calls for a crusade against the Ottomans. There are two possible interpretations that can be derived from this: one interpretation is, as Schwoebel suggests, that Pius wrote this letter as a kind of warning or perhaps an intimidation, underlining that if the Christian princes did not give support to the pope

²⁵ Richard Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978), 99.

²⁶ R. J. Mitchell, *Laurel and the Tiara* (London: Harvill Press, 1962), 171.

²⁷ Kenneth Setton, *Papacy and the Levant*, vol. II (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1978), 233.

against the Turks,²⁸ he would turn to their enemy, Mehmed, favor him, and recognize his authority in Eastern Europe. Another interpretation might be that the pope wanted to encourage the Christian princes by presenting them as powerful forces against Mehmed II. Clearly, the letter presents conflicting messages and this makes it open to interpretations in different ways. In any case, the pope may have considered that contemporary conditions were not propitious for the reception of such a letter, or that the letter was too weak to stir Christian princes against Mehmed; thus, he preferred to keep it secret; and that is why, it was spread through Europe only after his death. Still, this remains an open question.

Written either as a warning or encouragement for a Christian audience, the letter was certainly representative of the synthesis of medieval and Renaissance perceptions of the other. While in all his speeches, works, and letters Pius emphasized zealously the necessity to take action for a crusade against the Turks, this letter can be considered as smart diplomatic maneuvering by the pope. He cleverly used his rhetorical skills to underline the need for Christian princes to sort out their political quarrels and to unify against the common enemy through a text masquerading as a conversion letter. However, to take this letter only as a humanistic rhetorical work, as Bisaha argues, fails to confront so much evidence to the contrary.²⁹ Pius' rhetoric certainly played an important role in constructing the images of civilization and superiority of the West against the East. But in his interpretations religious motivation was more prominent. As the head of the religious authority in Western Europe, it was

²⁸ Robert Schwoebel claims that compared to Pius's other works, which have a derisive attitude towards Turks, this letter is an exception. And about its purpose he suggests that the Pope hoped to frighten the rulers of the West by proposing to legitimize the sultan's conquest of Byzantium in return for his conversion to Christianity, in *The Shadow of the Crescent: the Renaissance image of the Turk*, 66.

²⁹ Nancy Bisaha also adopts the idea that the letter was not written with the aim of converting Mehmed but according to her, it should be read "less as a papal pronouncement than a humanistic rhetorical work," in "Pope Pius II's Letter to Mehmed II: A Reexamination," *Crusades* 1 (2002): 198.

quite natural for him to see the Ottoman advance as a direct threat to Christendom. In this sense, his attempt in this letter can be taken metaphorically as a crusade against the infidel; but in this case as a “crusade of ideas”, as he developed in his letter a discourse of self-presentation and a systematic argumentation against Islam in order to give Christians a clearer idea of the mass of contradictions and inconsistencies which characterized Islam. In his approach he certainly echoed the arguments of his medieval predecessors who had produced polemical texts concerning Islam. Thus, it can be argued that writing in this tradition seemed to him the best way of giving ideological support to the military endeavor. With this letter, the pope probably intended to touch Christian princes’ hearts and command their respect for his calls for action.

Pope Pius II, European Politics and the Fifteenth-Century Idea of Crusade

Before delving into the analysis of the letter itself, it is important to look at the course of political events that prepared the stage for the pope to write it. An analysis of the political context of the time is quite important in understanding the hidden agenda of Pope Pius II in writing his letter. As already emphasized, throughout his life, a crusade against the Ottomans was always his main objective. In his *Commentaries*, he assures us that “among all the purposes he had at heart, none was dearer than that of rousing Christians against the Turks and declaring war against them.”³⁰ From the Congress of Mantua, assembled soon after his coming to the papal throne, to his dramatic death at Ancona for the sake of taking the cross against the Ottomans, this aim was underlined and became the leading motif in Pius’s entire pontificate. In fact, his obsession with crusading was interpreted in various ways by

³⁰ *The Commentaries of Pius II*, Bk II, 115.

his contemporaries as well as present-day historians: some have interpreted it as the real struggle of a great crusader while others hold that the main aim behind it was to regain the leadership of Europe for the papacy.³¹ In any case, the political events of his period show that the pope's zeal for a crusade never received the intended response among the Christian princes. His diplomatic involvements with various Christian rulers proved fruitless for launching a crusade.

One of the main reasons for this was the long-lasting discord among the Christian princes themselves. The two most important powers of Europe, England and France, were already worn out after the conclusion of the Hundred Years' War in 1453. Both powers rejected a fight against the Turks as the relations between them were still not settled. Indeed, neither side was willing to leave his country defenseless against the potential enemy. Although Philip of Burgundy frequently offered his support to the crusade, continuing troubles on his own borders with France kept him from giving as much help as he had proposed. The situation in Central Europe was not much different. The ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, Frederick III of Habsburg, could not exert his control over the territories he ruled; he was constantly struggling with his electors. Regionalist movements in Hungary and Bohemia, where Hussite and Taborite heresies took root, weakened the force of imperial authority. Although Frederick appeared to be an ally of Rome with regard to the Ottoman threat, he remained quite passive when it came to taking action.³²

There were conflicts within Italy as well. In the kingdom of Naples, the death of Queen Giovanna II without a child in 1435 resulted in violent conflicts between the

³¹ Among present-day historians, Franco Cardini and Margaret Meserve can be considered as the supporters of this argument that the pope's insistence on crusading was largely because of his desire to restore the authority of the papacy. For this, see F. Cardini, *Europe and Islam*, tr. Caroline Beamish (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) and M. Meserve, "Italian Humanists and the Problem of the Crusade," 31-38.

³² Kenneth Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant*, 108-137; Norman Housley, *Religious Warfare in Europe, 1400-1536* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 64-69.

forces of Anjou and Aragon, and this continued until the papacy of Pius II. Moreover, within the Papal States local barons and princes were struggling against each other to benefit from the constant state of crisis in order to assert claims on disputed territories.³³ On the whole, the general picture in Europe was one of chaos and internal strife. While these conflicts were going on in Europe, the news of the fall of Constantinople in 1453 reached Europe and shook Christians, especially Piccolomini, deeply. During this time he was bishop of Siena. When he heard the news, he wrote a letter to Nicholas V:

I grieve that St. Sophia, the most famous church in all the world, has been ruined or polluted. I grieve that saints' basilicas without number, built with wondrous skill, should lie beneath the desolation or defilement of Mohammed. What shall I say of the countless books, as yet unknown to the Latins, which were in Constantinople? Alas, here is a second death for Homer and for Plato too...Now we see one of the two lights of Christendom extinguished. We behold the seat of eastern empire overthrown, all the glory that was Greece blotted out...Now Mohammed reigns among us. Now the Turk hangs over our very heads.³⁴

According to Piccolomini the only solution was to organize an effective crusade for the recovery of Constantinople. Pope Nicholas issued a bull on 30 September, 1453 to all Christians urging a crusade against the Turks. In it he called Mehmed II the cruelest persecutor of Christ's church, "the son of Satan, son of perdition and son of death, whose thirst is never satisfied by the shedding of Christian blood."³⁵ The fall of Constantinople shook European princes and republics as well. They attempted momentarily to cease their internal strife. In 1454, the Italian states, Florence, Venice and Milan, signed a peace treaty among themselves at Lodi, with the

³³ Margaret Meserve, "Introduction," in *Pius II Commentaries*, ed. and tr. by Margaret Meserve and Marcello Simonetta (London: Harvard University Press, 2003), x-xii.

³⁴ Rudolf Wolkan, ed., *Der Briefwechsel des Eneas Silvius Piccolomini*, in the *Fontes rerum austriacarum* [FRA], II. Abt., vol. 68 (Vienna, 1918), Ep. 109, p. 200-1. Quoted in Kenneth Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant*, 150.

³⁵ Charles Frazee, *Catholics and Sultans: The Church and the Ottoman Empire 1453-1923* (London: Cambridge UP), 9.

hope of presenting a united front against the infidel enemy. In the same year, Duke Philip of Burgundy took the crusader's vow and Frederick III convened a series of diets to discuss the problem.³⁶ But no action was taken.

For Piccolomini this was quite disappointing; in one of his letters he suggested that Christendom had no head whom all might obey. Neither the supreme pontiff nor the emperor was given his due. Every city-state had its own ruler and there were many princes. There was no order in the army, no military discipline, and no obedience.³⁷ In fact, Piccolomini was right in his remarks, as the attendance at the diet of Frankfurt in 1454 was below expectations and the princes who came showed a poor spirit from the crusading stand-point. The main reason was the distrust of the crusading policy of the papal and imperial authorities. In his *Commentaries* Piccolomini criticized the reluctance of the German princes to support a crusade in the face of a Turkish threat:

As if their ears had been infected with some poison, they could not bear to hear the name of the emperor or of the pope, who they said, were false and greedy and wanted to rake in gold, not make war; this was a fine sort of trick, to proclaim a crusade against the Turks, that money might be extorted from the Germans by artful wiles as from barbarians. These two grasping lords of the world were planning to divide the profits between them.³⁸

Pius' comments provide the general image of the papacy and the imperial authority in his time. The two institutions most closely associated with the crusade had already lost their influence and were unable to persuade crowds. No one wanted to be the first to commit men and resources to a new crusade. The medieval image of Catholic Europe forming a *Respublica Christiana* under the guidance of papacy was a thing of the past.

³⁶ Margaret Meserve, "Introduction," in *Pius II Commentaries*, xii-xv.

³⁷ Kenneth Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant*, 153.

³⁸ *The Commentaries of Pius II*, Bk. I, 72.

For five years, Piccolomini watched the Christian princes' indifference as Ottoman forces advanced. Neither the passionate propaganda of Calixtus III nor the wise diplomacy of Cardinal Bessarion nor the moving sermons of the mendicant preacher Giovanni Capistrano could stir the indifferent Christian princes to the cause of a new crusade.³⁹ Still, it was this cause which Piccolomini adopted as his own at the very moment he began his papacy. Entering upon his pontificate, Pius decided to solve first the problems in Italy. This was preliminary to forming a unified resistance against the Ottomans. He allied with Milan in support of Ferrante on the throne of Naples. Francesco Sforza, duke of Milan, supported Ferrante's claims because in this way, France could not threaten Milan. Therefore, Pius chose Sforza and Ferrante against France; he wanted to keep the outsider at a distance. His attitude was also in conformity with the Peace of Lodi, which had achieved a balance of power in the Italian peninsula. However, his decision resulted in conflict with France and led to antagonizing the most important Christian power.⁴⁰ France, once the proud defender of the crusade idea, refused any cooperation with the pope, his congress, and his moving and zealous appeals.

Pius' call for a crusade by the Italian powers was futile. In Italy the situation was still complicated. There were five large states and each was struggling against the others for domination. Among them, Venice especially was quite deaf to appeals for crusade. The attitude of Venice was generally seen as a treacherous, working against Christian interests. Although the Venetians had given the pope many promises of aid against the Turks, when the Ottomans conquered Constantinople the Venetians made peace with the Ottomans. The treaty provided that between the sultan and the signoria of Venice, including all its present and future possessions, there was to be peace and

³⁹ Margaret Meserve, "Introduction," in *Pius II Commentaries*, xiv.

⁴⁰ Karl August Fink, "Pius II," in *The Medieval and Reformation Church*, ed. Hubert Jedin (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 310-311.

friendship. Venice pledged it would never enter into any alliance against the Turks.⁴¹

Pius says about this in his *Commentaries* that Venetians favored the war against the Turks with their lips but condemned it in their hearts because:

They are not people who embrace splendid projects. They are mostly merchants whose nature, intent on gain, usually shrinks from noble aims which cannot be achieved without expense. The Venetians thought that if war were declared against the Turks, all their trade with the East, on which their livelihood depended would cease and that after Greece was freed the western princes would not allow the Venetian republic to have sovereignty in Dalmatia and the East.⁴²

Without the Venetian fleet, an undertaking of any magnitude was unthinkable, but for Venice commercial interests prevailed. Hence, the zealous call for a crusade received the hoped-for response from neither Venice nor other powers. The personal interests of each dynasty prevented it from allying with the others.

In Europe there was a temporary loss of zeal, which can be clearly seen in the failure of the congress of Mantua. In fact, Pius's speech at Mantua is quite revealing:

We have been mistaken. Christians are not so concerned about religion as we believed...We feared that once the Hungarians were conquered, the Germans, Italians, and indeed all Europe would be subdued, a calamity that must bring with it the destruction of our Faith. We took thought to avert this evil; we called a Congress in this place; we summoned princes and peoples that we might together take counsel to defend Christendom. We came full of hope and we grieve to find it in vain. We are ashamed that Christians are so indifferent. Some are given over to luxury and pleasure; others are kept away by avarice. The Turks do not hesitate to die for their most vile faith, but we cannot incur the least expense nor endure the smallest hardship for the sake of Christ's gospel.⁴³

Unlike before, Pius' Mantua speech contained almost no reference to the Turks as a barbaric threat to learning and Western culture. Nor did he go into detail about the ancient Scythians, the Turks' supposed ancestors. His focus shifted to religious

⁴¹ Charles Frazee, *Catholics and Sultans*, 12.

⁴² *The Commentaries of Pius II*, Bk. III, 257.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Bk. III, 192.

matters. For Pius, the crusade was a defense operation which Western Christendom had to undertake to avoid its overthrow at the hands of the Turk.

Crusading did not decline after 1291 as was previously thought but changed considerably.⁴⁴ The conquest of Constantinople opened a new phase in the history of the crusading activities of Europe. The defining characteristic of this new phase was that now Western Christendom itself was in direct danger from a forceful Islamic state and that a crusade would have to defend Europe and its Christian civilization. The immediate goal of a crusade was no longer the deliverance of the holy places, but of Constantinople and the expulsion of the Turks from Europe.⁴⁵ For this reason, Pius maintained a more traditional polemic of lamentation: the church in danger, the heritage of Christ ruined. However, his reactions failed to stimulate a serious counter-attack. It became obvious that the papacy, as titular head of crusading activities, was no longer capable of mobilizing military action on a large scale. The failure of Pius II's congress at Mantua demonstrated this even to the pope himself. For all its attractiveness and significance, the bulwark image of Europe was misleading.

It was during this period of disappointment and desperation that Pius decided to adopt a different method of persuading the Christian princes and he wrote his letter, which at face value was an invitation to Mehmed to convert to Christianity, but in spirit it reflected his desire for the revival of crusade spirit in the Christian princes. His attempt was quite consistent with his previous activities. With the strength of his intellect and the fluency of his language he proclaimed a united Christian Europe and the superiority of Christendom. Perhaps he thought his message was utopian, as he

⁴⁴ Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 829. See also James Hankins' article "Renaissance Crusaders: Humanist Crusade Literature in the Age of Mehmed II" which explains very well the transformation of the crusade ideal from medieval period to Renaissance.

⁴⁵ Halil Inalcik, "The Ottoman Turks and the Crusades, 1451-1522," in *A History of the Crusades*, Vol. 6, ed. Kenneth Setton (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 315; James Hankins, "Renaissance Crusaders," 113.

knew from experience that his lofty plans were limited by the realities of the Italian and European political systems. Thus, he did not reveal his letter.

Soon after he wrote this letter, in one of his speeches addressed to a small group of cardinals early in 1462, Pius sincerely disclosed his own perplexities. Acknowledging the criticism being leveled against him with regard to a crusade, he admitted his inactivity in promoting the enterprise, giving as a reason not indifference but despair. “Power, not will, has been lacking.”⁴⁶ To fight successfully against the Turks would require the united efforts of Christian monarchs, an aim which he pursued in vain. The idea of *Respublica Christiana* was already dead. The congress of Mantua showed it to be useless; the appeal of papal envoys for aid from the courts of Europe was ignored; the issuing of indulgences to raise money brought forth the charge of avarice. “People think our sole object is to amass gold. No one believes what we say. Like insolvent tradesmen we are without credit.”⁴⁷ For this reason he decided to follow another strategy, which was to lead a crusade personally. Thus, the climax of his endeavors was reached through his expedition to Ancona to lead the crusade himself, despite his failing health.

All this taken into consideration, it is hardly plausible to accept this letter as a sincere attempt at conversion. On the contrary, it can be argued that this letter was a part of Pius’ agenda in order to trigger preparations for a crusade among the Christian princes and to promote a crusade against the Turks. Moreover, considered in the context of his previous works and activities, such a letter perfectly fits the consistent attitude of the pope towards the Ottomans. A close analysis of the letter itself in the following chapter will reveal its intended purposes.

⁴⁶ *The Commentaries of Pius II*, Bk. VII, 515.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Bk. XII, 823.

CHAPTER II:

PIUS II'S LETTER IN COMPARISON WITH PREVIOUS PAPAL LETTERS

Pope Pius' work was written in the form of a letter, adhering to some extent to the rules of the epistolary genre. However, as this letter was never sent and is quite long, it can be described in Constable's terms as a "fictional" letter.⁴⁸ It is more like a treatise in epistolary form, which was not intended to be sent to Mehmed but written to serve other purposes. More explicitly, it can be assumed that Pope Pius used the epistolary form for the purpose of the instruction of the Christian princes and as propaganda aimed at them, as other methods of persuading them had proved fruitless. This makes us wonder why Pius wrote his text in the letter-format rather than writing it simply as a treatise. This can be explained as a part of humanist rhetoric as well as by his professional background.

Above all, Pius' training in Classical rhetoric and literature and his career had prepared him to fight his own rhetorical battles by various methods. Considering the fact that he started his career as a secretary in the imperial court of Frederick III and during his service composed persuasive orations, letters and other forms of propaganda and served his patron as advocate, counselor and ambassador, it is not amiss to argue that Piccolomini was quite experienced in inspiring and persuading through rhetoric, like all other humanist secretaries in his period. In fact, most Quattrocento secretaries had a background in the liberal arts and some of them, including Pope Pius II were humanist scholars of considerable standing.⁴⁹ By studying and adopting ancient techniques of rhetorical argumentation, the humanists developed

⁴⁸ Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1976), 13.

⁴⁹ Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 8.

an effective device of power for use in contemporary struggles for political survival.⁵⁰ In this context, it is hard to imagine that Pope Pius really intended to appeal to Mehmed with the rhetorical force of his letter. Rather, the epistolary genre provided him with the opportunity to voice his ideas concerning the Ottomans and Islam to his Christian audience. As Kristeller argued, epistolography was “the most extensive branch of humanist literature” at that time, and the letter was not merely a personal document but also often a tool for literary expression on scholarly and philosophical subjects.⁵¹ In this sense, it can be suggested that the flexibility of the epistolary genre allowed Pius to write more or less what he wanted. The most convincing evidence that can sustain this argument is certainly the comparison of this letter with the previous papal letters written to other Muslim rulers.

Letter of Gregory VII to al-Nasir (1076)

One of these papal letters that can be analyzed in this sense is Pope Gregory VII's short missive to a Muslim ruler, the Hammadite Emir al-Nasir⁵² of Algeria in 1076.⁵³ This letter, little more than the letter of accreditation for two emissaries, seems to have been written on the subject of the Christian community of Bijaya (Bougie). It was quite friendly in tone compared to Gregory's general attitude towards Muslims. In his other writings, Pope Gregory often expressed his dislike of Muslims in Spain, Sicily, and Anatolia. For him, they were “the ungodly haters of Christians” so he was concerned about “the Christian people living under the great hatred of the

⁵⁰ Margaret Meserve, “Introduction,” in *Pius II Commentaries*, xv-xviii.

⁵¹ P. O. Kristeller, *Medieval Aspects of Renaissance Learning*, tr. Edward Mahoney (New York: Columbia UP, 1992), 104.

⁵² Al-Nasir was the ruler of Hammadids in Algeria from 1062 to 1088.

⁵³ Gregory VII, “Epistola XXI,” in *Epistolae et diplomata pontificia* printed in PL vol. 148, coll. [450-452].

ungodly Saracens.”⁵⁴ In this letter, however, he took a different diplomatic stance. The pope wrote: “there is a kind of love which we owe to each other more than to other peoples, because we believe and confess one single God, though in different ways, and we praise and worship Him every day as creator and ruler of this world.”⁵⁵

There were practical reasons for the warm and friendly tone which Gregory used. As Hourani suggests, the pope wrote it in order to guarantee the protection of Christian communities in North Africa and perhaps to secure the merchants of Rome a share in the growing trade of the port of Bijaya in al-Nasir’s domains.⁵⁶ Although these reasons were not explicit in the letter, it is apparent that the pope wrote it for political purposes because in the content of the letter there is no implication of an intention to convert the Muslim ruler to Christianity. Still, it was quite unusual for a pope at that time to write a letter to a Muslim ruler that emphasized common points between Islam and Christianity.

Pope Gregory concludes his letter with this blessing: “God knows that we strive for your honor in this life and in the future on. And we pray, with our heart and our word that after the long period of this life, God lead you in the embrace of blessing of the most holy patriarch Abraham.”⁵⁷ It is important to emphasize that the pope ends his blessing with Abraham rather than Christ, knowing that Abraham is also recognized and venerated by Muslims. This attitude is quite diplomatic as clearly the pope wanted to avoid any sort of contention with al-Nasir for the sake of attaining his objectives in Islamic lands more easily. Compared to the general attitude towards

⁵⁴ H.E.J. Cowdrey, *Pope Gregory VII, 1073-1085* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 488.

⁵⁵ Gregory VII, “Epistola XXI,” 451; *Hanc itaque charitatem nos et vos specialibus nobis quam caeteris gentibus debemus, qui unum Deum, licet diverso modo, credimus et confitemur, qui eum Creatorem saeculorum et gubernatorem hujus mundi quotidie laudamus et veneramur.*

⁵⁶ Albert Hourani, *Islam in European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 14.

⁵⁷ Gregory VII, “Epistola XXI,” 452: *Scit enim Deus quia pure ad honorem tuum in praesenti et in futura vita desideramus. Atque ut ipse Deus in sinum beatitudinis sanctissimi patriarchae Abrahae post lingua hujus vitae spatia te perducatur corde et ore rogamus.*

the Muslims during his period, it can be said that Gregory's tactfulness to the Muslim ruler is quite unusual.

Letter of Alexander III to Kilij Arslan II (1179)

Another example, much closer in spirit to Pius' letter, is the letter written by Alexander III in 1179 to the sultan of Iconium (Konya), Kilij Arslan II (1156-1192), in order to convert him to Christianity.⁵⁸ In fact, this letter was written by Peter of Blois in the pope's name and at the pope's request. As emphasized at the beginning of the letter, it was written as a response to the request of Kilij Arslan for the instruction on the Christian faith, and in contrast to Pius' letter, it was actually sent to its declared recipient. It is unknown why the sultan would have made such a request. According to Claude Cahen, Kilij Arslan II and Kaykhusraw I corresponded with the popes of their day for political reasons.⁵⁹ Whether the relations with the Byzantines were good or bad, the sultans could see no harm in it if "Latin propagandists came to compete with the Byzantine clergy for influence over their Greek subjects."⁶⁰ From this argument, it can be assumed that the request of Kilij Arslan might have been completely due to some political purposes rather than a sincere intention to conversion. On the other hand, it is suggested in one of the chronicles of the period that Kilij Arslan was prepared to convert and also to convert his subjects to Christianity in order to obtain a

⁵⁸ Alexander III, "De Instructione Fidei Catholicae," in Petrus Blessensis, *Opera omnia* printed in PL vol. 207, coll. [1069-78].

⁵⁹ Kaykhusraw I was the youngest son of Kilij Arslan II; he succeeded his father in 1192 and ruled until 1196, when he struggled against his brothers for the control of the sultanate and he finally ruled again from 1205 to 1211.

⁶⁰ Claude Cahen, *Pre-Ottoman Turkey: A General Survey of the Material and Spiritual Culture and History c. 1071-1330*, tr. J. Jones-Williams (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1968), 214.

marriage alliance with Frederick Barbarossa.⁶¹ Frederick reluctantly agreed but this marriage was not realized as his daughter died. Thus, the pope might have taken this prospect seriously and responded enthusiastically to the sultan's request for instruction in the Catholic faith.

Looking at the content of Peter of Blois' letter, its themes focus on the main tenets of Christianity. One of the basic points of difference between Islam and Christianity brought out is the idea of the Holy Trinity. In the letter, Peter of Blois elaborates on this theme. He shows proofs from Scriptures, and his rational explanations are only intended to be illustrations; for instance, he suggests, "we call mind memory, intelligence, and will, but they are one mind; but memory is not intelligence or will."⁶² So, through this metaphor, he tries to explain the idea of the Trinity — just like mind, which without intelligence or memory cannot be described as mind, there are three persons within the God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All have equal status and are divinely equal and without the Son or Holy Spirit cannot be comprehended. Still, Peter of Blois was aware that this doctrine of Christianity is beyond the understanding of the human mind; he says "it [the idea of Trinity] is difficult to comprehend and it exceeds the power of human reason, but the more complicated it is for belief, the more charmingly it deserves to be believed in."⁶³ Together with this idea of the Trinity, Peter of Blois also talks about the birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary, the divine and human sides of Christ, his resurrection,

⁶¹ Otto of Blaisen, *Chronica*, ed. A. Hofmeister, cited in Paul Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 100-105. Due to the scarcity of Seljukid sources related to this period, the real motives behind Kilidj Arslan's act are not known for sure.

⁶² Alexander III, "De Instructione Fidei Catholicae," 1071; *mentem autem vocamus memoriam, mentem dicimus intelligentiam, mentem dicimus voluntatem; memoria, intelligentia et voluntas sunt una mens; sed nec memoria est intelligentia, vel voluntas.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*; *res quidem difficilis est intellectu, et aciem rationis humanae transcendit, sed tanto elegantius habet fidei meritum, quanto difficilior est ad credendum.*

his redemption of mankind, and so on. Basically the focus is on the main doctrines of Christianity and Peter says nothing about Islam or Islamic teachings.

Such an attempt can be interpreted; however, as that Peter of Blois was already aware of the fact that Muslims rejected these doctrines, especially the idea of the Trinity and the divine essence of Christ, and formed his own arguments accordingly. For instance, in some places, he adopted a tone of rebuke. Concerning the crucifixion of Christ, he says:

Indeed inhuman and cruel is the one who does not appreciate His compassion, the one who does not love such a merciful Lord out of true feelings, and the one who does not expose himself to the peril of death, if necessary, for Him.⁶⁴

In Islam, Christ is recognized as a prophet but Muslims do not believe that Christ was really crucified; according to them, he ascended to heaven directly. Thus, here Peter may have meant to criticize this belief in an implicit way. Moreover, he used an aggressive tone when he wrote about those who question the divine and human natures of Christ. He says, “the infidels and the sinners will be ashamed, who burst into these insanities: if Christ was a God, how could he have died? If a man, how could he have resurrected?”⁶⁵ Here, the words “infidels” and “sinners” probably refer to Muslims, as they are the ones who reject the divine nature of Christ. Thus, although the letter is far from polemical in tone while introducing the main tenets of the Catholic faith, Peter emphasizes points which were already controversial issues between Christian and Muslim theologians. Still, these two examples apart, there is no implicit or explicit attack on Islam. On the contrary, Peter tries to emphasize common points between Islam and Christianity. While referring to biblical figures such as John

⁶⁴ Alexander III, “De Instructione Fidei Catholicae,” 1075: *Sane inhumanus est et crudelis, qui misericordiam ejus non recolit, qui Dominum tam clementem ex affectu non diligit, qui se pro eo, si opus est, mortis periculo desiderabiliter non exponit.*

⁶⁵ Ibid., 1076: *erubescant infidelis et praevaricatores, qui inordinate in haec prorumpunt deliramenta: si Christus Deus fuit, quomodo potuit mori! Si homo, quomodo resurgere?*

the Baptist and Isaiah, he underlines that these prophets are also accepted by the sultan.⁶⁶ This clearly shows that when writing this letter Peter of Blois was already familiar with basic Islamic teaching.

It can be suggested that his familiarity came from the translations of Peter the Venerable, the learned abbot of Cluny, who around 1142 commissioned Robert of Ketton to translate the Koran into Latin. He himself also wrote a summary of Islamic teachings and a refutation.⁶⁷ These two works, together with the translations known as the Toledan Collection, were the first scholarly works in Latin about Islam. From this time onwards in the West, Christians began to learn about Islam and to take it seriously as a religious threat rather than simply treating it as pagan idolatry. Just like Eastern Christians, who had already established a long tradition of polemics against Islam as a heretical sect, Peter the Venerable also classified “Islam as a heresy” and tried to refute it “using the tools of anti-heretical argument.”⁶⁸ Throughout the Middle Ages, these translations and this refutation were used as authorities for studies related to Islam. In his *Summa*, Peter the Venerable established basic points of similarity and difference between Christianity and Islam saying that:

They [Muslims] do not believe that Christ, though conceived of the Holy Spirit, is the son of God, or God, but [only that he is] a good prophet, most true, free from all falsehood and sin, the son of Mary, born without a father, and never having died because it was not fitting that he should die. On the contrary, they believe that, when Jews wanted to kill him, he ascended to the heavens.⁶⁹

Peter the Venerable pointed out clearly that Muslims deny the incarnation, the redemption, and the resurrection of Christ, but accept the virgin birth and the

⁶⁶ Alexander III, “De Instructione Fidei Catholicae,” 1071-2; *quem recipis*.

⁶⁷ Peter the Venerable composed two treatises using these translations: the first one, *Summa totius haeresis Saracenorum* describes Islam and degrades it to a Christian audience; the second one is *Contra sectam sive haeresim Saracenorum* in which he tried to refute Islam and commanded Muslims to convert to Christianity.

⁶⁸ John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval Imagination* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), 137.

⁶⁹ James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964), 119-20.

Ascension. As Peter of Blois elaborated these points in his letter as well, it was quite possible that he had access to the works and translations of Peter the Venerable. At the end of his letter, Peter of Blois suggests to the sultan that in order to come to the light from darkness he should be baptized and become a Christian. Although in Pius' letter, it is also emphasized that "a little bit of water" (baptism) was enough for Mehmed to become Christian, both the style and content of the letter as a whole differ a great deal from the letter of Peter of Blois which was written with the sincere aim of conversion.

Evaluation of Pope Pius' Letter in the Context of Previous Letters

In both of the previous papal letters, the popes were clearly aware of the polemical issues of their time between Christianity and Islam, but for different reasons both of them adopted a constructive and peaceful approach towards the Muslims. When one evaluates Pius' letter in the light of these two letters, certain parallels with both of them become apparent in Pius' letter. For instance, the emphasis on common points between Islam and Christianity can be seen in Pius' letter as well. For him, these are confessing and believing in one God, and belief in the immortality of souls. He states:

We think that you confess and believe in one God who created the earth and who cares for everything He fashioned in the world. We do not think you are unaware that human souls are immortal and that when they leave our bodies they are taken to other regions where the good receive a happy abode and the bad are borne off to punishment. This is not only written in our New Testament and the prophets, but your religion holds the same.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 29.

While discussing these points he also makes reference to ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle who, Pius claimed, shared the views of Christians concerning the governance of the world, the immortality of souls, and God.⁷¹ In fact this association of Christian beliefs with ancient Greek philosophy can be explained with the idea that ancient authorities provided a key for Pius to prove the superiority of Christianity.

Pius also emphasizes that both Christians and Muslims believe in the Old Testament and accept the prophets Moses, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. He is aware that Mehmed also admits Christ as a holy man inspired by God, a great prophet and famous for his miracles.⁷² Christians and Muslims also both believe that those who worship idols are in grievous error. Up to this point, Pius says, Christianity and Islam do not differ. On the whole, the statements related to common points in Islam and Christianity not only involve some truth, but they also imply a conciliatory attitude. However, Pius still regards Mehmed as a creature of God and his lamb, but claims he “went astray and fed beyond his home in other pastures far from the Lord’s fold.”⁷³ From this, it can be concluded that Pius regards Islam as a heresy rather a separate monotheistic religion, and Mehmed as indeed a Christian but one whose faith had been corrupted by heresies. Pius’s concern for Mehmed reaches its peak when he states:

We grieve that you, an excellent man, do not walk in the paths of the Lord, do not know his commandments, and do not live according to His law. We feel for you and deplore the unhappiness of your subjects who perish with you. We do not believe you willingly go astray since we have faith that your nature is good. The ignorance of the truth holds you back.⁷⁴

⁷¹ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 30.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

The tolerant attitude at the beginning of Pius' letter is reinforced by historical examples. He defends the advantages and reputation of conversion to Christianity through the example of Constantine, among other rulers: "But why do we delay and not mention the greatest example of all? The Emperor and Monarch Constantine himself opened the way which you and all like you could have entered without delay."⁷⁵ Pius depicts Constantine as a ruler who achieved glory by converting to Christianity. By comparing Constantine with Mehmed, Pius implies that such glory is also possible for Mehmed if he simply converts.⁷⁶ In fact, this association of Mehmed with Constantine also refers to the association of the Romans with the Ottomans. He says, "just as the Romans became Christians with their emperor, so the Turks will become Christians with Mehmed."⁷⁷ This approach is quite surprising, especially when we recall the pope's claims for the barbaric origins of the Turks in his previous works.

The use of historical examples provided Pius with a rhetorical arena in order to promote his own interests. The analogy drawn between the heroes of antiquity and the Ottoman sultan seems to create a heroic image of Mehmed. However, as Soykut suggests, with the "heroification of Mehmed" Pius rather aimed to trigger the Christian rulers against the Ottomans, warning them of a forthcoming Turkish rage.⁷⁸ Throughout the letter, there is an ambiguous division between remarks of spite and praise about the Ottomans. On the one hand, Pius compares Mehmed with Constantine the Great in respect of his bravery and strength. Moreover, he makes a clear distinction between the Ottomans and other Muslims by praising the Scythian origins of the Turks: "compared to effeminate Egyptians and unwarlike Arabs, Turks

⁷⁵ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 25.

⁷⁶ Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 148-9.

⁷⁷ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 27.

⁷⁸ Mustafa Soykut, *Image of the "Turk" in Italy: A History of the "Other" in Early Modern Europe, 1453-1683* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2001), 25.

are originally Scythians who were known for their bravery.”⁷⁹ On the other hand, Pius denounces Mehmed as the arch-enemy of the Christian faith. These conflicting remarks function as reminders for Christian princes that they should unify and take a common solid stand against the common enemy.

Despite a few remarks which can be interpreted positively at face value, on the whole the letter contains many passages where Pius’ tone becomes harsher and more condescending towards Mehmed and Islam. For instance, from the beginning he regards Mehmed as the enemy of Christendom and persecutor of Christians.⁸⁰ Moreover, he challenges Mehmed, saying that he should be aware of the greatness of the Christian people, for he cannot compete with “the strength of Spain, the warlike spirit of France, the vast populace of Germany, the bravery of Britain, the boldness of Poland, the tenacity of Hungary, and the wealth, energy and experience in warfare of Italy.”⁸¹ Moreover, he is quite threatening when he says that all Christians will come together if they ever hear that Mehmed is approaching the heartland of Christendom. “You cannot do anything better for peace among Christians than invade Christendom with great, strong forces, for all private hatreds will stop when a threat to all is sensed; with combined forces arms will be taken up against a common enemy.”⁸² Pius emphasizes especially the invincibility of the Italians. With the hope of encouraging the Italian states and arousing the longed-for crusading spirit, he says:

Your ancestors never possessed or saw Italy. You have no right to it and if you insist on invading Italy you will realize you are fighting with men...The nature, strength, talent, and courage of Italy are different. They who are used to ruling cannot be subjugated and all of Italy is now filled with horses and men. It does not lack of money which is called the sinews of war.⁸³

⁷⁹ *Epistola ad Mahomatem II*, 74.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Pius' reflection on Italian unity and strength was unrealistic. He had a strong sense of being an Italian and of Italian superiority, which is demonstrated again and again in his letter. However, he was also aware that the Italian states were not strong enough to cope with the Ottomans. The real picture of the Italian states and all the European powers was far from this image of "the strong unity". On the contrary, at that time the Ottoman Empire represented a centralized and unified rule against a divided Europe. Pius himself already knew from his relations with European states that they never sacrificed individual advantage for mutual gain. This is well illustrated in his antipathies toward other Italian states, notably Venice and Florence. Their ambitions to dominate Italy led to conflicts and fights among them and made the long-desired unity impossible. Even in the context of the outside threat like that posed by the Ottomans, the idea of unity remained intangible. Therefore, through these remarks, it is possible that Pius aimed to encourage the Italians by constructing a powerful and unified image of Italy against the Ottomans.

Pius wrote his letter in order to represent the concerns and attitudes of his time. Although fifteenth-century Europe had no power or superiority over the Ottomans, his emphasis on the superiority of the West and Christendom certainly purport to evoke a sense of European power and authority over the Islamic Ottoman Empire. This is one of the main themes in Pius' letter: "the emphasis on the necessity for undertaking war against the Turk, and the ease with which victories could be won."⁸⁴ In fact, he emphasizes the same point in his *Commentaries* as well. For him, the courage of Christians had always been a terror to the Turks and the Christians had never been defeated unless betrayed or overpowered by too great odds, when they were weary of conquest, or because the Lord was angry at their sins. But if they

⁸⁴ James Hankins, "Renaissance Crusaders," 120. Although Hankins derived this theme from the writings of the humanist proponents of crusade, into which he did not include Pius' letter, the analysis of the letter shows that the same idea exists in the letter as well.

would gather their strength, not only all of Christendom, which comprised so many wide provinces, but Italy alone, if she were united, could wipe out the Turks. According to him, nothing helped the enemy so much as dissensions among Christians themselves, “who preferred by attacking one another to avenge private rather than public wrongs and to assail the household of the Faith more fiercely than the foreign foe.”⁸⁵

These passages are quite revealing. They demonstrate that Pius’ letter was indeed intended to address Christian princes rather than Mehmed. They can be interpreted as encouragement, underlining that if the princes unified against the Turks they could defeat them. On the other hand, highlighting the possibility of Mehmed’s conquest of Italy and asking the Christian princes to unify and prevent the realization of such a possibility can be taken as a subtle warning. In fact, Pius’ anxiety was not baseless, because Mehmed was planning to organize a military attack on Italy. One contemporary, Niccolo Sanguindo, reported that the sultan believed Constantinople to be the daughter of Rome and having won the daughter he also hoped to gain the mother.⁸⁶ Sanguindo was right to a certain extent, as in 1480 the Ottoman army, under the leadership of Ahmet Gedik Pasha, occupied Otranto and took it. However, since Mehmed died, the plan could not be carried out.⁸⁷

In his letter Pius warns Mehmed, saying that he can never subjugate the Christians because “there is no one who wants to be subject to a non-Christian master and all [Christians] want to die in the orthodox faith.”⁸⁸ If Mehmed attempted to do this, no one would be eager to leave his religion and Mehmed would not be able to do in Europe what his ancestors had done with the Byzantines. Pius’ attitude towards the

⁸⁵ *The Commentaries of Pius II*, Bk. III, 214-215.

⁸⁶ Charles Frazee, *Catholics and Sultans*, 17.

⁸⁷ Halil Inalcık, “The Ottoman Turks and the Crusades, 1451-1522,” 330-31.

⁸⁸ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 14.

Byzantines is quite ambivalent throughout the letter. On the one hand, he criticizes the Greeks, Armenians, Jacobites and Maronites, saying that they cannot be considered as Christians as their beliefs are not consonant with the correct faith and that they are schismatic. He says, “very few are the Christians under your rule who walk in the truth of the New Testament, all are imbued with error to some degree.”⁸⁹ The Greeks, especially, had abandoned the unity of the Roman Church after the fall of Constantinople and they had not accepted the Florentine Agreement.⁹⁰ Moreover, their beliefs about the Holy Spirit and the fires of Purgatory were not consistent with the correct faith. Thus, in a way, for Pius the Byzantines deserved to live under Ottoman rule as they insisted on doctrinal errors and resisted papal authority.

Pius, however, declared that he was also concerned with the plight of the Eastern Christians. He draws a picture of miserable and oppressed Christians under the rule of Mehmed. He says that Christians are driven to slavery and many of them are compelled to renounce their religion⁹¹ and he adds:

They are looked upon as the vilest property, pay heavy tribute and are afflicted with injustices daily. They are led off to war against their will, are exposed to death without weapons, and are deprived of their wives and children. Moreover, after they raise their sons, they lose them. Their boys are taken off to the palace, circumcised and instructed in the rites of Mohammed.⁹²

Here, Pius provides an image of the Ottomans as fanatical Muslims who had an unappeasable desire to subjugate the Christians and destroy the Christian faith through forceful and cruel methods. He associates the Turks with uncivilized behavior in such procedures as the *devsirme*.⁹³ By presenting such an image, Pius again tried to

⁸⁹ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 17.

⁹⁰ The Council of Florence (1438-45) attempted to realize a union between Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman papacy. In the end it failed as most of the Byzantines were against this union.

⁹¹ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 23.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 24-5.

⁹³ This refers to the levy of Christian children to be trained for posts in the palace, the administration or the *kapikulu* military corps.

inspire contemporary princes to take action in order to save their fellow Christians from the yoke of the Ottomans.

It is important to emphasize, however, that the Ottomans building their empire under special conditions, became particularly tolerant and conciliatory toward Christians and Jews. They made compromises and gave guarantees to Christians and Jews allowing them to exercise their religion freely and form autonomous religious communities (*millets*), in which religious issues and civil suits were solved internally.⁹⁴ In exchange for paying a special tax, Christians and Jews, or *dhimmis*,⁹⁵ were permitted to continue practicing their faith, but with some restrictions. As the Ottoman rulers had many Christian subjects in the Balkans, especially in the early years of the empire, they won over the Christians in this region by maintaining not only their Church organization but also their pre-conquest customs, taxes and local institutions.⁹⁶ Moreover, the Christians who cooperated with the Ottomans during their conquests were integrated into the Ottoman military class as Christian *timar*-holders⁹⁷ and in most cases these Christians maintained the privileges that they had previously possessed.⁹⁸ Thus, the image created by Pius of the Christians under Ottoman rule did not correspond much to the actual situation; rather, it shows a lack of interest on the part of Pius in knowing the aspects of Ottoman rule. In fact, this approach serves his main purpose of reviving the crusading spirit better.

A large part of Pius' letter comprises a detailed refutation of Islam. The tone of the pope hardly reflects friendly and kindly attitudes to its seeming addressee while discussing Islam. Pius regards Islam as a promoter of chaos and discord while

⁹⁴ Stanford Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, 59.

⁹⁵ *Dhimmi* is the term used for non-Muslim subjects living under the Ottoman rule.

⁹⁶ Halil Inalcık, "The Meaning of Legacy: The Ottoman Case," in *Imperial Legacy: The Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East*, ed. L. Carl Brown (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 23-4.

⁹⁷ *Timar* refers to a fief whose revenues were given in return for military service.

⁹⁸ Halil Inalcık, "The Meaning of Legacy," 24.

Christianity stands for the peace. “It is impossible for unity to take place under Mohammedan Law. Under Christian Law it can easily come about.”⁹⁹ His approach is more critical than persuasive towards Mehmed. After all, it can be argued that for such a person as Pius — who was skilled in oratory and famous for his persuasive rhetoric concerning all issues — the rhetoric in this letter is too weak to convince or persuade Mehmed to convert.

From the beginning Pius based his arguments on an essential distinction between the East and the West while justifying European superiority which is associated with Christianity over the Ottomans and Islam. For instance, he says:

You believe only Muhammad and his Koran. You follow a man who died without witnesses, to no purpose, without miracles; we believe in a living being, Christ, who even in your teachings, is admitted to be alive. We lend our ears to God and are guided by holy writings, proofs and witnesses.¹⁰⁰

In addition, he asserts that Prophet Mohammed had no sufficient understanding about faith, and adds “nor have you, up to now learned enough.”¹⁰¹ Concerning Islam, Pius says:

Your doctrine is not supported by arguments or reasons, but is based on the force of arms alone; it does not hope to convince through reasoned debate but, instead fears defeat. There are no Christians who can be defeated in war or deceived by arguments, since they both excel in arms and are fortified by the arguments not only of divine scripture but of philosophy as well.¹⁰²

Throughout the letter all the arguments are constructed on the basis of the self-Other dichotomy. While Christianity is founded on reason, Islam is presented as a religion of cruelty, deception, violence, and sexual perversion. It is reflected as an invention of Devil to replace and destroy Christianity. It is regarded as irrational,

⁹⁹ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 20.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 20. Pope Pius develops this point more fully in the following chapters.

since it refuses to allow Christians to dispute publicly with Muslims. All these remarks related to Islam were aimed at demonizing the Islamic enemy for the purpose of crusading. Pius drew upon a rich literature of negative stereotypes regarding Islam, many of them going back to the ninth century or even earlier. There is large degree of topical continuity between the pope's letter and the medieval polemical texts, which will be analyzed more fully in the following chapter.

Even if this letter was really written with the aim of conversion and it was truly intended to be sent to Mehmed, it is hardly likely that it would have been received positively by the sultan. It seems that Pius' aim in this letter is rather to construct a European self-image defined as superior vis-à-vis the Ottomans. Islam provided the framework for Pius to construct a European identity in respect of Christianity. Although recent scholarship has argued that the humanist perceptions of the Ottomans is a mixture of religious stereotypes coming from the Middle Ages and cultural stereotypes rooted in the ancient distinction between the civilized and the barbarian, it is hard to say that Pius' letter proves this argument. Rather than basing his arguments on a secular outlook — the defense of civilization against barbarism — Pius adopted religious rhetoric in his letter and established European self-image and its "Other" through Christianity.

From this discussion, it can be concluded that in terms of its approach and intention, Pius' letter should be placed in a completely different category than attempted conversion. Pius does not bother to establish a religious dialogue or to persuade Mehmed to become a Christian, but rather tries to construct a superior image for Christianity and Latin Christendom, and aims to revive medieval crusading spirit among the Christian princes. While discussing Islamic doctrines, similarly to medieval polemicists, he tries to refute rather than understand what Islam is basically

about. Thus, to evaluate this letter in the context of Christian-Muslim polemics and to compare it with medieval polemic texts will certainly be more revealing, not only in understanding Pope Pius' actual intention but also in seeing the roots of Renaissance perceptions of Islam and the Ottomans.

CHAPTER III:

PIUS II'S LETTER IN THE CONTEXT OF ANTI-ISLAMIC POLEMICAL TEXTS

The close analysis of the letter in the previous chapter seems to confirm the view that Pius' letter, portraying Mehmed as an enemy of the faith and refuting Islam in scathing comments, can hardly be considered to have been written with the aim of conversion. Such references to the Ottomans and Islam rather reflect the influence and use of medieval polemical rhetoric and do not demonstrate much innovation on the part of Pope Pius. While dealing with Islam, Pius focuses on similar points as medieval polemicists. He mostly draws on common medieval polemical devices in describing Islam and the Prophet Mohammed. In this sense, it is more convincing to evaluate Pius' writing, camouflaged as a conversion letter, as belonging to anti-Islamic polemical texts.

As a term, *polemic* refers to argumentation composed with the intent of refuting or showing the falsity of another's position.¹⁰³ The medieval anti-Islamic polemical texts were generally devised as *apology* (defense of Christianity) which is followed by *polemics* (attacks on Islam). Pope Pius' letter also stands in this tradition: first, he defended certain Christian doctrines elaborately and then he refuted Islam, more or less touching upon all the points that had been leveled repeatedly against the Prophet and his religion. In that respect, his views can be taken as a continuation of the medieval discourse on Islam. Before analyzing the general themes in Pius' letter in connection with medieval anti-Islamic polemics, it is necessary to discuss how Pius gained access to the rich medieval polemical literature.

¹⁰³ Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993), 294-95.

Sources of Pope Pius II

One of the main sources for Pope Pius' letter is the *Cribratio Alkorani* written in 1460 by the German cardinal, Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) at the request of Pope Pius himself. In this work, Nicholas of Cusa examined the Koran point by point, trying to show the common and different points between Christian and Islamic doctrines. Some scholars interpret his attitude in this work as a respectful approach to the Koran, acknowledging the Muslim belief that it contained the revealed word of God. It is true that both John of Segovia¹⁰⁴ and Nicholas of Cusa believed in the necessity of a clear understanding of the Koran, and so the need for a revised translation and interpretation;¹⁰⁵ however it can be said that their concern was basically to demonstrate the errors of Islam just as Peter the Venerable had three centuries earlier. In the *Cribratio*, Nicholas of Cusa deals only with Islam and its doctrines. He carries out a systematic analysis of the Koran in detail by breaking it up into its various elements and trying to find the issues in it which separate Islam and Christianity. His text aims to prove that those parts which accorded with Christianity were necessarily taken from the Gospel, whereas all that was false stemmed from Mohammed's evil.

While composing his work, Nicholas of Cusa largely borrowed from medieval polemical sources. In the introduction to his work, he suggests that he obtained in Basel the translation of the Koran which was done by Robert of Ketton.¹⁰⁶ He also adds that together with the Koran, he had a chance to acquire the translation of Al-

¹⁰⁴ John of Segovia spent many years on a revised and accurate translation of the Koran, though in the end he could not achieve this. Richard Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*, 103-4.

¹⁰⁵ R. Southern, *Western Views of Islam*, 88-90; N. Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 144; R. Schwoebel, "Coexistence, Conversion and the Crusade Against the Turks," *Studies in the Renaissance*, vol. 12 (1965): 175-179.

¹⁰⁶ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani*, ed. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1990) 965.

Kindi's *Apology*. The *Apology* or *Risalah* of Al-Kindi was a very important source, as much of what the Western Christians knew of Islam and the Prophet Mohammed came from this source, which involved criticism of Islam and was attributed to the Arab Christian Al-Kindi though this is still a matter of discussion among the scholars.¹⁰⁷ In his work, Al-Kindi presents a defense of Christianity and a detailed refutation of Islam. He justifies Christian doctrines while launching a number of attacks on different aspects of Islam. According to Al-Kindi, Mohammed was not a prophet as he did not have any divine signs and did not perform any miracles, and he spread his religion only by the sword and violence. Al-Kindi also questions the Koran's claim to be the Word of God, claiming that it was composed by Mohammed with the help of a heretical Christian monk Sergius (Nestorius) and two Jews, Abd Allah b. Sallam and Ka'b al-Ahbar. Moreover, he says that the text had not been accurately transmitted and preserved.¹⁰⁸ The *Apology* of Al-Kindi only became known in the West in the mid-twelfth century, when it was translated from Arabic into Latin by Peter of Toledo under the patronage of Peter the Venerable.¹⁰⁹

Besides these sources, Nicholas of Cusa also claims that during his mission to Constantinople in 1437 he had found in the Dominican convent in Pera the writings of John of Damascus refuting Islam.¹¹⁰ John of Damascus wrote *Fount of Knowledge*

¹⁰⁷ It is assumed that Al-Kindi wrote his *Apology* around 830 at the court of the Caliph al-Ma'mun as a response to a conversion-to-Islam letter from a Muslim friend, al-Hashimi. William Muir, "The *Apology* of Al-Kindi: An Essay on its Age and Authorship," in *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries, 632-900 AD: Translations and Commentary*, ed. N. A. Newman (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993), 365-377. Concerning the discussions related to the authorship of the *Apology*, see J. Tolan, *Saracens*, 40-68.

¹⁰⁸ *The Apology of Al-Kindi*, tr. Anton Tien in *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A Collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries*, 381-516.

¹⁰⁹ These two works, the translation of the Koran and the *Apology* of Al-Kindi, are particularly important because they were used by various later Christian polemicists against Islam, including Nicholas of Cusa. Especially the portrayal of Islam in the *Apology* of Al-Kindi was elaborated and used for different purposes in the following centuries.

¹¹⁰ John of Damascus was one of the most influential anti-Muslim writers during the eighth century. He was a Melkite presbyter and monk and he wrote on a variety of theological issues. He was also one of the chief financial administrators of the Umayyad caliphs Abd al-Malik (685-705) and Walid I (705-15). This provided him with the chance to acquire first-hand knowledge of Muslim beliefs and

and *Disputation between a Saracen and a Christian*, which contributed a great deal to the formation of an apologetic Christian response to Islam. In his *Fount of Knowledge*, he wrote a part entitled *On the Heresies*, and there he stated that the Koran recognized Christ as the Word of God and His servant, miraculously conceived but not crucified-- this was one of the main points that made him interpret Islam as a heresy. Moreover, he asserted that Mohammed came to the Old and New Testaments through an Arian monk and with the help of this monk he formed a heresy of his own.¹¹¹ The description of Mohammed as an Arian or Nestorian heretic was employed by many following medieval and Renaissance polemicists, including Nicholas of Cusa and Pope Pius. In their writings, they tried to refute Islam using the tools of anti-heretical argument.¹¹²

Other polemical texts Nicholas of Cusa mentioned in the introduction to *Cribratio Alkorani* were *Contra Legem Sarracenorum* by a Dominican friar, Riccoldo de Montecroce and *Contra errores perfidi Machometi*, the work of a Dominican friar, (later the Spanish cardinal) John de Torquemada, which for Nicholas refuted the heresies and the errors of Muhammad with logical arguments. In his work, Riccoldo de Montecroce aimed to present a comprehensive refutation of the Koran as a sacred text. Montecroce largely made use of earlier polemical treatises, especially by Peter the Venerable.¹¹³ His work became one of the most widely read anti-Islamic treatises

religious practices, including some acquaintance with the Koran. On the basis of this familiarity he suggested that Muslims had some common beliefs with Christians, however, on most points the two communities differed. From this, he concluded that these similarities and differences demonstrated Islam as a Christian heresy. Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 38-39.

¹¹¹ *John of Damascus on Islam: The Heresy of the Ishmaelites*, tr. Daniel Sahas (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 133-141.

¹¹² John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), 137.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 251. Peter the Venerable himself also wrote two works on Islam, the *Summa totius heresis Saracenorum* (The Summary of the Entire Heresy of the Saracens) and the *Liber contra sectam sive heresim Saracenorum* (The Refutation of the Sect or Heresy of the Saracens). The titles of the two

from the fourteenth century to the sixteenth century. His portrayal of the Muslims as violent and irrational believers who are resistant to reason and can only be overcome by force was adopted by many following polemicists.¹¹⁴

Apparently, all these medieval polemical texts became available to Nicholas of Cusa in various ways and they were used in his *Cribratio*. Like Al-Kindi and Peter the Venerable, Nicholas of Cusa regards Islam as a Nestorian heresy developed by a monk called Sergius who converted Mohammed from idolatry to Nestorian Christianity; however, some sentiments in the Koran that were written against Christians were introduced later by Mohammed under the influence of the Jewish advisors.¹¹⁵ Therefore, Nicholas of Cusa points out that Mohammed composed the Koran by deriving it from Christian and Jewish material and he did this for his own glory, power, and wealth.¹¹⁶ Throughout the *Cribratio*, Nicholas interprets the Koran in a Christian way and tries to find in it traces of Christian beliefs. For him, all the points that accorded with the Christian beliefs were necessarily taken from the Gospels whereas all that was false was due to either Mohammed's ignorance or evil intentions.¹¹⁷ Taking this argument as a basis, Nicholas of Cusa tries to establish that the Koran is not the Word of God but a man-made text. It was for this reason that Mohammed forbade discussing his law. He rather gave an essential role to force and violence in order to spread Islam.

In fact, Nicholas of Cusa's approach was not new, as this theme was already a *topos* in medieval polemical literature. Like Al-Kindi and other following polemicists, Nicholas maintains that as Muhammad could not defend his teachings with argument

works indicate clearly that, like Al-Kindi, Peter regarded Islam as a Christian heresy, specifically Nestorian heresy.

¹¹⁴ J. Tolan, *Saracens*, 254.

¹¹⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *Cribratio Alkorani*, 969-70.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1068.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 968.

and discussion he resorted to arms and deceived his people, claiming that in the Koran God says “we have destroyed cities before the eyes of those who have not believed. And neither would believe miracles, except by sword...”¹¹⁸ Thus, Nicholas of Cusa suggests that Mohammed, taking this as justification, argued that God commanded him to use force to spread his religion. Through this kind of arguments Nicholas accuses Mohammed of being dishonest and promoting violence. Moreover, he condemns Mohammed for promoting sensuality and worldliness. For this, he gives the Islamic conception of heaven in the Koran as example. He suggests that there is as much difference between Islamic Paradise and Christian Paradise as there is between sensible things and intellectual things.¹¹⁹ While the idea of heaven refers to physical pleasures for Muslims, it means spiritual satisfaction for Christians. To support his point, Nicholas of Cusa gives many quotations from different parts of the Koran and finally he concludes that the Koran mentions maidens and lustful physical copulation in Paradise many times and adds:

I was ashamed to read these vile things. And I said to myself: If Mohammed ascribes to God this book full of vileness, or if he himself wrote it and attributes its authority to God, then I am amazed that those wise and virtuous Arabs, Moors, Egyptians, Persians and Turks who are said to be of this law esteem Mohammed as a prophet...For no one speaks so vilely of such vile things unless he is full of all such vileness.¹²⁰

According to Nicholas of Cusa, Mohammed put such statements in the Koran in order to validate his immoral and lustful attitudes. Moreover, Nicholas adds, by saying that God permitted to him whatever pleasures he wanted, Mohammed tried to excuse his adultery. The idea that Islam promotes carnal pleasures was a commonplace idea in the medieval anti-Islamic texts. Thus, it can be said that

¹¹⁸ Nicholas of Cusa, *Cribratio Alkorani*, 1061.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 1043.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 1046.

Nicholas of Cusa mostly echoed earlier medieval anti-Islamic polemics in his *Cribratio Alkorani*. A close look at the general themes in Pius' letter demonstrates that Pius derived most of the themes from Cusa's *Cribratio*, which was a mixture of rich medieval polemical texts against Islam. This will be discussed more fully in the following pages.

In addition to Nicholas of Cusa's work, the *Cribratio Alkorani*, Pope Pius was also heavily influenced by Juan de Torquemada's work, *Contra errores perfidi Machometi* (1459). In 1431 Torquemada was appointed papal theologian and, from this moment on, he attended all important assemblies and gave speeches on the most varied subjects ordered by the successive popes.¹²¹ Torquemada was one of the supporters of the Council of Mantua. It is suggested that during the Council of Mantua in 1458, Pope Pius ordered him to write a work about Muhammad's errors and his sect.¹²² The purpose was quite practical: as already mentioned in the first chapter, princes from all over Europe were supposed to attend this council, and in order to stir these princes with both political and religious reasons, Torquemada wrote this treatise full of Biblical references, promises of glory, and praise for the princes. Even Juan de Torquemada himself states that he wrote his treatise in a hurry, "not so much to tell Muhammad's history as to demonstrate that his faith contained the mistakes of all heretics."¹²³ Most of Torquemada's knowledge about Islam and the Prophet was based on second-hand information rather than the Koran or the collections of *Hadith*. His work was the summing up of Peter the Venerable's views. Pope Pius was also influenced by Torquemada's treatise while composing his letter.

¹²¹ Ana Echevarria, *The Fortress of Faith: The Attitude towards Muslims in the Fifteenth Century Spain* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 43.

¹²² Ibid., 45.

¹²³ Juan de Torquemada, *Contra Errores Perfidi Machometi*, 3-8. Cited from Ana Echevarria's *The Fortress of Faith*, 45.

This will be pointed out when discussing the general themes regarding Islam in his letter.

General Themes Related to Islam

The first theme Pius deals with in his letter is the idea of the Holy Trinity. Pius explains the idea of the Trinity saying, “We assert that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God from eternity; yet the father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son. The essence of the Father, of the Son, of the Holy Spirit is one.”¹²⁴ Pius also emphasizes that the Christian religion teaches that there are three persons in God and not three gods, as Mohammed falsely thought. According to Islamic belief, the idea of the Trinity is against monotheism and God’s unity. It is blasphemous to worship Jesus, a human being created by God, as if he were God.¹²⁵ These two central doctrines are attacked in the Quran, and Muslim polemicists vigorously refuted them. As a response to this, Pius proposes that by depriving the divinity of the Word and the Spirit, Muslims deprive God of his key attributes.

Pius argues against Muslims’ rejection of the Holy Trinity by saying that Christ was the Son of God, Christians do not mean that God gives birth in a marriage through a union with a woman. “We Christians are not so witless as to admit such filth. It is Saracens who can believe such a thing since they attribute a body, head, hands and other limbs to God.”¹²⁶ Pius maintains that God is incorporeal, immortal, eternal and an incomprehensible spirit. “As God generates the Word, we call Father,

¹²⁴ *Epistola ad Mahomatem II*, 48.

¹²⁵ J. Tolan, *Saracens*, 36.

¹²⁶ *Epistola ad Mahomatem II*, 44.

and utterance of the Word itself we call the generation of the Son.”¹²⁷ Pius gives much space to proving the truth of the Trinity through citations from Bible and analogies that explain it. He asserts that as the idea of the Holy Trinity is established in Holy Scripture and divine testimonies, it should be obeyed, but that Arius and Mohammed insisted on denying this truth:

Since Arius and Mohammed did not understand this deep, profound mystery, they elected to deny the truth rather than to confess ignorance. They elected to advance their nonsense everywhere instead of humbly learning the truth from others. This is stupid and destructive stubbornness.¹²⁸

Pius stresses that the rejection of the idea of Holy Trinity was not original to Mohammed, but that Arius, Nestorius, and Macedonius produced this error. “Their virus lurked hidden for a long time among the Egyptians and Arabs; Mohammed discovered it with the help of his teacher, Sergius, and diffused it widely.”¹²⁹ The defense of the idea of the Trinity was heavily dealt with also in the works of Nicholas of Cusa and Juan de Torquemada. They regarded this issue as Muhammad’s main error, and therefore devoted whole chapters to the discussion of the Christian dogma, the relationship between the three persons, and the problem of Christ’s incarnation. Pius followed the same pattern.

In connection to the idea of the Trinity, Pius suggests that Islam also rejects the Incarnation and crucifixion of Christ: “Your law denies the execution of Christ and teaches that someone else was killed in his place. Further, your law recognizes neither that God became flesh nor that He was crucified or died.”¹³⁰ In answer to this, he asserts that God was made man and suffered for the salvation of man. Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, mankind fell into sin and it is only suitable for God to

¹²⁷ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 44.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

rescue mankind from sin as He is “the omnipotent, merciful and just.”¹³¹ For Muslims, Incarnation is difficult to accept because God is absolutely transcendent and cannot be subject to death and share other human qualities. They accept Christ as a creature of God, the founder of Christianity, and a great prophet, but not a divine figure. About the death of Christ, he suggests that Muslims believe Christ was not killed on the cross but was lifted up to heaven, and adds: “what wretched audacity and foolishness never heard anywhere before!”¹³² He explains the falsity he ascribes to this statement by saying that the Gospels affirm Christ died on the cross and was buried but rose again, ascended to heaven, and will return at the end of the time, but “as your religion does not know about Christ what it should know it does not accept this.”¹³³

From this point onwards, Pius’ treatise moves more from defense to attack. He discusses the idea of eternal life and compares the Islamic perception of heaven with the Christian perception. Pius suggests that since Islam is not a divine religion but an invention of Mohammed, it promotes carnal pleasures in both this and the next world. In his refutation, Pius argues that even pagan philosophers did not hold such a view, except Aristippus and Epicurus, as for them “the highest good is pleasure,” and “your religion follows them who were the dregs and foul filth of all philosophers.”¹³⁴ He explains that these philosophers held this view because they did not believe in a life after death; however, Muslims look for this kind of happiness in the next world as well.¹³⁵ They are deeply struck by the physical nature of the Islamic paradise — a garden of delights — in contrast to the Christians’ striving for peace of the mind and delights of the spirit. Pius says,

¹³¹ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 55.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 57.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

Your religion promises rivers of milk, honey and wine in the next world, as well as delicate foods, plentiful women and concubines, relations with virgins, angels to assist in these foul pursuits; in short all that the flesh desires. This is the paradise of an ox or an ass, not of a man!¹³⁶

In his handling of the issue, Pius uses a scathing tone. He draws a clear distinction between Christianity and Islam in terms of the conceptions of heaven by identifying Christianity as a spiritual religion which offers eternal life and Islam as a religion of this world promoting sensual and vile pleasures.¹³⁷ Through this comparison Pius probably hoped to evoke in his audience a sense of religious superiority that would help them to adhere to their Christianity. In fact this theme was addressed by almost all the medieval polemicists. Here, Pius' attitude is quite close to that of Al-Kindi and Peter the Venerable.

Another issue which Pius deals sternly with is the refutation of the prophethood of Mohammed. He repeats medieval arguments about Mohammed as an impostor who lacked divine guidance, but established a religion for worldly gain and fame, and by allowing and promoting pleasures attracted many to his false religion. Like Al-Kindi and Peter the Venerable, Pius considers Islam as a sect born out of a mixture of Christianity and Judaism. Mohammed took the advice of certain perverse Jews and Christians — among whom was Sergius — and produced a third religion which put together elements from the Old and New Testaments and some other sources.¹³⁸ Moreover, Pius asserts that Mohammed received no divine signs and that he lacked the force of miracles. “What are the signs, what are the miracles which prove the Law of Mohammed?” The roots of this polemic go back to Al-Kindi's

¹³⁶ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 61.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹³⁸ *The Apology of Al-Kindi in The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: a collection of documents from the first three Islamic centuries*, 453-55; J. Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 129.

text.¹³⁹ Refuting the prophethood of Mohammed on this basis, Pius associates him with the devil. Mohammed rejected the divinity of Christ because he himself lacked it and tried to seduce mankind from Christianity to idolatry:

Do you not see that the argument of your prophet and of the demons is the same? That the devil envies Christ and detracts from his glory and majesty and that his counsel and persuasion fashioned your religion contrary to the Gospel and Mosaic Law?¹⁴⁰

Throughout the letter, Pius describes the Ottomans as infidels and enemies; and Islam as a heresy, sect, false religion, superstition, error, and an invention of the devil. Considered in this context, Pius' motivation in the letter seems unlikely to have been to convert Mehmed. It can be rather proposed that one of the motivations for him to draw such images of the Ottomans and Islam was to justify a war against the Ottomans.

Another common theme concerning Mohammed was his tendency to carnal pleasures and his promotion of lust. Pius suggests that Mohammed permitted his followers to marry as many women as they wished and to put them aside when they grew tired of them. Pius adds that Mohammed encouraged his followers to commit adultery by saying them "marry wives and have as many concubines as you please, for I have the strength of forty men in my loins and I consort with many wives and maidens."¹⁴¹ Pius seems to derive this from the *Apology* of al-Kindi, in which Mohammed is presented to have the sexual powers of forty men and there is a catalogue of Mohammed's fifteen wives.¹⁴² For many Christian polemicists, including Pius, this was used to portray Mohammed as a lustful man:

Your lawgiver has placed adultery, fornication, serving the belly, living in filthy pleasures among good things. Mohammed promotes

¹³⁹ *The Apology of Al-Kindi*, 452.

¹⁴⁰ *Epistola ad Mahomatem II*, 80.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁴² *The Apology of Al-Kindi*, 432.

turpitude and only he advances shameful practices, even mixing the good with the bad, the way heretics do, in order to deceive more easily.¹⁴³

As Mohammed allowed his followers to take part in every kind of passion and pleasure, his law was able to attract many people. Therefore, the lustful image of Mohammed was also reflected on his believers and resulted in the perception of all Muslims as licentious and immoral people.

After the refutation of the prophethood of Mohammed, Pius questions the authority of the Koran as a sacred book. Al-Kindi was the first to propose this argument against Muslims, the charge of falsification of the Scriptures. According to Muslim polemicists, Christians and Jews deliberately falsified their scriptures (*tahrif*),¹⁴⁴ omitting prophecies relating to Mohammed from the Torah and Gospel. Pius assails this argument in a most decisive way. He argues that neither the Torah nor the rest of the Bible are corrupted. As for the Torah his argument is that, as it was the first law, there was no reason to change it. Although it was translated into many languages, it was not corrupted as it still agrees with the Greek and Latin translations. The Old Testament has four versions: of the Hebrews, of the Greeks and the Romans, of Christians, and of Muslims. He argues that among these versions, only the Koran is different from all the others, which shows clearly that it is the false one. From this, Pius concludes that the Koran is “a foul invention” of Mohammed.¹⁴⁵ Pius then goes on to defend the originality of the New Testament. Although it was not written by one man, in one place, and at one time, it contains one doctrine and all Christians have the

¹⁴³ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 90.

¹⁴⁴ *Tahrif* refers to change, alteration and is used with regard to what Jews and Christians are supposed to have done to their Scriptures. More detail on this is in the article “Tahrif” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. H.A.R. Gibb (Leiden, 1986-)

¹⁴⁵ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 78.

same version. Therefore, Pius states, while Christians preserve the Law and remain within the tradition of the Church Fathers, Muslims depart from it and pervert it.

In fact, concerning the transmission of sacred texts Pius did not use a different argument from that of Torquemada. In his treatise Torquemada also discusses this issue, saying that Bible could not be forged and corrupted at the same time by Christians and Jews due to their hatred for each other and the different views they had about their sacred Scriptures.¹⁴⁶ Thus, both Torquemada and Pius employed the same arguments gleaned from the *Apology* of Al-Kindi.

Another common theme coming from medieval times is Islam as a religion of the sword. Pius, like his predecessors, suggests that Islam expanded not through persuasion but through force. The political and military success of the Prophet against the pagan Arabs during the spread of Islam was reproached by many Christian polemicists, as for them, prophets do not spread the Word through the sword.¹⁴⁷ According to Pius, as Mohammed was afraid that in discussion “the vanity of his law would be exposed, he prohibited debates and ordered to defend the religion by sword.”¹⁴⁸ After this, Pius writes to Mehmed that although the Ottomans won many victories over Christians, it is not because the Ottomans were strong, but because Christians were being punished by God for their sins. “Your victories have nothing miraculous about them; you never won them without a vast superiority in numbers.”¹⁴⁹ Pius also asserts that conquest with the sword and to expand an empire does not mean that the conquered accept the faith of the conqueror. He gives Jews as an example of this: although they were conquered by the Assyrians and by the

¹⁴⁶ Juan de Torquemada, *Contra Errores Perfidi Machometi*, 115-121. Cited from Ana Echevarria’s *The Fortress of Faith*, 149.

¹⁴⁷ Al-Kindi and Peter the Venerable dealt with this issue in detail: *The Apology of Al-Kindi*, 481; James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 162.

¹⁴⁸ *Epistle to Mohammad II*, 84.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Romans and were oppressed and led off into slavery, they remained true to their religion.¹⁵⁰ Here Pius implicitly warns Christians not to lose faith in Christianity due to defeats and oppression. He says:

We, Christians, do not abandon our religion or blame it when we are conquered in war or are afflicted with other disasters. We think that a good God punishes us like children for our sins when we do not remain true to the traditions of the Holy Fathers.¹⁵¹

However, Pius adds, Christians should not despair as God is merciful and does not abandon those who call upon Him. He also asserts that the triumphs of an enemy do not mean that his religion is better. He challenges to Mehmed, saying: “not even you would agree with this, nor your prophet, who entrusts the defense of his religion to arms and flies from every kind of thinking.”¹⁵² All these remarks can be taken as exhortations to a Christian audience rather than attempts to persuade the Ottoman sultan.

The final stream of Pius’ polemic is a defense of the rationality of Christianity against irrational Islam. According to Pius, Christianity promotes the study of philosophy, the liberal arts and theology, while Islam represents ignorance and irrationality. In fact, the irrationality of Islam was a common medieval perception among the Christian polemicists. They based their argument on the assumption that as Mohammed was not sure about the truth of his law, he prohibited his followers from disputing it and he took up arms instead of reason. Pius also emphasizes this point but he adds a new dimension to this idea by presenting Islam as a barrier to intellectual growth. He says:

There was once a great and flourishing school of philosophers in Alexandria; many of its learned men whose names have come down to us were known throughout Syria and Asia. But ever since the Law of Mohammed won the day, few have attained renown for revealing the

¹⁵⁰ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 85.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

secrets of nature. This is because neither your prophet nor your law, which is founded on pleasure and maintained by the sword, imparts wisdom to those lacking it.¹⁵³

It is clear that here Pius develops a discourse about the Muslims as inimical to learning and the arts. According to Bisaha, the emphasis on intellectual questions in the fifteenth century appears to be more a product of humanist thought than medieval precedent.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, different from his medieval predecessors, Pius extends the idea of the irrationality of Islam to its opposition to intellectual development. He asserts that:

The study of liberal arts flourishes among us. Philosophy is read in public. Theology is taught in universities. No branch of learning is ignored. Famous literary schools are found in many of Italy's cities....Christians have a deep desire to instruct the uninstructed and to understand the truth in our religion.¹⁵⁵

By drawing an image of Islam that rests on ignorance, Pius constructs Christianity as promoter of learning and creates a vision of European virtue and enlightenment in contrast to the supposed wickedness and ignorance of Muslims.

While discussing the irrationality of Islam Pius also makes reference to the story of Mohammed's celestial voyage (*Miradj*).¹⁵⁶ He suggests that in the beginning chapter of the Koran¹⁵⁷ Mohammed argued that God carried him from Mecca to Jerusalem. Later, Pius narrates the details of this event in a mocking way, saying that Muhammad in his dream travelled from his house in Mecca to Jerusalem with Gabriel on an ox which could speak in a human voice and enabled Muhammad to reach Jerusalem in no more than an hour. There Mohammed ascended to heaven and saw

¹⁵³ *Epistola ad Mahometem II*, 91.

¹⁵⁴ Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 169.

¹⁵⁵ *Epistle to Mohammad II*, 91.

¹⁵⁶ *Miradj* refers to the Prophet's ascension to Heaven.

¹⁵⁷ In the Koran, *miradj* is described as a vision in which a divine messenger appears to Mohammed; however, there is no suggestion that Mohammed was carried away to Heaven: "Miradj," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. 7, 97-105.

angels and God. After giving the story, Pius questions the feasibility of this event saying that:

Let us not find fault that the ox spoke, because our sacred texts state that a she-ass did and the pagans say that a cow did; but what the claim that the ox covered a journey of fifty-thousand years in an hour? Where did it go? Where was it? Mohammed had not risen to heaven so where did he cover so much space?...Mohammed says nothing about these things.¹⁵⁸

Through this kind of question Pius refutes the story and suggests that with these ridiculous dreams Muhammad deceived uneducated people. The account of *Miradj* was a famous topic among medieval Christian polemicists to show the absurdities of Mohammed's teachings. They derived the information about it from one of their favorite sources, the *Liber scalae Machometi*, which was translated from the Arabic *Kitab al-Miradj* (Account of Mohammed's Night Journey to Heaven) around 1264.¹⁵⁹ The Jewish doctor Abraham de Toledo and Bonaventura de Siena translated this text, although other versions of this text were made in the following centuries as well.¹⁶⁰ One of them was made by Riccoldo de Montecroce and this version was used by Juan de Torquemada and Pius II. According to Daniel, the *Liber Scalae* was used by Christian polemicists to mock Islamic beliefs and they attributed this work to Mohammed as this would provide solid ground for their polemics.¹⁶¹ Pius, like his medieval predecessors, used this account that originated from a deliberately deformed source in his letter and made it suit his argument that Islam is irrational.

On the whole, it can be said that while discussing Islam Pius emphasized similar points as medieval Christian polemicists did. He regarded Islam as a heresy

¹⁵⁸ *Epistle to Mohammad II*, 93-4.

¹⁵⁹ Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, 29.

¹⁶⁰ Ana Echevarria, *The Fortress of Faith*, 93.

¹⁶¹ Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, 263.

founded on pleasure and force; he questioned the prophethood of Muhammad, the originality of the Koran as the Word of God and the rationality of Islam. While doing this, he followed a pattern similar to that of Al-Kindi, Peter the Venerable, Riccoldo de Montecroce and other polemicists. During the Middle Ages, Christian polemicists tried to refute Islam in all possible ways by looking for the most destructive arguments against its religious enemy and by formulating the harshest black-and-white claims. The reason for this attitude was to convince the Christians that Islam as a heresy of Mohammed aimed to destroy the true faith, Christianity. The motivations behind this attitude changed according to the political and social events of the time each polemical text was produced. In general, however, these were, as Tolan pointed out, “the desire to justify a war against a Muslim state, an attempt to dissuade Christians from converting to Islam, or a need to justify the rule of Christian princes over Muslim subjects.”¹⁶²

During the fifteenth century in Europe due to a perception of a growing Ottoman threat most of the works devoted to Islam and the Ottomans were written in the tradition of medieval anti-Islamic polemics. Although it is suggested that the declared aim of polemics was to convince the other of the error of his ways and to convert him to the true path,¹⁶³ the intended audience for these works was Christians and their main aim was not the conversion of the Ottomans. The close analysis of Pope Pius’ letter has demonstrated that although ostensibly written as a conversion letter, Pius’ letter carried more the characteristics of medieval anti-Islamic polemical texts, echoing the similar themes in the refutation of Islam.

As already emphasized, Pius did not reveal his letter during his lifetime; therefore, it is hard to make any precise explanations about his motivations. It is

¹⁶² J. Tolan, *Saracens*, 281.

¹⁶³ Nancy Bisaha, *Creating East and West*, 145.

evident, however, that all the arguments concerning Islam in the letter were unlikely to carry weight with Mehmed; Pius rather meant to address Christians and inspire in them disgust and ridicule for Islam. In this way the Christian audience was to be reassured of the superiority of its own religious beliefs. Moreover, as was the case in the medieval period, the detailed refutation of Islam in Pius' letter might have aimed to show Christians that a crusade or some type of military response was the only way to confront the Ottomans. Through the use of polemics, he demonizes the enemy in order to justify and glorify an action for crusade against the Ottomans. Another motivation might have been that he wrote this letter in order to instruct fellow Christians against the dangers of yielding to the Islamic heresy. Clearly, Pius' letter can be subject to many possible interpretations concerning its purposes, except its declared intention of converting the Ottoman sultan Mehmed to Christianity.

CONCLUSION:

The close analysis of Pius' letter to Mehmed II has revealed in many respects that this letter was not composed with the sincere intention to convert Mehmed II to Christianity, but was intended to serve other purposes. In order to reveal these purposes, the letter was examined in three steps. In the first step, the letter was evaluated in the context of the political and literary activities of Pope Pius. Such an evaluation offered the view that Pius' letter aimed to function as a propagandistic effort among Christian princes to revive the spirit of Christian unity and the crusading ideal against what Pius apparently perceived as a growing Ottoman threat. The conflicting remarks in the letter presented two possible interpretations. The positive statements of Pius about Mehmed intended to warn the Christian princes, stressing that if they continued to ignore his calls for crusade the pope would favor their enemy Mehmed and recognize his authority. On the other hand, the flattering remarks concerning the European powers aimed to encourage Christian princes to take action against the Ottomans. In any case, the examination of the letter indicated that the intended audience of the letter was Christians.

In the second step of the study, Pius' letter was examined in the context of previous papal letters to Muslim rulers. Such a comparison demonstrated that, in contrast to the conciliatory and respectful attitude and rhetoric of previous popes towards the Muslim rulers in their letters, Pius adopted in his letter a more polemical and sometimes even deprecatory rhetoric towards Mehmed. Through the image of Mehmed II as a ruler and the image of Islam, Pius tried to construct the self-image of Latin Christians and Christianity, arguing for European superiority over the Ottomans. In this sense, Pius' letter not only reveals the Renaissance perceptions of the Ottoman

other, but also indicates the process of the constructing a self-image through an image of the other.

Because a large part of the letter deals with a detailed refutation of Islam, in the third part of this thesis Pius' letter was evaluated in the context of anti-Islamic polemical texts. The comparison of Pius' letter with Renaissance and medieval polemical works demonstrated that Pius' attitudes towards Islam carry parallels with the Christian polemicists of the medieval period. In his approach Pius certainly echoed the arguments of the medieval polemicists, which indicates continuity between the medieval and Renaissance perceptions of the Muslims.

Over all, the final conclusion that can be drawn is that Pius' letter is a fascinating combination of medieval themes on Islam, humanist rhetoric, and a discourse of the Ottoman Other. Appealing to many aspects such as asserting papal leadership in the struggle with the Turks, asserting Christian pride in having a superior religion, asserting the primacy of religion in the struggle with the Turk, and holding out the prospect of what could be achieved if Christians united against the Turk, it represents the concerns and attitudes of the fifteenth century humanists in the face of the Ottoman peril.

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