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Dialogue and Toleration in Juan Luis Vives's *De veritate fidei Christianae*: Vives on Muhammad and Islam

Abstract:

The article argues that Juan Luis Vives's (1492/1493 – 1540) conceptualization of Islam in *De veritate fidei Christianae* can be placed inside the Erasmian paradigm of toleration of error. *De veritate* presents a fictional dialogue between a Christian and a Muslim in which the flaws of Islam are systematically traced back to the unethical nature of Muhammad. In describing the initial failure of Muhammad to grasp universal law, Vives equates the Muslim prophet with a failed legislator or a tyrant. Vives's strategy does not save Islam but it portrays the Muslim interlocutor as a victim of an error. In the dialogue the Muslim appears as a man of good judgment, he is adopted into the sphere of dialogue but only in order to overcome his error.

Introduction

Considering the amount of literature on the Valencian humanist Juan Luis Vives (1492/1493 – 1540), by far the most widely published humanist writer of Spanish origin in the sixteenth century, the lack of studies on his main work on religion, *De veritate fidei Christianae* (*On the Truth of the Christian Faith*), is somewhat surprising.¹ The monumental *De veritate fidei Christianae*, printed posthumously

¹ Moreno Gallego considers strange the scarcity of interest considering the *converso* background of Vives. See Valentín Moreno Gallego, *La recepción hispana de Juan Luis Vives* (València: Generalitat Valenciana, 2006), 496-497. *De veritate fidei Christianae* has been the subject of only one monograph: Paul Graf, *Ludwig Vives als Apologet. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Apologetik* (Freiburg, 1932). Important articles include Edward George, "Rules of Engagement: The Humanist Apologetics of Vives' *De veritate fidei Christianae*," *Erasmus Studies* 27 (2007), 1-36; Edward George, "Author, Adversity and Reader: A View of the *De veritate fidei Christianae*," in *A Companion to Juan Luis Vives*, ed. Charles Fantazzi (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 315-358; Edward George, "Juan Luis Vives," in *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History. Volume 6. Western Europe (1500-1600)*, eds. David Thomas and John Chesworth (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Marcia Colish, "The *De veritate fidei Christianae* of Juan Luis Vives," in *Christian Humanism: Essays in Honour of Arjo Vanderjagt*, eds. Alasdair A. MacDonald, Zweder R. W. M. von Martels and Jan R. Veenstra (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 173-197; José María Belarte Forment, "Aproximación al estudio de la teología humanista de Vives," in *Opera omnia Ioannis Lodovici Vivis Valentini, I: Volumen introductorio*, ed. Antonio Mestre (València: Generalitat Valenciana, 1992), 317-408; Vicente Cantarino, "La polémica de Luis Vives contra el Islam," *Boletín de la Biblioteca de Menéndez Pelayo* (1991), 5-34. For Vives's popularity in the 16th century, see Enrique

in 1543 by the Basel printing house of Johann Oporinus (1507–1568), was an unfinished work. The printed version comprised a dedication letter from Vives’s close friend Francis Cranvelt (1485–1564) to Pope Paul III (Pope in 1534-1549), a preface from Vives, and five books on different religious themes. Two of these break the monologous flow of the treatise by introducing a dialogue between a Christian with a Jew (Book 3) and then between a Christian and a Muslim jurist (Book 4), Alfaquinus. What is largely acknowledged is that *De veritate* is not an exercise in systematic theology, something Vives had rejected throughout his life, but a more persuasive literary exhortation to the Christian faith.² The bulk of existing scholarship has, however, focused on the clarification of Vives’s points on theological questions and it is only recently that the function of the interreligious dialogue inside the totality of *De veritate* or the dialogues themselves have been studied from the point of view of rhetorical choices.³ Edward George’s work in particular has shed some light on the rhetorical elements of the dialogues as well as on the interconnections between rhetorical choices, audience and the meaning of the text.

In this article, I aim to advance scholarship on the interreligious dialogues found in *De veritate* in two ways. First, I will situate the dialogues inside the rhetorical models and humanist discursive paradigms found in Vives’s own work and in the intellectual current of northern humanism more generally. I will argue that they can be placed inside the Erasmian paradigm of asymmetrical dialogue that tolerates error in order to overcome it. Secondly, I will focus on the contents of the dialogue between the Christian and the Muslim and especially on the figure of Muhammad. In doing this, I will not present a summary of the whole dialogue and I will not try to exhaustively explain Vives’s potential source base in the construction of the text.⁴ Instead, I argue that the dialogue with the Muslim paints a picture of Muhammad that any reader familiar with Erasmian commonplaces would have recognized as a close reproduction of the Erasmian tyrant. Thus, Muhammad in the dialogue is not merely a sketch drawn from existing commonplaces but the figure of the Muslim prophet is intentionally turned into the central theme and argumentative nucleus of the whole piece.⁵

González González, *Una república de lectores. Difusión y recepción de la obra de Juan Luis Vives* (México: Plaza y Valdés, 2007), 61.

² See Karl Kohut, “Anmerkungen zu “de veritate fidei Christianae,” in *Juan Luis Vives, Sein Werk und Seine Bedeutung für Spanien und Deutschland*,” ed. Christoph Strosetzki (Frankfurt: Vervuert Verlag, 1995), 122-134 (122-123).

³ Theological approach is very present in Belarte Forment, “Aproximación.”

⁴ These have been discussed in the existing literature, for a recent description and assessment of the dialogue between the Christian and Alfaquinus, see George, “Juan Luis Vives.”

⁵ Vives’s polemics against Islam and Judaism draw heavily from the longer tradition of Christian apologetics. For a recent study of the *adversus iudaeos* genre in the Middle Ages, see Alex Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 172-221. For Vives’s possible sources in his polemic against Islam, see Cantarino, “La polémica,” 9-10. For Vives’s place in the *adversus iudaeos* genre, see Jesús Gómez, “El diálogo contra iudaeos de Vives y su tradición medieval,” *Criticón*, 41 (1988), 67-85. George has hinted on the argumentative importance of Muhammad in Vives’s text, see George, “Juan Luis Vives,” 671.

These two objectives are closely interlinked, and I will show that likening Muhammad to a secular tyrant and to a flawed legislator is an integral part of Vives's toleration of error: it does not save Islam, but it saves the interlocutor in the dialogue by constructing him as a victim of a tyrant. In the latter part of the article, I will briefly consider the results from the vantage point of the possibilities of interreligious dialogue in Vives's thought, and whether he might have seriously contemplated the option of non-Christians' engaging with *De veritate*. In doing this, I take as my starting point George's powerful interpretation according to which the dialogues can be approached as literary performances for a predominantly Christian audience.⁶

Erasmus and Vives on the Possibilities of Interreligious Dialogue

In understanding Vives's position and choices in *De veritate* two things should be highlighted. The first is a personal one and linked to his experience as a member of a converted Jewish family (*converso*) that had had severe problems with the Spanish Inquisition culminating in the trial and death sentence of his father (1522 – 1524) and in the public burning of the remains of his mother (1529 – 1530).⁷ As existing scholarship has noted, this is one of the reasons that led Vives to distance himself from the theological debates of his time with the posthumous *De veritate* being his only large work dedicated to theological themes.⁸ Moreover, his *converso* background can be seen as the source of a number of critical remarks on the activity of the Inquisition as the watchdog of private conscience in different parts of Vives's oeuvre.⁹ Secondly, the intellectual context of Vives's literary career was strongly marked by the intellectual current of northern humanism centered on the figure of Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536). Vives, who had left the Iberian Peninsula for good in 1509 settling finally in Bruges, had been closely linked to the Dutch humanist in the late 1510s and 1520s and continued to be well connected to the most famous names of northern humanism throughout his life.¹⁰

⁶ George, "Rules of Engagement," 12; George, "Author, Adversity and Reader," 344-347. Cantarino situates the dialogue with the Muslim inside the rhetorical tradition of anti-Islam literature of the Middle Ages, Cantarino, "La polémica," 12.

⁷ Enrique González González, "Juan Luis Vives, Works and Days," in *A Companion to Juan Luis Vives*, ed. Charles Fantazzi (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 15-64 (25-27); Miguel de la Pinta y Llorente and José María de Palacio y de Palacio, *Procesos Inquisitoriales contra la familia judía de Luis Vives*. (Madrid, 1964).

⁸ George, "Author, Adversity and Reader," 317.

⁹ See for instance Vives's dedication letter to his *De pacificatione* addressed to the archbishop of Seville, Vives, *De pacificatione* (hereafter DP), vol. 5 in Vives, *Opera omnia*, 8 vols, ed. Gregorio Mayans y Siscar. (Valencia, 1782 -90), 405.

¹⁰ Carlos Noreña, *Juan Luis Vives* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 45-46; 77-81; 123-147.

The familiarity with the Erasmian branch of humanism brought with it an interest and optimism in the power of words and dialogue that were often but not limitlessly preferred to force as a somewhat tolerant model for dealing with religious error. This model presupposed a union of transformative use of language with the free conversion of those addressed, which was deemed important in the Erasmian theology of inner spirit. The use of the concept of toleration in the context of religious dialogue does, of course, risk anachronism since the nouns (*tolerantia*, *toleration*) and the verb (*tolerare*) were rarely used, and no coherent theory of toleration can be found in any Erasmian text. Still, the predominantly modern notion of toleration has frequently served as a concept under which modern scholarship has discussed the possibilities and limits of Erasmian optimism in man's malleability, use of language, and freedom to spiritual transformation in the context of the specific debates of the early 16th century.¹¹

Erasmus's own position vis-à-vis religious dissent is much debated but much of the existing scholarship agrees that his plea for toleration and dialogue in the context of Christendom did not extend to cover other religions in any straightforward way.¹² In the confines of Christendom Erasmus distinguished famously between symmetrical conversation (*sermo*) among the wise on non-essentials of faith (*adiaphora*) and more vertical rhetoric intended to overcome religious error. This second approach was only partially tolerant; it tolerated error because it believed that the best way to overcome heresy and to guarantee Ecclesiastical or civic concord was a sensible use of words, not because toleration would signify an ultimate political solution to protestant movements or other religions, let alone imply respect or recognition of their worth. Thus, it is temporary forbearance of error on the part of those "with the power to be intolerant," never the ultimate solution to religious heterodoxy.¹³

¹¹ For a discussion of the threats of the use of the modern concept of toleration in Renaissance studies, see Mario Turchetti, "Une question mal posée: Érasme et la tolérance," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 53 (1991), 379-395. For recent discussions of Erasmus and toleration, see James D. Tracy, "Erasmus, Coornhert and the Acceptance of Religious Disunity in the Body Politic: A Low Countries Tradition?" in *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic*, eds. C. Berkvens-Stevelinck, J. Israel and G. G. M Posthumus Meyjes (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 49-62 (49-54); Rainer Forst, *Toleration in Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 103-109.

¹² Heiko Obermann, "The Travail of Tolerance: Containing Chaos in Early Modern Europe," in *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformations*, eds. Ole Peter Grell and Bob Scribner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12-31 (26); Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, 107-108.

¹³ Gary Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration* (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 7-8, 43-102; Turchetti, "Une question mal posée," 385-393; Gregory Dodds, "The Reception of Erasmus in Restoration England," in *The Reception of Erasmus in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Karl A. E. Enenkel (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 103-127 (109).

In Vives's work, non-Christian religions appear mostly in the context of the Turks and there are broadly speaking two ways in which the question is taken up.¹⁴ The first of these is the idea of a common European war against the Turks that comes up in Vives's *De Europae dissidiis* (1526) and *De conditione vitae sub turca* (1529), both of which were composed in the aftermath of the battle of Pavia (1525) when the French were planning an alliance with the Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (Sultan in 1520 – 1566). What made the situation even more critical was the success of the Turks in the battlefield culminating in their victory in the battle of Mohács against a Christian army in Hungary in the summer of 1526.¹⁵ Both of these texts in different ways and degrees connect the idea of a concord and peace between European commonwealths with the idea of a shared military expedition against the Turks. Thus, although the heretic nature of the Ottomans is evoked frequently, the context of these texts is predominantly political and focused on a tangible military threat.

However, the Turks appear in a somewhat different light in Vives's *De concordia et discordia in humano genere* (1529), a monumental piece focusing on peace and concord on all levels of social life. In *De concordia*, Vives aims to investigate the possibilities of concord not merely in commonwealths (*civitates*), nor in Christendom, but in all levels of human association. Thus, in the first book, which focuses on concord, Vives's main task is to explain the natural sociability (*societas*) of humans that should bind men together on all levels of human interaction.¹⁶ In the fourth book, Vives is quite explicit that the social imperative of love does not refer merely to the union of all Christians in the body of Christ but to all humans, and the central precept of doing to others what one would like to be done to oneself is said to be nothing less than a law of nature. Thus, according to Vives, one should wish the Turks "the greatest thing of all," which is "knowledge of truth." This is, however, not achieved through "our insults" but only by following the same path Christians had to tread with the help of apostles, which consisted in reasoning that was coherent with nature and human abilities, and in the communication of virtue through the integrity of one's life. By following the path set by the apostles, Christians should become living examples of what they profess and ordain so that their beliefs do not diverge from their words.¹⁷

¹⁴ Marcia Colish has also recognized two ways of writing about the Turks, see Marcia Colish, "Juan Luis Vives on the Turks," in *Medievalia et humanistica*, 35 (2009), 1-14 (3-6).

¹⁵ For the alliance between the French and the Turks, see Wim Blockmans, *Emperor Charles V, 1500-1558* (London: Arnold, 2002), 65-66.

¹⁶ Vives, *De concordia & discordia in humano genere* (hereafter DC), vol. 5 in Vives, *Opera omnia*, 8 vols, ed. Gregorio Mayans y Siscar. (Valencia, 1782-90), book 1, especially 195-201.

¹⁷ Vives, DC, 390: "illis ergo, quod veri est amoris, bene cupiemus, illudque optabimus vnicum et maximum bonum, agnitionem veritatis, quod nunquam assequuntur conviciis aut maledictis nostris, sed eo modo, quo nos ipsi ope ac beneficio sumus Apostolorum consecuti, rationibus naturae et humanis ingeniis congruentibus, integritate vitae, modestia, moderatione, inculpatis moribus, ut nos ipsi priores re ostendamus quae profitemur et jubemus, ne a fide nostrorum dictorum arceat eos tam discrepans vita."

This plea to dialogue, peace, and persuasion that is extended to cover the Turks had naturally precedents in Renaissance thought. In the aftermath of the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453, both Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464, *De pace fidei, On the Peace of Faith*) and Juan de Segovia (c. 1395-1458) had pleaded for peace and dialogue as a persuasive way to encounter and convert the Turks.¹⁸ Simultaneously Vives's *De concordia*, that lacked any concrete interest in Islam and the Quran, pointed to an Erasmian trust in language to overcome difference of opinion. Indeed, Erasmus himself in his widely-read *Paraclesis* (1516) had claimed that the word of Christ should be translated to all tongues so that it could be read not only by Europeans but also by Turks and Saracens.¹⁹

Language, the Bond of Human Association

As Vives made clear in his *De concordia*, reasoning was essentially dependent on language, praised eloquently by the Valencian throughout the work for its capacity to bind men together. Vives reminded the reader in the first part of *De concordia* that the fact that men were given the ability to speak was the “most explicit and evident” sign of concord and social life, and that language was “the most suitable instrument one could imagine for human communication.”²⁰ Underlining further the importance of language, Vives repeatedly argued that two were keys to social life; justice and word.²¹ In his most significant contribution to rhetorical theory, *De ratione dicendi* (1532), Vives claimed that whereas justice was soft and exercised authority over well-educated minds, language could potentially draw all men to itself and dominate passions.²² However, the powerful nature of language as an emperor of passions is ultimately predicated on the corrupted nature of man. As Vives wrote in his *De ratione dicendi*, in a world of trust where nature had not lost its integrity, it would have been enough to communicate what was hidden in one's mind to others in a simple way. In the world of

¹⁸ Victor Sanz Santacruz, “Juan de Segovia y Nicolás de Cusa frente al Islam: su comprensión intelectualista de la fe Cristiana,” *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia*, 16 (2007), 181-194 (187).

¹⁹ Erasmus, “Paraclesis ad lectorem pium,” in Erasmus, *Novum Instrumentum* (Basel: Froben, 1516), aaa4-bbb (the third page from the start).

²⁰ Vives, DC, 197: “Maxima sunt haec quidem omnia concordiae & societatis indicia, sed apertius aut evidentius nullum, quam quod sermonem accepimus...”; “quo non aliud excogitari poterat instrumentum communicationi hominum aptius.”

²¹ Vives, *De disciplinis* (hereafter DD) (Köln: Johann I Gymnich, 1532), 134; Vives, *De ratione dicendi* (hereafter DR) (Basel: Thomas I Platter & Balthasar Lasius, 1536), 3.

²² Vives did differentiate between the justice of civil authorities that was strong and coercive, and the natural justice referring to life according to one's true nature. Vives, DD, 372: “Verum ubi charitas abest, iustitiae officium in eius locum succedit, non illius blandae ac inermis, sed armatae potestate ac viribus...”

sin, however, it was not enough to explain (*explicare*) what was in one's mind; rather, instruments of persuasion were needed. Indeed, the cause of truth could be helped with the use of passions when it could not be advanced through the mere use of reason.²³ Thus, there are two basic ways of persuading, “the probability of arguments and reason” and “the moving of passions.”²⁴

These two means of persuasion, arguments and passion, resonated very well in the rhetorical and dialectical traditions: they mirrored one of the basic dichotomies that had been present in all reflections on language use since Plato and Aristotle. In Cicero, primary authority of the Latin language in Vives's mind, the distinction between a dispassionate conversation with epistemological connotations (*sermo*) and true passionate oratory (*oratoria*) directed to the masses was central.²⁵ In fact, Erasmus's distinction between different forms of horizontal conversation among the learned and the vertical rhetoric destined for education in practices such as preaching owed greatly to these classical distinctions between different modalities of speaking.²⁶ Although both passion and reason play a part to a different degree in all human communication and no simple separation of them can be made, Vives's *De ratione dicendi* is full of allusions to the dichotomy between rational conversation and passionate rhetoric – a dichotomy primarily conditioned by the audience one is addressing. As Peter Mack has noted, one of the distinctive features found in Vives's rhetorical theory is his great interest in the concept of *decorum* (propriety) as well as his insistence on the primary importance of audience in conditioning stylistic, dispositional and even argumentative choices.²⁷ For instance, Vives gives the example of how to describe the abstract concept of philosophy to different audiences claiming that, whereas an educated audience might be satisfied with an adequate description of what philosophy is, the people (*vulgus*) need sensible things. Thus, one should create tangible vividness (*enargeia*) and paint a poetical picture where philosophy is described eloquently as a beautiful lady.²⁸

This is just one example of the multiple ways in which the audience plays a part in the construction of a literary composition. However, the interaction between literary choices and audience means that the selection of rhetorical devices reveals a conceptualization of the audience; it

²³ Vives, DR, 106-107. The dichotomy between simple explanation and persuasion most likely draws from Agricola's distinction between exposition and argumentation, see Peter Mack, *Renaissance Argument, Valla and Agricola in the Traditions of Rhetoric and Dialectic* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 190-20.

²⁴ Vives, DR, 108: “Ergo persuasio orationis duobus, uelut telis, utitur ad expugnandam mentem, probabilitate argumentorum, siue rationum: affectuum motu ad concitationem, aut ad sedationem.”

²⁵ Cicero, *De officiis* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1913), Lxxxvii; Cicero: *Orator* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1939), xix.62-64. Vives reflects explicitly on this distinction in *De ratione dicendi*, see Vives, DR, 90.

²⁶ Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration*, 7-8.

²⁷ Peter Mack, “Vives's *De ratione dicendi*: Structures, innovations, problems,” *Rhetorica*, 23 (2005), 65-92 (80-84)

²⁸ Vives, DR, 174-175.

provides some insight into the intellectual and moral qualities Vives attributes to the persons in the dialogues as well as to his potential readers. This categorization is far from innocent: it is only with those of judgment and reason that a symmetrical discussion between equals is ultimately possible.

***De veritate fidei Christianae*, an exercise in interreligious dialogue**

What, then, do Vives's stylistic and argumentative choices in *De veritate fidei Christianae* reveal about his understanding of the Muslim as a participant in a debate? The Spaniard himself provides the reader with some hints in his preface to the whole work as well as in his separate introductions to the interreligious dialogues with the Muslim and the Jew. The preface declares that Vives is persuading those to whom the authority of God is not enough, who are incredulous, suspicious or doubtful.²⁹ According to Vives there are many belonging to this group among Christians themselves, but in a later passage he also goes on to include Jews and Muslims among the target audience. In a solemn ending, in which Vives distances his persuasive style from Cicero's deliberative and forensic oratory because of the religious nature of his subject matter, he claims that he is speaking to "all the nations of the earth."³⁰

The respective introductions to the dialogues with the Jew and Alfaquius construct conflicting views of the representatives of other monotheistic religions as interlocutors in a discussion. The introduction to the discussion with the Jew is full of tensions to say the least: it opens up with a passionate passage evoking the hatred (*odium*) of the Jews against Christians and against Christ, and with serious reservations about the possibilities of the dialogue the Christian is about to undertake.³¹ Simultaneously, however, Vives claims that the dialogue with the Jew will proceed under the guidance of "reason and judgment," a claim that is made possible by the fact that Vives introduces a Jew willing to "yield to truth."³² But despite the claim to reason and judgment, it is clear that the

²⁹ Vives, *De veritate fidei Christianae* (hereafter DV) (Basel: Johann Oporinus, 1543), A3^v: "Ad quas res quum alii plane sint increduli, alii suspicaces & dubii, nunquid erit operae precium, ut eas humanis ratiocinationibus fulciamus ac corroboremus; ut ad credendum adducantur ii quibus sola Dei dicentis autoritas non uidetur ad persuadendum satis adferre momenti."

³⁰ Vives, DV, A4^v: "Nos autem in hoc opere uniuerso dedimus operam, ut argumenta quibus utimur, quiuis etiam possit intelligere, si mentem aduerterit."

³¹ Vives, DV, 179: "Molesta pars huius operis & perplexa sequitur, disputandi aduersum Iudaeos, genus hominum impudentissimae perucaciae, quam odium excauit contra nos & Iesum Christum Dei filium."

³² Vives, DV, 179: "Christianum introducemus & Iudaeum, sectam suam quam fieri poterit acerrime ac fortissime propugnantem: sic tamen, ne obstinarit animo pernegare omnia etiam ueritatis manifestae, sed qui cedat apertae rationi, & homo cum homine humana ratione ac iudicio disceptante contendat."

introduction never asserts that the dialogue will be a symmetrical one. It is about the Christian “teaching [the Jew] openly” and the traditional Erasmian commonplace of “medicine of the mind” is evoked in order to highlight the relationship between the interlocutors. The Christian is a doctor who wants to cure a patient who resists.³³ In comparison to the highly ambivalent and passionate introduction to the dialogue with the Jew, the short introductory remarks to the dialogue with Alfaquinus seem quite different. The reader is told that there are many who embrace “the dreams of the Muslims” but that they are persuaded by things the pronouncing of which grinds the whole argument to pieces. Moreover, their arguments do not need to be attacked since they do the attacking themselves.³⁴ Both introductions, despite their plea to reason and judgment, underscore that the dialogue will mostly be one-way traffic. Thus, in no way does the plea for reason reveal the dialogue as a symmetrical one. The relationship is rather between a master and a pupil.

The dialogues themselves produce a picture of the interlocutors that highlights their asymmetric positions. It is mostly the Christian who speaks harnessing different rhetorical motives ranging from short Socratic questions to direct attack and passionate monologues to make his point. All along the dialogues the hatred of the Jews and the ignorance of Muslims are evoked side by side with philological, exegetical, ethical and theological arguments. This accentuates the basic tension between the rational and judgmental claim of the Christian on the one hand, and an actual passionate performance on the other that conquers resistance through at times aggressive means, especially in the case of the Jew. Thus, it communicates a mode of engaging in a dialogue that does not only draw on the dispassionate and grave rhetoric of a teacher, but relies often on passion and emotion as if it distrusted the possibilities of intellect to get things done. It underlines that this is not a conversation on equal terms but bringing the other to reason by employing various strategies not found in the symmetrical discussion between the wise members of the Christian Republic of Letters.³⁵

The dialogues do not, however, only show a certain modality of discussion but they also reveal an interpretation of Islam that is hardly an insignificant one. Despite the heavy use of *Doctrina Mahumet* found in Theodor Bibliander’s (1509-1564) encyclopedia on Islam (*The Doctrine and Quran of Muhammad*), and the example of Bernardo Pérez de Chinchón’s (c. 1500-c. 1556) *Dialogos*

³³ Vives, DV, 179: “doceamus aperte...”; “Operosum est hos sanare, qui & medicinam oderunt, & medicum non aliter detestantur, quam carnificem aliquem ad occidendum inductum.”

³⁴ Vives, DV, 262: “Tanta pars generis humani stultitiae Mahumeticorum somniorum est addicta...Ea sunt illis persuasa, quae uel sola confutentur relatione, ipsa enim semetipsam contundit, & confringit: neque nos adeo cum ea pugnamus, ut ipsa secum.”

³⁵ For the Erasmian Republic of Letters, see for instance Christiane Berkvens-Stevelinck, Hans Bots, Jens Haseler, eds., *Les grands intermédiaires culturels de la République des Lettres. Études de réseaux de correspondances du xvie au xviiiè siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005), 9-10.

Christianos (1535) as well as a range of other literature on Islam, the dialogues found in *De veritate* do not merely recycle existing tropes and stereotypes that were meant to ridicule the Muslim faith. By looking at the vituperation (*vituperatio*) of Muhammad in the dialogue on Islam, I will show how Vives weaves existing commonplaces and folktales into a broader interpretative structure centered on the figure of the prophet. What is more, I will show how the focus on Muhammad creates an Erasmian structure to the dialogue that is crucial for its correct understanding, since it shifts the focus from systematic theology to ethical theology.

There was a long tradition in Christian polemic of imputing Muhammad's moral character. The influential 11th or 12th century *Liber denudationis* (*The Book of Denuding*) focused amply on attacking the credibility of a morally corrupted Muhammad whose authority lacked miracles, proclamations of the prophets, and was merely based on sword.³⁶ In a similar vein, in Riccoldo da Monte di Croce's widely-read *Contra legem Saracenorum* (around 1300), that drew on *Liber denudationis*, it was claimed that Muhammad's authority did not emanate from God and miracles but from his own treacherous and diabolic claims, that the success of Islam was based on Muhammad's sword and not reason and truth, and that Muhammad was partly guilty for Islam being incompatible with the precepts of virtue.³⁷ Still, in Pérez de Chinchón's 1535 *Dialogos christianos contra la secta mahometana y contra la pertinencia de los judíos* (*Christian dialogues against the Muhammadan sect and against the appropriateness of the Jews*) one could read that Muhammad was not a prophet but a cheater, that he was not a saintly but a bad and a vicious man, and that he deceived people with diabolic shrewdness.³⁸ While Vives most likely knew all of these works and drew on them extensively, he deliberately takes the commonplaces of the tradition and turns the vituperation of Muhammad into the central argumentative thread of his work. Thus, Muhammad becomes the decisive point of question, and the errors of Islam are quite systematically traced back to the character of Muhammad.³⁹

As in other treatments of Islam, in *De veritate* Muhammad is first and foremost presented as a law-giver.⁴⁰ As the Christian interlocutor tells us, it is important to "study the dignity

³⁶ "Liber denudationis siue ostensionsis aut patefaciens," in *Religious Polemic and the Intellectual History of the Mozarabes, c. 1050-1200*, by Thomas E. Burman (Leiden: Brill, 1994), especially chapters 2, 3, 10.

³⁷ Ricoldus de Monte Crucis: *Confutatio Alcorani seu legis Saracenorum* (Basel: Nikolaus Kessler, 1507), biii-c (Chapters 7 and 8).

³⁸ Bernardo Pérez de Chinchón, *Dialogos christianos contra la secta mahometica y contra la pertinencia de los judios* (Valencia: Francisco Díaz Romano, 1535), a iiiii: "Mahoma no fue propheta sino en gañador falso/y que no fue sancto sino hombre malo y vicioso y que dios no le embio/sino que el mesmo con diabloica astucia engaño la gente con falsas opiniones."

³⁹ Graf

⁴⁰ Pérez de Chinchón, *Dialogos*, a iiiii.

of the legislator because the first authority of laws emanates from him.”⁴¹ Towards the latter part of the dialogue the Christian underlines that if Christians do not follow the precepts of the law it is their fault, but in the case of the Muslims, their error is a consequence of the very law they are following. Furthermore, this fundamental error in law cannot be separated from the person of the lawgiver.⁴² There are a number of issues the lawgiver has done that are dubious in the mind of the Christian. First, he has silenced all possibilities of rational investigation and dialogue on questions of faith. As the Christian argues, the use of human reason is a fundamental way of partaking in the eternal truth of God. True, it cannot aspire to certainty, but inside its own limits it should strive to understand things that will always remain hidden to a spirit not versed in investigation and the use of reason. This rational tenet encouraging disputations and discussions among the learned and the prudent is set in contrast to the supposedly mute and blind faith of the Muslims.⁴³ The reason for the ignorant and unlearned nature of the Muslim faith is said to be a command of the Prophet. This, among other things, covers the fraud of Muhammad with a veil of divinity.⁴⁴ Sure of his cause, the Christian claims that “who trusts his own truth is not afraid of the examination of the mind,” and continues to claim that Muhammad deliberately prohibited the exercise of reason in order to hide his deceit.⁴⁵

Secondly, whereas Christ is a preacher of peace, Muhammad is systematically portrayed as a warlord with a hunger for glory comparable to that of Caesar or Alexander the Great, the classical warmongers in Vives’s thought.⁴⁶ It is true that Muhammad did claim that he was sent into the world with piety and compassion and that persuasion is a weapon more worthy of God than violence and coercion. However, he did not comply with these precepts, and had to sustain his mission on the basis of force, because – again, according to the Christian – no one would have accepted the faith of his absurd and childish sect through mere persuasion.⁴⁷ The Muslim interlocutor, Alfaquinus, even admits that some of his people consider Muhammad a “wicked and lost man,” but reminds that this does not necessarily undermine his prophetic authority, given that “God chooses whom he wants

⁴¹ Vives, DV, 266: “Excutiamus primum dignitatem legislatoris, inde enim prima autoritas legibus”

⁴² Vives, DV, 304 (the page is erroneously numbered, should be 294): “nam quod nostri homines legi non obtemperant, culpa est eorum, non legis. quod uero facitis uos, ex praescripto legis facitis, ut culpa iam legis sit, seu legislatoris potius, non uestra, nisi quod malae ac impurae legi paretis sine ulla mente.”

⁴³ Vives deliberately refers to the dialogue among wise that was one of the cornerstones of Erasmanian religious toleration, see Vives, DV, 264: “...eruditi & prudentiores & cordatiores in populo sine periculo tum possunt facere, tum etiam debent.”

⁴⁴ Vives, DV, 265-266.

⁴⁵ Vives, DV, 265: “Qui ergo ueritate sua fidit, nihil reformidat examen ingenii: imo aduocat, & quantum potest excauit.”

⁴⁶ Vives, DV, 268.

⁴⁷ Vives, DV, 268: “Verum non ignorauit Mahumetes mansuetudinem, clementiam, humanitatem esse potius diuina arma...”; “Missus sum a Deo ad homines cum pietate & misericordia. Item persuasionem esse potius diuinitatis, quam uiolentiam, & coactionem”; “...persuasionem enim nemo esset unquam ad assentiendum sectae inductus, tam absurdae ac puerili.”

to.”⁴⁸ The Christian argues against this by invoking the importance of the life of the messenger as a persuasive example in itself – a reference to the well-known Erasmian principle of one’s life conveying a truth through the totality of one’s deeds (*veritas vitae*).⁴⁹ This is emphasized by the Christian throughout the dialogue. Thus, it would not make sense that God would have communicated the precepts of “good life, religion, sanctity through a man (Muhammad) who is most distant from these virtues.”⁵⁰ Moreover, it is evident that God should send the man who most resembles him in “sanctity, innocence of life, wisdom, and other virtues...”⁵¹

Thirdly, some of the fundamental principles of Islam are traced back to the private preferences of the prophet or to the specific advantage of Arabs; they are essentially a universalization of private advantage or vice. As the Christian claims, the laws of Muhammad were not universal but suitable for the desires of Arabs.⁵² Thus, he sanctified by laws the practice of plundering for people living off it against the rules of non-violence understood not only by Christians but also by pagan philosophers.⁵³ Muhammad also allowed polygamy against what would have been “decorous and pious,” and thus justified a merely African custom to the detriment of what was truly good.⁵⁴ Indeed, the allowance of polygamy and the prohibition of wine are predicated on the moral imperfections of Muhammad – according to the Christian, Muhammad was more of a womanizer than a drinker.⁵⁵ Referring to the month of Ramadan, the Christian argues that Muhammad did not even understand the point of fasting, given the feasting that followed the nightly breaking of the fast.⁵⁶

Fourth, the Islamic treatment of happiness (*beatitudo*) is also seriously flawed, and the Christian claims that the promise Muhammad gave of eternal happiness is “more suitable for a pig than for a man.”⁵⁷ This is followed by a vivid and thoroughly satirical description of an Islamic afterlife, in which the focus is on the delight of the senses through drinking, eating and women. According to the Christian even the ideas of the philosopher Epicurus, traditionally villainized in

⁴⁸ Vives, DV, 270: “Non negant quidam nostrum, nequam & perditum hominem fuisse nostrum nuncium. Sed Deus eligit quos uult...”

⁴⁹ James D. Tracy, *Erasmus of the Low Countries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 105-106; M. W. F. Stone, “Conscience in Renaissance Moral Thought: A Concept in Transition,” *Renaissance Studies* 23, no. 4 (2009), 423-444.

⁵⁰ Vives, DV, 270: “Quale autem est, formulam recte uiuendi, pietatis, sanctitatis dare Deum hominibus per hominem ab illis uirtutibus alienissimum.”

⁵¹ Vives, DV, 269: “Quem ergo conuenit mitti a Deo, nisi qui Dei sit simillimus sanctitate, innocentia uitae, sapientia, & aliis uirtutibus...”

⁵² Vives, DV, 289: “Ipse uero eas tulit, quibus maxime gratificaretur desiderii eorum apud quos captabat principatum, nempe Arabum.”

⁵³ Vives, DV, 289: “Hominibus egenis, & rapto uiuere assuetis, rapinas permisit, & ultionem etiam lege sanxit.”

⁵⁴ Vives, DV, 289-290: “Multas uxores permisit, more Africae totius peruetere...”; “...decorum ac pium...”

⁵⁵ Vives, DV, 306 (the page is erroneously numbered, should be 296): “Sed Mahumetes mulierosus erat, non uinosus.”

⁵⁶ Vives, DV, 304-305 (the pages are erroneously numbered, should be 294-295).

⁵⁷ Vives, DV, 300: “Eam beatitudinem posuit, quae magis porco quam homini conuenit.”

Christian moral philosophy because of his reverence for pleasure, compares favorably to Muhammad's paradise, given that the hedonistic philosophy of the Greek thinker did not make any claims regarding the immortality of the soul. Ultimately, Muhammad's description of heavenly life is a reproduction of "a court of a great prince," a reference not to the lifestyle of a truly Christian prince but to the opulent courtly life Vives was very critical of throughout his life.⁵⁸

Throughout the dialogue Vives creates a dichotomy between Jesus and Muhammad that is a close reproduction of the dichotomy of the Christian prince and a tyrant found in the Erasmian tradition. As is well known, the idea of a Christian prince found in Erasmian thought is never separated from his ethical qualities represented in their purest form by Jesus Christ, an analogy often evoked by Vives.⁵⁹ In a number of texts Vives strongly underlines that a good prince listens to his people and serves as a patron of the arts who creates suitable conditions in which arts and sciences can flourish. Moreover, in his *De pacificatione* (1529) he referred back to the mirror-of-the-princes tradition of Seneca and Plato contrasting a good prince to a "warmonger."⁶⁰ Furthermore, a good prince bases his rule on persuasive love that makes the people around him flourish, not on fear and violence. A truly Christian prince should, moreover, remember that he is watched by everyone and, thus, he has to turn himself into a persuasive example of good conduct.⁶¹ His laws are not partial: they are not promulgated as an extension of private advantage nor for the specific expediency of one commonwealth but according to what is truly good.⁶² The glory and happiness a good prince is looking for is not based primarily on earthly rewards but on the prizes of Christian eternal life that does not appeal to the senses. All of this is predicated ultimately on the ethical nature of the prince: it is only through self-governance that a prince can free himself from disturbing passions, partake in wisdom and lead men successfully to the good life. Tyranny for its part is a negation of all this. The basic definition of tyranny is a rule based on private advantage, not common good.⁶³ Moreover, tyranny is a profoundly unethical condition, a submission to one's passions that then bursts out to

⁵⁸ Vives, DV, 302: "Nec mirum est eum talem finxisse beatitudinem, qui coelum facit aut aulam magni alicuius principis, in quo omnia gerantur more humanae conditionis."

⁵⁹ Vives, DP, 418: "Hoc vero non solum christiani scimus, qui exemplar principis ab aequitate Christi et divinae sapientiae ad homines deducimus..."

⁶⁰ Vives, DP, 440: "haec quidem christianus ad christianos dicat, nam etiamsi gentiles, vt Seneca, Plato, et alii, orationem haberent ad Principem plenam gravitatis, acuminis, ingenii, prudentiae, qua ostenderent quam parum inter bonum Principem et bellatorem conveniret, amatorem suae gentis, et patrem patriae et belli origine causa nutricula plurimum distat."

⁶¹ Vives, *Lodovicus Vives Henrico VIII regi Angliae inclito* (Brugge: Hubertus de Croock, 1526), fol. xiii. This letter, that bore the name *De regni administratione, bello, & pace* on the title page, was printed as part of a political compendium *De Europae dissidiis, & Republica*.

⁶² Vives, DD, 202.

⁶³ Vives, *Aurelii Augustini De Civitate Dei, Johannes Lodovicus Vives, Commentarii in XXII libros de civitate Dei* (Basel: Froben, 1522), 60.

one's actions and the civic realm at large. Thus, whereas a good monarch is a secular version of Jesus Christ, Muhammad is a spiritual equivalent of a secular tyrant.

But the analogy is more than an investigation into the qualities of the two prophets. It has legal and theological consequences in Vives's thought because it simultaneously points to a specific understanding of the legislator as partaking in Divine and Natural law. This lies at the very heart of Vives's own understanding of jurisprudence as it was presented in his youthful *Aedes legum* (1519), *Praefatio in leges Ciceronis* (1514) and the more mature *De disciplinis* (1531). In all of these texts Vives emphasized that the office of the legislator consisted essentially in translating universal precepts into positive law in the best possible manner. Moreover, the interpretation of that positive law had to be undertaken in the spirit of the virtue of fairness (*aequitas, epikeia*), the performance of which guaranteed that the interpretation of the law happened in the right spirit capturing the original intention of the lawgiver.⁶⁴ It was only through the practice of interpretation of law in the spirit of *epikeia* that one could guarantee that human law did not diverge from natural or divine law. Thus, in arguing against the ethical nature of Muhammad Vives is deliberately implying that the law cannot be interpreted fairly because it is flawed in the first place. An investigation of the nature of the lawgiver that is forbidden to Muslims according to the Christian would surface the twisted nature of the law itself. This is essentially what the Christian wants to point out. Thus, his point is more than ethical, it is profoundly theological for Vives: if the biblical hermeneutics of Erasmian humanism or other rational investigation were applied to the Quran, it would shed light on its fundamentally twisted nature as a reliable source of universal law.

Vives's presentation of Islam does not save it as a religion but aspires to saving the moral condition of individual practitioners of the Muslim faith. The focus on the prophet turns the attention to the origin of the error and away from the contemporary practitioners of Islam. They are victims of a hoax and error that has been inscribed into the laws of the tradition they are living in, not bad and vicious in themselves. One is, however, left with a rather ambivalent feeling since Alfaqinus is praised for exactly the qualities he fails to produce with respect to his own faith: acuteness of mind and certain learning with respect to things of life and nature. These are the reasons that, in the words of the Christian interlocutor, led him to undertake the dialogue in the first place.⁶⁵ Thus, the Muslim expert on law comes out as intelligent and learned enough to partake in a discussion but quite unable

⁶⁴ Vives, DD, 201-219; Vives: *Aedes legum*, in *Opuscula varia*, Juan Luis Vives (Louvain: Thierry Martens, 1519), 115-120 (118-120).

⁶⁵ Vives, DV, 263: "Si existimarem te hominem esse ingenio uel tardo uel iacenti, quales sunt plerique omnes uestrae sectae, uerbum unum dictis non adderem, ne tempus & operam inaniter consumerem."

to actually produce a significant intellectual defense of his own faith. Or more precisely, he has to be a man of acute mind in order for the dialogue to take place, but he cannot be acute and learned enough to play a symmetrical part in the dialogue because in that case he would have already spotted the imperfections of his own faith. The moment he reaches an understanding of all this he is already a Christian. The same point is explicitly made early in the dialogue with the Jew when the Christian cries out that if the Jew really understood the meaning of the Torah he was reading, he would be a Christian and ask to be baptized into the Catholic faith.⁶⁶

Possible audiences of *De veritate*

Despite Vives's explicit claim that Jews and Muslims were included in his potential audience, there are many elements that challenge this interpretation. As George has convincingly argued there are reasons to think that Vives's primary audience did not comprise members of other religious groups. George has shown that the tension between the idea that the dialogue is based on judgment and reason and the actual passionate, dramatic, and aggressive performance of the Christian in the dialogue can be understood if one interprets the dialogues as fictional performances inside the totality of *De veritate*. Thus, by evoking old stereotypes and by dramatizing some of them Vives is addressing a predominantly Christian audience in a deliberately passionate and creative form that gives him more persuasive freedom compared to the other chapters of *De veritate*. Some parts of the dialogue almost turn into a monologue of the Christian that allows Vives to instruct the audience in specific points of his own *philosophia Christi*. In other moments the dialogical form offers possibilities of dramatizing the message.⁶⁷ Some further remarks that Vives makes in his rhetorical work *De ratione dicendi* still support George's reading. For example, when Vives described situations in which the appearance of concord can deliberately be broken by a direct attack on one's opponent, he mentioned instances where one is not trying to persuade the other interlocutor but "those who are present."⁶⁸ As seen, direct and open attack breaking concord and mutual respect is one of the central features of the text, and it clearly contrasts with the dispassionate and didactic rhetoric found in Vives's pedagogical

⁶⁶ Vives, DV, 179: "Si eo usque perueneris, ut uere & quemadmodum decet intelligas, ilico eris Christianus, & baptismum petes, ut sis de grege Ecclesiae catholicae."

⁶⁷ George has emphasized that they are not, however, only masquerading monologues, George, "Rules of Engagement," 6.

⁶⁸ Vives, DR, 118: "licebit etiam aperte adhiberi artem contra aduersarium, si non tam illi persuadere quippiam contendis, ut iis, qui adsunt."

Linguae Latinae exercitatio (1538) meant for Christian schoolboys. Lastly, it is hard to imagine any real context for opening up an interreligious dialogue through a text printed posthumously in Basel.

There is, however, a real possibility that Vives's imagined Christian audience would have included converted Jews and Muslims as Marcia Colish has argued.⁶⁹ He himself was a member of a converted Jewish family from Valencia, one of the true hotspots of *conversos* and *moriscos* in the Iberian Peninsula.⁷⁰ Despite the fact that Vives resided in the Low Countries, he had gained a certain fame in Spain and he must have contemplated the possibility of a Spanish readership.⁷¹ George's claim of Vives deliberately distancing himself from Judaism in *De veritate* becomes even more important if one imagines a possible Hispanic reception of the work. There are some textual hints in the dialogues too that point at least partially to a Spanish context. The dialogue on Islam is not focused on Turks at all like Vives's 1520s engagement with Islam and he indeed makes references to the Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula.⁷² Furthermore, the name of the representative of Islam, Alfaquinus, has a distinctive place in the *morisco* culture of the time not only as a legal scholar but as a learned guide on a range of matters in local *morisco* communities.⁷³ Read in this light as an exhortation to the Christian faith of those inside Christendom, the dialogues appear as something more than fictional fabrications. With regards to both *conversos* and *moriscos* this is a crucial phase: all Jews had been forced to convert in 1492 and the same happened to the Muslim population in the Crowns of Aragón and Castile in the mid-1520s. As is well-known, this is exactly the moment when the breakdown of a dialogue between Christians and Muslims or *moriscos* takes place.⁷⁴ In the context of the religious strife and debate of the 1520s, 1530s, and 1540s the dialogues seem to do many things. Their at times aggressive tone guarantees that they cannot be interpreted as sympathetic towards Jews and Muslims. Taking into consideration Vives's family history, this might be a way of protecting himself and his family against possible persecution on the part of the Inquisition, especially in the case of the dialogue with the Jew, where Vives elaborates on their hatred. Simultaneously, however, the dialogues present a model where persuasion appears as the right way to direct heretics back to the Christian flock.

⁶⁹ Colish, "Juan Luis Vives on the Turks," 175.

⁷⁰ For Valencia, see Teofilo F. Ruiz, *Spanish Society 1400-1600* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 63-64, 102.

⁷¹ González González, *Una república de lectores*, 143-144.

⁷² Vives, DV, 288.

⁷³ L.P Harvey, *Muslims in Spain, 1500 to 1614* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 91-92, 120-121. The term had been used in earlier polemics as well, see Thomas E. Burman, *Religious Polemic and the Intellectual History of the Mozarabs, c. 1050-1200* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 38. The meaning of Alfaquinus was explained already by Mayans, see Gregorio Mayans y Siscar, "Vita Vivis," in *Joannis Ludovici Vivis Valentini Opera omnia, tomus 1*, ed. Gregorio Mayans y Siscar (Valencia: Benedict Monfort, 1782), 2-219 (166).

⁷⁴ Harvey, *Muslims*, 102-110.

The model of the interreligious dialogue they paint can be situated I believe in the Erasmian tradition of tolerating religious error in order to overcome it. Whether the rhetorical choices are seen from the vantage point of a Christian, Muslim, or Jewish audience, they reveal an asymmetrical and passionate mode of dialogue that does not draw from the tradition of conversation (*sermo*) among equals. It is doubtful whether the ideal of symmetrical dialogue would have been a conceptual possibility in the first place. For Vives the truths of religion and the truths of philosophy are one. There is no possible separation between the two. Christ is fundamentally the incarnation of truth, a truth that is universal and should be accepted by anyone capable of judging correctly about things. It is true that even in *De veritate* Vives claims that all religions partake in truth in different forms and that he often endorsed the possibilities of natural light to reach truths in the case of pagan philosophers.⁷⁵ But the results of the reasoning following from this natural light can never be in any tension with Christian truth, even if the doctrinal core of Christian faith is reduced by a relatively broad category of *adiaphora* within which difference of opinion among the wise is granted. However, whereas with the Jew the tradition based on actual sacred texts and prophets can be interpreted correctly and brought to a union with Christianity, *De veritate* does not leave a lot of room for the truth claims of Islam. In choosing to picture Islam as an initial fraud of Muhammad that conditions the whole religion, the only conceivable dialogue is that between a teacher and a pupil through which the pupil comes to understand his own error. Thus, the model Vives is offering in his *De veritate* can be read as an exercise in interreligious dialogue following the model of toleration of error. The Christian tolerates the Muslim and the Jew adopting them to the sphere of rationality but only in order to overcome their resistance through the persuasive use of words.

⁷⁵ See for instance Vives's treatment of happiness in *De disciplinis* where the natural light of Stoics and Platonics is praised, Vives, DD, 192.