

Alberto Saviello

## Between *Convivencia* and *Reconquista*

### The Prophet Muhammad as Arabian Knight in a Spanish Qur'an Translation of 1872<sup>1</sup>

*El Coran ó Biblia mahometana, seguido de la biografía de Mahoma*, edited in 1872 by Juan Aleu y Fugarull in Barcelona, is an exceptional piece for the study of the Spanish perception of the Prophet Muhammad and Islam in the nineteenth century. This is for two main reasons: firstly, the book counts among the earliest modern Qur'an translations published in Spain, and secondly, its sixteen full-page wood-engravings make it the most lavishly illustrated Qur'an ever printed in Europe until that time. The images by various artists which are included in the holy book, and the biography of Muhammad appended to the Qur'anic text not only create vivid visual representations of the mythical deeds in the genealogy of the Prophets and of conceptions of the Muslim afterlife contained in the text, but also facilitate the direct comparison of the major prophetic figures representative of all three of the so-called "religions of the book" through the inclusion of full-size portraits of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad respectively.

The article aims to contextualize Juan Aleu's edition within the Western European, and especially Spanish, discourse regarding Islam and its Prophet. In order to appropriately interpret the image of Muhammad constructed in this publication, particular attention must be given to the specific Spanish notion of its own history and its concern with Islam, which proves to be particularly complex and multifarious. The scholarly discussion of Iberian history and thus of Spain's national and cultural roots was mainly coined by dichotomous concepts:<sup>2</sup> on one side by

---

<sup>1</sup> I'm greatly indebted to Avinoam Shalem, Christiane Gruber, Michelina di Cesare, Heather Coffey and Julia Ann Schmidt for sharing their immense knowledge with me and for supporting me in many ways in writing this article. Especially, I have to thank Heather Coffey, who also corrected the English version of the article.

<sup>2</sup> The scholarly discussion about the role of the Iberian Muslim past for the Spanish national identity goes back to the eighteenth century. Cf. Juan Vernet Ginés, *Die spanisch-arabische Kultur in Orient und Okzident* (Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1984), 30–50, 290–293. Its most prominent case in modern historiography was the dispute between two Spanish intellectuals in the 1950s, the philologist Américo Castro and the historian Claudio Sánchez Albornoz. While Castro claimed that the Spanish culture arose as a product of *Convivencia*, being a mixture of the different Iberian cultures, Sánchez Albornoz was convinced of the continuity of a pure Christian Spanish tradition. On this discussion, which itself became part of scholarly history, see José L. Gómez-Martínez, *Américo Castro y el origen de los españoles: historia de una polémica*, (Madrid: Ed. Gredos, 1975) and Walther L. Bernecker, *Religion in Spanien, Darstellung und Daten zu Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1995), 49–55.