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# TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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## THE QUR'ĀN AND ITS WORLD: VIII/1. *CONTRA LEGEM SARACENORUM*: THE QUR'ĀN IN WESTERN EUROPE

The Qur'ān is a text which occupies the central place in a religious-philosophical system which has for fourteen centuries played an important role in human history. From the moment of its appearance, it was, in essence, interpreted and studied primarily in the context of competing political-ideological and confessional interests and in conditions of a centuries-long confrontation between the Christian world and the world of Islam.

The ideological necessity of study of the Qur'ān was a constant condition both in the choice of approaches to the sacred book of Islam and in its interpretation. Up through the present, the religious affiliation of the author of this or that study has influenced in the most direct fashion his

evaluation of the Qur'ān as a historical-cultural document. Past centuries have seen mankind endure a multitude of ideological shifts and cultural revolutions, mass political and religious movements have followed one after the other, philosophical conceptions and schools have become popular only to be forgotten, cultural orientations and priorities have changed. In one fashion or another, all of this found its expression in shifting approaches to the Qur'ān. To a great extent, the basic stages in the history of the study of the Qur'ān in Europe, the evolution of methodologies for studying and understanding this text, have been reflected in the history of its publication and translation.

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By the second half of the seventh and eighth centuries, Islam had already started to become an inalienable part of the histories of Western Europe — Spain, the Mediterranean islands — as well as the Balkans and Eastern Europe (Khazaria, the Bulghārian kingdom, part of the lands of the Golden Horde, the Northern Black Sea, the Crimea, the Northern Caucasus). Available facts allow one to speak of the practically simultaneous emergence of two traditions of Qur'ānic study — inter- and extra-Islamic. The success of the Arab conquests, effected beneath the banner of Islam, forced Christian authors to turn to the sacred book of the Muslims, which was seen as the main source for information about Islam as a whole. Christian polemicists at the time of the conquests included in their works what information they possessed about the Qur'ān, as well as translations of genuine citations or expositions of fabricated citations [1]. John of Damascus (d. 750), who lived in Syria and until his acceptance of vows served the Umayyad Caliphs, left the first polemic work against Islam to have reached us. As a result of the moderate policies pursued by the Umayyads in relation to the “people of the Book” and his belief in the profound superiority of Christianity to the religion of the barbarian-conquerors, the polemic written by John of Damascus does not yet display a strident political-religious orientation. Considering Islam a heresy, he disputed the theoretical “delusions” of Muslims [2], who in

turn proclaimed the Christian Bible “altered and deprived” after the revelation of the Qur'ān. At the same time, representatives of conquered peoples who had been converted to Islam introduced their own scholarly traditions into the study and interpretation of the Qur'ān. The research of John Wansbrough has convincingly demonstrated once again the frequently decisive influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition on the emergence of Muslim exegesis, although his conclusion that the Qur'ān and early-Muslim *sīra-maghāzī* literature represent two versions of a Judeo-Christian polemic, adapted to the Arabic language and Hījāz environment [3], cannot of course be accepted [4].

Modern research has shown that a Greek translation of the Qur'ān existed in Byzantium in the tenth century; the earliest date for its probable appearance is the beginning of the ninth century. An analysis of extant Qur'ānic citations in the works of Byzantine polemicists allows one to assume that the translator of the Qur'ān into Greek was, in all likelihood, a bilingual individual of Arab descent from the Latin areas of the Empire [5]. Later, anti-Muslim treatises by Syrian polemicists, for example, the Jacobite bishop Dionysius bar Šalībī (d. 1171), included genuine or imagined fragments of the Qur'ān in Syriac translation [6].

Also, the significant number of extant manuscripts of Jewish-Arab theological works, fragments of Qur'ānic manuscripts in Hebrew writing, and Jewish polemical works