The Logic of Medieval Christian Polemics: Muhammad, Women, and the Boundaries of Reason

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Abstract

This thesis examines how medieval Christian authors used polemics to define the boundaries of reason, revelation, and epistemic authority. Focusing on representations of the figure of Muhammad (d. 632 CE) and women, this thesis argues that medieval Christianity constructed its rational and theological identity through structural acts of exclusion. Polemics did not merely express hostility toward religious or gendered others. They were a rationalised method for determining who could know, whose testimony was valid, and what forms of knowledge were legitimate in the Christian epistemic framework.

Representations of Muhammad as a false prophet, heresiarch, or antichrist functioned not only as labels but as epistemic arguments used to deny the credibility of the Muslim revelation. Narrative distortions, pseudo-biographies, and accusations of contradiction allowed Christians to position Islam as a system incapable of producing true knowledge. Muhammad became the external other of reason whose exclusion made Christian rationality appear self-evident and coherent.

Women, by contrast, were positioned as the internal other. Through appeals to Genesis, Aristotelian biology, scholastic psychology, and the regulation of female prophecy, women were depicted as governed by the senses, prone to deception, and epistemically unreliable. Their speech required male validation, and their claims to divine illumination could only be recognised when framed in terms of their weakness and submission. This internal boundary stabilises the authority of Christian male reason.

The following study will conclude that medieval Christian rationality was produced through exclusion. Polemics function as a form of epistemic governance. They became a rational tool that established the Christian male subject as the only legitimate knower, defined against the negation of Muslims and women.

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Introduction

From the polemics of medieval theologians onwards, Western thought has defined itself through exclusion. Reason and revelation were shaped by defining truth, but also by determining who could grasp it. Throughout Western theological and philosophical traditions, dominated by Christianity, Islam and women were recurrently positioned as epistemic others. Islam was framed as a counterfeit religion grounded in false and unverified sources of knowledge. Women were depicted as beings governed by beauty, emotion, and bodily desire rather than intellect. These portrayals established the boundaries of the realm of knowledge in the West, causing mainly Christian males to have authority over it.

These exclusions were not accidental. They served the Western self-understanding, reinforcing the image of a rational, authoritative Christian knower against those deemed irrational. Western rationality is a tradition that is recurrently in contrast with its internal and external others. Polemical writings are a philosophical tool used to uphold this tradition.

Theoretical Framework: Prophecy, Revelation, and the Role of Reason

During the Middle Ages in the West, reason was conceived as a faculty endowed in human beings by God, by which humans could apprehend nature and its divine truths. Reason had its limits, however, and was severely subordinate to revelation. Reason could not inquire into ultimate truths but could only demonstrate the truth of the knowledge God had revealed to us in the form of revelation and the external world.[1] Revelation disclosed the highest knowledge of God. It is the divine disclosure of truths that are inaccessible to human reason alone. Revelation is brought down to us directly from God through Scripture, Christ, and prophecy.

Medieval Christian theology developed a comprehensive system for classifying prophecy and revelation, seeking to reconcile divine communication with human reason. 'Prophecy' in medieval Christianity had multiple meanings. Prophecy entailed revealing what God had hidden from ordinary

[1] Edward Grant, *God and Reason in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 13.

reason. It was an act of interpretive insight into divine providence. Prophecy could include speaking for God, praising God, predicting future events, and teaching knowledge of God. During the Middle Ages, 'prophecy' and 'inspiration' were interchangeably used to describe the mode by which God communicated prophetic knowledge to a prophet. This was the inner illumination through which divine truths were revealed.[2] To safeguard this knowledge from error and impostors, theologians sought to determine how revelation could be recognised as true and not the product of deception, imagination, or demonic influence. Proof of prophecy became central to Christian epistemology. True prophecy was to be judged by its rational coherence, its harmony with Scripture, testimony, and its confirmation through miracles. These are signs that confirm divine rather than human origin.

In his work *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine,* R.A. Markus gives a thorough account of St. Augustine's view on prophecy. Augustine holds that the seeing of images and visions inspired by God does not by itself constitute prophecy. The activity of understanding must accompany this, since the prophet needs to be able to interpret the images endowed to him by God.[3] The vision of human beings can therefore be distinguished into three types according to Augustine: corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual. The corporeal vision is merely the activity of the eyes when we see. When applying our spiritual vision to this, we become aware of what we see. This not only happens in bodily perception, but also in dreams, imaginations, and hallucinations. The third kind of vision is the intellectual sight, which interprets, judges, and corrects the material brought about by the previous kinds of sight.[4]

The latter vision is of great importance for prophets, for when they are endowed with images of knowledge by God, they must be able to have insight into the meaning of that experience. Without the ability to understand and judge these prophetic visions, a prophet is unable to convey his revelation to others.[5] Prophetic insight is always achieved with divine assistance, referred to by Augustine as prophetic

[2] Brian FitzGerald, *Inspiration and Authority in the Middle Ages: Prophets and Their Critics from Scholasticism to Humanism*, First edition, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford University Press, 2017), 2-3.
[3] R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 13.
[4] Markus, *Saeculum*, 193.
[5] Markus, *Saeculum*, 193-194.

divine illumination. This is what separates divine wisdom as revelation from ordinary human reason.[6] Regular human reason has a form of constant divine illumination, since humans were endowed with rationality by God. True prophecy occurs when the intellect, specifically illuminated further by God, can interpret divine signs. Some prophets have a more illuminated intellect than others, causing them to be able to interpret divine signs better than others.

In Augustine's account, divine illumination refers to the idea that the human mind attains eternal truths only because God, who is Truth itself, inwardly enlightens the intellect, allowing it to perceive the divine directly.[7] He does not mean that God directly whispers into our minds, but rather makes a philosophical claim here. Human reason cannot arrive at universal, eternal truths on its own. The human mind is fallible, so it cannot be the source of ultimate truths. Therefore, Augustine argues that when we grasp an eternal truth, our mind is actively endowed with divine light.

Thomas Aquinas builds his theory of prophecy further on that of Augustine. For Aquinas, a prophet is the teacher of the ordinary believer, and God is the teacher of the prophet.[8] Prophecy to him is knowledge imparted to an individual, where God communicates truths that exceed the capacity of human reason.[9] He argues this through both Aristotelian epistemology and Augustine's theory of illumination.[10] Prophecy, to Aquinas, is not merely an ecstatic inspiration but a moment of knowing and clarity. But it cannot be conceived through the human intellect, in which knowledge arises through the senses and reasoning. Prophetic knowledge needs participation from the illumination of God, and it concerns truths that surpass human cognition, such as divine mysteries and visions of the future.[11] Prophecy is, therefore, a strengthening of the natural powers of the human intellect by means of divine illumination and helps the prophet to come to know truths that ordinary human reason cannot achieve.[12] This is a continuation of Augustine's theory of divine illumination.

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[6] Markus, *Saeculum*, 194.
[7] Timothy Noone, "Divine Illumination," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Robert Pasnau and Christina Van Dyke (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 370-372.
[8] Anna Bonta Moreland, *Muhammad Reconsidered: A Christian Perspective on Islamic Prophecy* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 43.
[9] Moreland, *Muhammad Reconsidered*, 49.
[10] Moreland, *Muhammad Reconsidered*, 58.
[11] Moreland, *Muhammad Reconsidered*, 54-55
[12] Robert J. Dobie, *Thinking Through Revelation: Islamic, Jewish, and Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 252.

The prophetic experience is a temporary occurrence for Aquinas, and it involves two components: reception and judgement. In defining reception, Aquinas draws on Augustine when he explains that there are three modes of reception, which correspond to the levels of human vision or cognition. These are corporeal reception, imaginative reception, derived from spiritual vision, and intellectual reception. To this, Aquinas adds the component of judgment. Judgment here is the prophet's interpretation of what has been revealed. For Aquinas, perfection of prophecy does not lie in visionary experience, but in the mind's ability to judge the truth of the divine communication.[13] Prophecy is neither irrational ecstasy through divine inspiration nor is it a passive possession. It is rather an act of knowing, where reason is illuminated by God and interpreted by the receiver. After receiving and understanding a revelation through divine illumination, the mind of the prophet is strengthened, after which the prophet can pass what he learned through his revelation on to others.[14] Prophecy cannot be proven through simple rational demonstration but needs to be confirmed by miracles.[15]

This medieval framework of prophecy reveals that reason and revelation were conceived of as hierarchically ordered forms of knowledge, rather than opposing forms. For Augustine and Aquinas, revelation perfects reason. It does not abolish rationality, but it elevates it through divine illumination. Human reason is bound to the natural order of the world and can reach ultimate truths only through the intervention of God. Yet this synthesis also imposes limits. Since divine illumination is granted only within the boundaries of Christian faith, reason's fulfilment depends on a theological framework. Rationality here is defined in Christian terms because Christian revelation perfects reason. Prophecy, knowledge, and rational inquiry are tied to the Christian God as their source and ultimate truth. This understanding shows that the relation between reason and revelation and the understanding of them is exclusionary. Reason and revelation are exclusively defined within a Christian context. It is this fusion of epistemology and faith that will later inform Christian judgments of Islam as an epistemic other. This hierarchy between reason and revelation provided the conceptual framework through which medieval Christian thinkers articulated the limits of true knowledge.

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[13] Moreland, *Muhammad Reconsidered*, 57-58.
[14] Dobie, *Thinking Through Revelation*, 253.
[15] Moreland, *Muhammad Reconsidered*, 49-51.

If rationality, revelation, and prophecy were only attainable within the Christian sphere, those outside it were positioned as incapable of genuine knowledge. Islam emerged as an exemplary case of false revelation. The figure of Muhammad, often portrayed as a false prophet or imposter, became the mirror through which Christian authors defined the boundaries of true revelation and knowledge. Muhammad's teachings were framed as derivative or deceitful, and his followers as governed by passion rather than reason. These portrayals not only expressed hostility towards Islam but also served a philosophical purpose. By setting Muhammad up to be the exemplary figure of corrupted religion, medieval authors created epistemic boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate prophecy and rational and irrational revelation. Muhammad and Islam functioned as the external other of the Christian epistemological system.

Muslims, however, were not the only group positioned outside the realm of reason, revelation, and prophecy. Women, too, were systematically excluded from rational and prophetic authority. They were excluded as internal others whose nature was seen as incompatible with rational and inspired knowledge. Medieval theologians described women as beings of passion, emotions, and sensory weaknesses, which caused them to naturally lack the intellectual stability required for true prophecy. These views on women were derived from Scripture and Aristotelian natural philosophy and biology. Prophecy presupposed an elevation of the intellect by divine illumination, but women lacked this intellect entirely in the eyes of their male contemporaries. Even accepted female visionaries such as Hildegard von Bingen only gained acceptance through emphasising the internalised stereotypes of her own sex. She presented herself as weak, unlearned, and dependent on male supervisors, causing her revelations to be accepted without destabilising the gendered order of knowledge.[16] Gender was foundational for medieval epistemology. The boundaries of reason were created through the female body.

The following chapters explore the dynamics between Christianity and its engagements with Others through polemical writings. Chapter one analyses medieval Christian polemics against

[16] Frances C. Kneupper, *Prophecy and the Battle for Spiritual Authority, 1360-1400: Outsiders, Women, and Reformers* (Oxford University Press, 2025), 57.

Muhammad and Islam, showing how depictions of Muslims as epistemically deficient served to create boundaries of legitimate knowledge. Chapter two turns to the subordination of women in theological and philosophical writings, tracing how gendered hierarchies were justified through claims about women's incapacity for reason, authority, and intellectual agency. Chapter three draws these together by reconstructing a philosophy of polemics and exclusion used by Christian theologians during the Middle Ages. This chapter will demonstrate how the demarcation of boundaries of reason and revelation contributed to the identity formation of masculine Christian thought, portraying it as uniquely rational and authoritative.

Chapter 1

Depictions of Muhammad and the Epistemic Exclusion of Islam

The epistemological hierarchy established between reason and revelation in medieval Christian thought provided the framework for interpreting and judging non-Christian forms of knowledge. Within this framework, Islam was positioned as a distorted imitation of revelation and an instance of false prophecy that claimed divine authority without the divine illumination of which the Christians spoke. Central to this was the portrayal of the figure of Muhammad, who became the embodiment of prophetic error and deception. It is important to note that throughout this study, *Muhammad* does not refer to the historical individual, but rather the imagined figure of Muhammad that emerged in the writings of non-Muslim authors.[17] This is the case because, as we will learn throughout this study, polemicists used unreliable sources when writing about Muhammad. It is difficult to say whether they did so deliberately, but one can suggest that they did. Polemicists wrote about Muhammad and Islam because they were threats to them. Not only were Christians afraid of conversion to Islam, but they also believed that anyone who would come forward as a prophet after Christ to be a pseudo-prophet with deceitful intentions.[18] This figure of Muhammad functioned as a theological and philosophical tool through which Christian writers defined the boundaries of truth, reason, and legitimate revelation and prophecy. By examining depictions of Muhammad and his followers, we can see how medieval Christian authors used the figure of Muhammad to articulate their claims about divine authority, epistemic order, and the exclusivity of Christian rationality.

[17] This methodological distinction follows John V. Tolan's approach in treating *Muhammad* as a constructed figure within Christian and Western discourse rather than as the historical individual in his book *Faces of Muhammad*. See John V. Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 3.

[18] Michelina Di Cesare, *The Psuedo-Historical Image of the Prophet Muhammad in Medieval Latin Literature: A Repertory* (De Gruyter, 2016), 2.

Medieval Polemical Depictions of Muhammad

In Christian polemical writings about Muhammad, he is called various names: false prophet, trickster or imposter, heresiarch, the antichrist, and many others within these categories. Each of these designations expresses a particular strategy for denying the legitimacy of Islamic revelation and for defining the limits of rational and divine knowledge. Most writers discussed in this chapter use more than one of these polemical titles simultaneously. Certain authors will therefore appear under more than one polemical name of Muhammad. In the following section, these various depictions will be examined not only as rhetorical or theological attacks but as epistemic tools. These depictions served as a means for Christian thinkers to define who could speak with divine authority and who could not.

This analysis will draw on a range of medieval authors and genres, from early theologians and apologists such as John of Damascus and Peter the Venerable to scholastic writers like Thomas Aquinas and Riccoldo da Montecroce, to chroniclers like Laurent de Premierfait, and Christian reformers like Martin Luther, using both translations of their works, which are sometimes fully included in secondary sources, and relevant secondary literature. Together, they reveal how the Christian imagination of Muhammad became a tool for defining reason itself, through the authenticity of prophecy and revelation. These imaginations of Muhammad expose the epistemic framework through which medieval Christianity defined true and false knowledge. By depicting Muhammad's prophecy as a series of sensory deceptions, Christian polemicists transformed magic and fraud into categories of epistemic failure. What appeared miraculous to the unlearned was, in their view, mere illusion: a corruption of perception that deceived the senses but could not persuade reason.

Trickster: myths about Muhammad

At the foundation of medieval polemics about Muhammad lie certain myths about him that circulated among Christian authors for centuries. One of the most comprehensive accounts of these myths was compiled by Laurent de Premierfait, who portrayed Muhammad as a false, lying prophet and

magician.[19] The most prominent myths of Muhammad were those directed at him faking miracles, since he was unable to truly perform them, as he deemed himself a prophet without having received divine illumination and prophecy from God. According to Laurent de Premierfait, Muhammad was at some point joined by an exiled priest or monk, a myth we will dissect thoroughly later in this section, who helped him think of his tricks. Laurent de Premierfait's influential work was based on crusade chronicles by Guibert de Nogent.[20] As John V. Tolan summarises, "On the advice of this priest, [Muhammad] trained a dove to eat grains of wheat out of this ear; when the astounded people saw the dove landing on his shoulder and putting his beak in the false prophet's ear, he explained to them this was the holy spirit coming to speak to him as he had to John the Baptist. Through this trick, he hoodwinked "simple, rustic people" who flocked to him in great numbers."[21]

Another of these tricks through which Muhammad faked his miracles, according to Laurent de Premierfait, was the coming of the Qur'an to the prophet by a bull. Together with the monk, Muhammad wrote the Qur'an and then placed the book on the horns of a bull that they trained to come to Muhammad. One day, as Muhammad was preaching his word to the people, the bull appeared with the book, causing the listeners to believe the bull was a divine messenger bringing the word of God to Muhammad.[22]

The myth that proved prominently of Muhammad's false prophecy was that of Muhammad's death. The author of the *Risalat al-Kindi* (*Apology of Al-Kindi*) wrote that Muhammad proclaimed to his followers that he must not be buried, because angels will come to take him up to heaven, proving his divine nature. His disciples followed these instructions, but "after they had waited for three days, his odour changed, and their hopes of his being taken up to heaven disappeared. Disappointed by his illusory promises and realising he had lied, they buried him."[23] According to Laurent de Premierfait, Muhammad's rotting corpse was put inside an iron casket and hung by the ceiling in the temple of Mecca using magnets.[24] This was repeated well into the early modern ages by, for example, John

[19] Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 44.
[20] Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 48.
[21] Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad,* 45.
[22] Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 47.
[23] Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 57.
[24] Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 46.

Lydgate.[25] Laurent de Premierfait, as well as Riccoldo da Montecroce, heavily emphasised the supposed epilepsy of Muhammad as punishment from God for his pretending to be a prophet in their mythical biographies of him.[26] However, Muhammad took this to his advantage by saying he fell because an angel spoke to him and he was struck by revelation.[27]

Many Christians emphasised that Muhammad knew the Old and the New Testament, because he worked together with a priest or monk. This was mentioned by Laurent de Premierfait, as we have seen, and it stems from a larger myth that has Arabic roots. The exiled Christian monk was named Sergius by some, and Bahira by others. The latter became the name most associated with this monk. This myth became the basis for apocalyptic visions of Muhammad, which say that nothing is original about the teachings of Muhammad, and that they are based on and oppose the Christian teachings he learned from the monk Bahira.[28]

In this legendary story, Bahira himself tells the story of how he met a group of Arabs, whom he told the story of Abraham and Ishmael, after which Muhammad came forward, and Bahira and Muhammad decided together that he must be the new prophet of the Arabs.[29] And so Bahira tells Muhammad of the prophets before him and about the Old and the New Testament, and the oneness of God.[30] The legend then describes how Bahira and Muhammad changed the Christian doctrine into the Qur'anic law, to conform to the limited rationality of the Arabs, and so that they would be convinced more easily of the prophecy of Muhammad.[31] Christian writers repeatedly invoked this legend to argue that Muhammad's teachings were a distorted imitation of Christianity rather than a genuine revelation. By portraying him as a pupil of a heretical monk rather than a divinely inspired prophet, these polemicists reinforced the idea that Islam was a derivative faith and a deception that mimics prophecy while stripping it of its divine truth.

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[25] Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 68.
[26] Maciej Dawczyk, "The Image of Muhammad in Riccoldo Da Monte Di Croce's 'Contra Legem Sarracenorum,'" *Studia Ceranea* 9 (December 2019): 396; Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 46.
[27] Dawczyk, "The Image of Muhammad in Riccoldo Da Monte Di Croce's 'Contra Legem Sarracenorum,'" 396.
[28] Richard J. H. Gottheil, *A Christian Bahira Legend* (Gorgias Press, 2012), 189.
[29] Gottheil, *A Christian Bahira Legend*, 131-133.
[30] Gottheil, *A Christian Bahira Legend*, 134-136.
[31] Gottheil, *A Christian Bahira Legend*, 142-145.

These myths about Muhammad expose the epistemic framework through which medieval Christianity defined true and false knowledge. By depicting Muhammad's prophecy as a series of sensory deceptions, Christian polemicists transformed magic and fraud into categories of epistemic failure. What appeared miraculous to the unlearned was, in their view, mere illusion: a corruption of perception that deceived the senses but could not persuade those who are rational thinkers.

False prophet and heresiarch

The figure of Muhammad as a false prophet, the deceiver who imitates divine revelation, serves as the starting point for tracing how medieval Christian writers defined the boundaries between true and false prophecy. One of the earliest polemical works directed at Muhammad was that of Christian priest John of Damascus, who wrote *De haeresibus,* which was a part of his larger work called *Fount of Knowledge*, written around 743 AD.[32] *De haeresibus* included all errors that 'good' Christians should avoid and discussed the major groups of Barbarism, Scythism, Judaism, and Hellenism. John of Damascus clearly does not mean internal Christian heresy, as the term heresy suggests. Rather, the term signifies all forms of erroneous belief or false doctrines.[33] In Daniel J. Sahas' book *John of Damascus on Islam*, an English translation of chapters 100/101 of *De Haeresibus* is included. These last chapters introduce Islam and present the view of John of Damascus on Muhammad and the emergence of his beliefs. He begins the chapter by shortly describing the pre-Islamic idolatry of the Arabs and then the forthcoming of Muhammad.

> *[...], therefore, until the times of Heraclius, they were, undoubtedly, idolaters. From that time on,* a false prophet *appeared among them, surnamed Muhammad, who, having casually been exposed to the Old and the New Testament, and supposedly encountered an Arian monk, formed a heresy of his own. [...] he spread rumours that a scripture was brought down to him from heaven.*[34]

[32] Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Gorgias Press, 2019), 376.
[33] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 378.
[34] Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Brill, 1972), 133.

The first argument here is one we have seen before: the knowledge of Muhammad on the Old and New Testaments, derived from the myth of Muhammad's encounter with the monk Bahira. According to John of Damascus, Muhammad was influenced by earlier Christian sources, which is proved by the sections of the Qur'an that directly respond to Christian doctrine, such as the belief that Jesus Christ was a human prophet, rather than the son of God. It can be assumed that John of Damascus had knowledge of the Qur'an and could decipher those parts in it that were based on, although opposite to, Christianity.[35]

In the same section of chapter 100 of *De Haeresibus*, John of Damascus directly claims that the Qur'an contains the absurdities of Muhammad and begins to challenge the legitimacy of his prophecy by asking: "And which is the one who gives witness, that God has given to him the scriptures? And which of the prophets foretold that such a prophet would arise?"[36] In response to the first question, John contrasts Moses, who received the Law publicly before all the people, with Muhammad, who received his revelations privately in his sleep.[37] He argues that because Muhammad has not provided any testimony to confirm that his revelations came from God, he cannot substantiate his claim to prophecy. For Christians, testimony is one standard proof of prophetic authority, and another is the foretelling of a future prophet. Since no prior prophet is recorded to have predicted Muhammad's arrival, John concludes that Muhammad's self-proclaimed prophecy cannot be considered authentic.

Peter the Venerable, the abbot of the Benedictine abbey of Cluny, wrote his work on Islam titled the *Summa totius haeresis ac diabolice secte Sarracenorum* as part of the larger project of the *Corpus Cluniacense,* which was published around 1142. The larger aim of the project was to create a reliable background for the refutation of Islam.[38] Peter the Venerable rejected the prophethood of Islam, similarly to John of Damascus, by saying Muhammad used earlier sources to come up with the heretical content of the Qur'an.[39]

[35] Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 381; Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 74.
[36] Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 135.
[37] Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 135.
[38] Di Cesare, *The Psuedo-Historical Image of the Prophet Muhammad in Medieval Latin Literature*, 83.
[39] James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton University Press, 1964), 129.

And since he had heard that the prophets of God were great men, saying he was His prophet to make the feint of some good, he tried to lead them bit by bit from idolatry: not, however, to the true God, but to the error of his own heresy, which he had now begun to bring to fruition.[40]

[...] thus Muhammad, instructed by the best Jewish and heretical doctors, produced his Koran and wove together, in that barbarous fashion of his, a diabolical scripture, put together both from the Jewish fables and trifling songs of heretics. Lying that this collection was brought to him chapter by chapter by Gabriel, whose name he already knew from sacred scripture.[41]

Since, at the persuasion of the aforesaid monk and the aforementioned Jews, [Muhammad] himself left idolatry completely and also persuaded whomever he could that it must be abandoned, and since he taught that one God was to be worshipped, he seemed to say unheard of things to the simple and instructed men. And because this preaching accorded with their reason, he was first believed by them to be a prophet of God. [...] Thus mingling good things with evil things, mixing truth in with falsity, he sowed the seed of error.[42]

Like John, Peter the Venerable interprets Muhammad's authority as derivative. His revelation is constructed from fragments of Christian and Jewish teaching rather than his own divine illumination. Peter's account shows a more epistemological critique: Islam is not only a theological error but also an intellectual deception and a distortion of reason itself. In portraying Muhammad as simultaneously rational enough to fake revelation and deluded enough to believe in it, Peter positions Islam between reason and irrationality. He reaffirms the Christian claim of access to true prophecy, while defining Islam as a religion that mimics revelation without possessing truth, and Muhammad as a heresiarch.

In his work, Peter the Venerable even faces the objection some may raise against calling Islam a heresy, as it is not a religion directly derived from the church. He acknowledges that the definition of heresy is that it must be internal to Christianity. But he writes, in Islam, they have taken certain parts from Christianity while rejecting others, and they do the same with their pre-Islamic pagan beliefs.

Choose, therefore, whichever you prefer: either call [the Moslems] heretics on account of the heretical opinion by which they agree with the Church in part and disagree in part, or call them pagans on account of the surpassing wickedness by which they subdue every heresy of error in evil profession."[43]

[40] Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 127.
[41] Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 139.
[42] Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 139.
[43] Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 144.

For Peter the Venerable, it does not matter which you choose. The implications of the Islamic belief and the prophecy of Muhammad would remain the same.

In 1288, Riccoldo da Montecroce left Italy to preach the Christian faith in the East. While there, he studied Arabic and became acquainted with Islam, after which he wrote his works *Letters on the Success of the Saracens at the Present and the Dispossession of Christians* and later *Against the Law of the Saracens* between 1291 and 1300. In contrast to the earlier polemicists discussed, Riccoldo wrote from direct engagement with Islamic sources acquired through his studies in the East. The figure of Muhammad is under clear attack in his work. Muhammad is presented as a tyrant promoted to prophet. In the letters, Riccoldo writes in disbelief how God gave Muhammad triumphant success even though he denies the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ and murdered Christians.[44] In his *Against the Law of the Saracens*, Riccoldo explains arguments against the divine nature of Islam and refutes Qur'anic verses. Muhammad is presented here as the last and most notorious heresiarch in the history of Christianity.[45] Riccoldo writes that the Qur'an is confusing, contradictory, unorganised, violent, and irrational.[46]

Riccoldo also puts emphasis once again on how the prophecy of Muhammad was not announced by previous prophets. He instead writes how previous prophets have warned against the forthcoming of false prophets. Repeating other polemical writings, Riccoldo further evidences the false prophecy of Muhammad by claiming Muhammad lacked proof through miracles. Since he could not prove his prophecy in this way, Muhammad resorted to violence to promote his religion and law, casting himself in a negative light when compared to other prophets.[47] The author of the *Risalat al-Kindi* reaffirms the claim of Muhammad's false prophecy through Muhammad's inability to perform miracles. One of the miracles of the prophets is that they can foresee the future, because God shows it to them in visions through divine illumination. However, Muhammad seems not to have received these revelations from God, as Muhammad was unable to foresee his coming defeat at the battle of Uhud, in which

[44] Di Cesare, *The Psuedo-Historical Image of the Prophet Muhammad in Medieval Latin Literature*, 381.
[45] Di Cesare, *The Psuedo-Historical Image of the Prophet Muhammad in Medieval Latin Literature*, 382.
[46] Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 63.
[47] Dawczyk, "The Image of Muhammad in Riccoldo Da Monte Di Croce's 'Contra Legem Sarracenorum,'" 397

Muhammad was injured. A true prophet would have been able to foresee this defeat and would have avoided taking his men into battle.[48]

By presenting Muhammad as a violent ruler and his scriptures as irrational, Riccoldo reinforces the idea that Islam represents a corruption of revelation. Muhammad's failure to perform miracles, his use of violence, and the inconsistency of the Qur'an all serve as proof that his revelation was false. True prophecy is confirmed by divine signs and divinely illuminated reason. False prophecy, by contrast, is marked by confusion, contradiction, and coercion. The figure of Muhammad here becomes the image of the opposite of this ideal.

Antichrist

Some authors take things further than calling Muhammad a false prophet or heresiarch. They believe that Muhammad was instructed by Satan, and that he was the Antichrist, sent to earth by Satan to take down the Christian faith. Among these are Peter the Venerable,[49] Riccoldo da Montecroce,[50] and Martin Luther. Later authors like Luther needed to integrate Islam's success into God's plan and included this in their calls for reformation. For Luther, it became clear that Islam was God's punishment for the Catholic church, as he called for the reformation and the return to natural Christianity as the salvation from this punishment.[51] Not only was the triumph of the Islamic army in battle a sign of Islam being "the lash and rod of God"[52] against Catholicism, but it could also be seen in the good things of Islamic law and ritual.[53] Luther used the figure of Muhammad as a tool to show the flaws of Papism, while still reaffirming the irrationality of Islam. He does so by referring to both the pope and Muhammad as the Antichrist, serving the devil.

> *Thus, when the spirit of lies had taken possession of Muhammad, and the devil had murdered men's souls with his Koran and had destroyed the faith of Christians, he*

[48] Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 56.
[49] Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 145.
[50] Dawczyk, "The Image of Muhammad in Riccoldo Da Monte Di Croce's 'Contra Legem Sarracenorum,'" 396.
[51] Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 106.
[52] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works Volume 46: The Christian in Society III*, ed. Robert C. Schultz and Helmut T. Lehmann (Fortress Press, 1967), 162.
[53] Tolan, *Faces of Muhammad*, 106.

had to go on and take the sword and set about to murder their bodies. The Turkish faith, then, has not made its progress by preaching and the working of miracles, but by the sword and by murder, and its success has been due to God's wrath.
[...]
And what shall I say of the most holy father, the pope? [...] the pope, along with his followers, wages war, commits murder, and robs not only his enemies, but he also burns, condemns, and persecutes the innocent, the pious, the ox, as a true Antichrist.[54]

In Luther's theology, the apparent success of Islam does not undermine the truth of Christianity, but rather, it highlights the Church's corruption. By portraying both Muhammad and the pope as expressions of the Antichrist, Luther unites external and internal threats into a single framework of divine judgment. In this view, false prophecy serves a revelatory function, demonstrating through its error the necessity of spiritual renewal and the restoration of "true" faith.

Even what appears to be a false prophecy is granted coherence within divine reason. It is not chaos but a sign of spiritual disorder that points back to God's rational governance of history. The Antichrist figure functions as the dark side of revelation, its false illumination showing the boundaries of true prophecy. In portraying Muhammad in this way, Christian authors reaffirm their conviction that all knowledge, even error, ultimately serves divine rationality. Islam becomes a paradox that secures Christianity's intellectual and moral supremacy within its system of reason and revelation.

Muhammad as the External Other of Reason

This chapter traced how medieval Christian theology constructed an epistemology that ordered relations between revelation and reason and determined who could claim access to truth. Prophecy, conceived as divine illumination of the intellect, served as the privileged site where knowledge transcended the limits of the natural world. Yet in establishing the criteria for true prophecy, such as coherence, testimony, and miraculous confirmation, Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas also demarcated its boundaries. The figure of the false prophet emerges as the essential contrast through which the Christian epistemology demanded its own authority.

[54] Luther, *Luther's Works Volume 46*, 179-180.

Within this theological logic, revelation and rationality were hierarchical. Reason was perfected by divine illumination or grace through faith, and those who lacked this were deemed irrational or erroneous. In this sense, the polemical depictions of Muhammad as a false prophet, heresiarch, trickster, and antichrist were not merely theological denunciations but ones that excluded Muhammad and Muslims from participating in the realm of reason as posited by Christians.

The denunciation of Muhammad as a false prophet was not only a theological technique to strengthen Christian belief and to keep Christian laypersons from converting to Islam. It was an epistemic act as well. Polemicists defined Muhammad as a false prophet, asserting that he stood outside the conditions necessary for the production and transmission of knowledge. By charging Muhammad with deception and delusion, they targeted his epistemic reliability, and by accusing him of heresy, polemicists attacked the coherence required for rational religious doctrines. Polemicists claimed that Muhammad received his revelations privately, which invalidated his access to knowledge, as testimony was another requirement for acceptance of new knowledge being sent down by God. And the lack of miracles performed by Muhammad further proved this, as it was another requirement for rational proof of prophecy.

Two types of accusation operated in Christian medieval polemics. Some were openly fictional and relied on invented sources like the Bahira myth to construct Muhammad as an imposter. Others drew on more durable claims that continued long after the Middle Ages, like the claim that Muhammad had access to and borrowed from Christian and Jewish scriptures. Orientalists continue to repeat these claims. Medieval polemicists turned them into polemical logic. Textual parallels between Christian and Islamic scriptures became a form of plagiarism. These two accusations show that polemicists used both fictional and historically grounded claims to depict Islam as derivative and Muhammad as a false prophet.

Christian polemicists asserted Muhammad's fraud as a category of epistemic failure. By reframing rival claims, they positioned Christian rationality as the only faculty capable of discerning true from false revelation. Believing in tricks and fake miracles became the antithesis of reason. This rhetorical motive allowed polemicists to deny the legitimacy of non-Christian religious authority on

philosophical grounds. True miracles must align with the right doctrine and reason, while false miracles show the defects of those who believe in them.

By characterising Muhammad as a false prophet who lacks divine illumination and distorts rational doctrine, Christian thinkers established Islam as Christianity's epistemic other. Islam becomes the imaginative outsider of the boundaries of true religion and prophecy, against which Christianity proves its own religious authority. Placing Muhammad outside their realm of Reason reaffirms that the polemicist authors themselves were within the true theological order, and only Christians can access legitimate knowledge. By insisting that prophecy must be proven by public witnesses, preannounced by earlier prophets, rationally coherent with earlier doctrine, and proved by miracles, Christian authors reaffirmed that only Christianity conformed to the proper epistemic criteria for accessing truth. Muhammad and Islam functioned as a negation of this and became the external Other of reason. By removing them from the realm of reason, Christians could claim exclusive access to it.

This logic of exclusion was not restricted to Christian engagements with Islam. The same epistemic framework that portrayed Muhammad and his followers as incapable of participating in true knowledge also created similar but internal hierarchies within Christian societies. The criteria for reason, revelation, and true prophecy were also applied to women. As the next chapter will demonstrate, women became the focal point for the internal reaffirmation of these hierarchies in polemical and misogynistic writings. Their supposed susceptibility to passion, deception, and instability marked them as epistemically inferior within the Christian imagination.

Chapter 2

Women and the Limits of Reason in Medieval Thought

Throughout the Middle Ages, Christian theological and philosophical traditions constructed women as the internal limit of reason, a figure through which the boundaries of rationality, authority and revelation were defined. Whereas the previous chapter traced how the figure of Muhammad functioned as a tool to define Muslims as the external other, women occupied an even more fundamental place in the epistemic order. Medieval authors drew upon Scripture, Aristotelian natural philosophy, and inherited misogynistic tropes to portray women as governed by the senses, prone to deception, and tied to the material aspects of human nature. From Eve's encounter with the serpent to scholastic assertions of female biological deficiency, Woman became both the symbol and the proof of epistemic failure. Yet at the same time, the period witnessed the rise of female prophets whose authority challenged the control of male clerics, only to be managed through theological and rhetorical strategies that reaffirmed their fragility. This chapter examines these intertwined discourses to show how women were rendered epistemically insufficient, and how the category of the 'irrational female' became essential to the Christian construction of rational, authoritative subjecthood.

Theological Foundations: Creation, Fall, and Subordination

When discussing this topic, we must start at the beginning, with the creation of man and woman. Genesis 2 says that God made Adam from the dust of the earth and he breathed life into him. He commanded Adam that he could eat from all the trees of the earth, except for the tree of knowing good and evil. God then said that it was not good for Adam to be alone, and so he created animals, and Adam could give them their name.[55] After Adam named the animals, God put Adam to sleep and took one of his ribs. God built the rib into a woman. And Adam said, "Now this one is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh; this one will be called Woman, for from her man this one was taken."[56] The

[55] Susan Brayford, *Genesis* (Brill, 2007), 37.
[56] Brayford, *Genesis*, 39.

general theory of the subjection of women that was prominent during the Middle Ages stems from these verses in Genesis. Woman was created after man, and therefore she was inferior to him. Not only was she created after man, but she was also created from man, meaning that man was perfect enough that part of him could be taken and turned into a woman. And according to theologians, God did this to give Adam a helper.[57] This is because, as we will see many times throughout this chapter, the main role of women, according to medieval thinkers, was that of reproduction.[58] Augustine feels that if reproduction had not played a role, Adam would have been better off with a male helper.[59]

> *Now, if the woman was not made for the man to be his helper in begetting children, in what was she to help him? She was not to till the earth with him, for there was not yet any toil to make help necessary. If there were any such need, a male helper would be better, and the same could be said of the comfort of another's presence if Adam were perhaps weary of solitude. How much more agreeably could two male friends, rather than a man and woman, enjoy companionship and conversation in a life shared together.*[60]

Not only does this show the thought that the value of a woman was her reproductive system, but Augustine here also highlights her lesser abilities in both physical and mental activity. Augustine here gives a Biblical reason why the relationship between Adam and Eve as husband and wife prioritises procreation above all. The 'virtue' of a woman's ability to reproduce will be discussed more thoroughly at a later point in this chapter. But the sexual organ of the body was scrutinised by medieval thinkers as well. This already began in early Christianity, when Galen believed that the male and female sexual organs were mirror images of each other.[61] The male sexual organ is turned outward and perfectly complete, whereas the female organ is incomplete and turned inward. This belief was continued into the Middle Ages, where it added to the reasoning for the subjection of women to men.[62]

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[57] Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, ed., *A History of Women in the West II: Silences of the Middle Ages* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 19.
[58] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 13.
[59] Kari Elisabeth Børresen, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Woman in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas* (University Press of America, 1981), 17.
[60] Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, vol. 2, Ancient Christian Writers 42 (Newman Press, 1982), 75.
[61] Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 33.
[62] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 46.

The story of Adam and Eve continues. A snake, identified as being Satan in later Biblical sources, persuades Eve to take a bite of the fruit of the tree of knowing good and evil against God's will. She gives the fruit to Adam, who eats it as well.[63] In the misogynist reading of Genesis in the Middle Ages, Eve is seduced by the serpent and then, in turn, seduces Adam to join her in her disobedience to God, causing their Fall.[64] For medieval thinkers, this meant that women are irrational criminals because they are easily swayed by the senses.[65] For Augustine, women, through being descendants of Eve, show that they are only in possession of practical reason, since Eve is at fault for the Fall.[66] For Augustine, this is the reason why man needs to govern over women. Because Woman has, since the beginning of Creation, shown that they are ruled by the animal part of the soul. Although all human beings have this animal part of the soul, women represent this.[67] A woman is ruled by her sensual desire. Medieval thinkers constantly refer to the nature of women as governed by passions in contrast to that of men, who were considered aligned with reason and spirit.[68]

For Augustine, there is a duality between the rational soul and the body, which is particularly prominent in women. The souls of Adam and Eve are identical, as both their souls were created by God.[69] Through the rational part of the soul, which only, but all, human beings have, it is shown that man is created in the image of God.[70] However, the divine image is not in the entire soul, but only the masculine element, which does not fully come to fruition when one has a female body. The soul of a woman is identical to that of a man, but the sexual difference of her body puts her in an inferior position as it suppresses the masculine part of the soul, which is the rational part residing in the image of God.[71] This results in the Augustinian belief that women should serve men and that Man should govern

[63] Brayford, *Genesis*, 41.
[64] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 19.
[65] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 22.
[66] Kim Paffenroth and Maggie Ann Labinski, eds., *Augustine and Gender*, Augustine in Conversation: Tradition and Innovation Series (Lexington Books, 2024), 57.
[67] Augustine, *On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees: And, On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book*, trans. Roland J. Teske (The Catholic University of America Press, 1991),11.
[68] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 14.
[69] Børresen, *Subordination and Equivalence*, 22.
[70] Augustine, *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 23.
[71] Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 29-30.

over Woman, as the rational masculine part of the soul does come into full fruition in his body.[72] Man is the image of God always, whereas woman can only be the image of god when united with a husband.[73] According to Genevieve Lloyd

> *The life of Reason, Augustine insisted, is open to woman as the spiritual equal of man. But It remained the case that the male, in pursuing the life of Reason, need deny only those aspects of human nature which are already external to his symbolic being. Woman, despite her status as co-heir of grace, must pursue that same path burdened by the symbolic force of her subordination to man, which Augustine saw as natural.*[74]

All women have the bad qualities that stem from Eve. However, there are also Biblical holy women. The best example of this would, of course, be the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary is revered, as she is both a virgin and the mother of the Son of God. She is, according to medieval theologians, one of the rare women who possessed a full set of virtues.[75] When discussing women, a dualism was created between Eve and Mary, where Eve was a symbol for women as they are, whereas Mary was portrayed as the ideal.[76] Since women were made by God and saved by Christ, they were also related to Mary, not only to Eve. Therefore, women were capable of virtue. However, they bore the "stain of sin" of the women before them, starting with Eve, so women could not reach the ideal.[77]

The misogynist interpretations of Genesis say that not only is woman subjugated to man, since she was also made from him and for him, she is also irrational because Eve was governed by the senses and passions and easily persuaded by the devil. She has condemned all females born after her to live her sins, unable to reach the virtuous status of the Virgin Mary.[78]

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[72] Børresen, *Subordination and Equivalence*, 27.
[73] Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, 30.
[74] Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, 33.
[75] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 25.
[76] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 37.
[77] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 88.
[78] It should be noted that the interpretations of Genesis and the Fall discussed here reflect the dominant medieval theological tradition, but they were not the only ones available. Alternative readings which defend Eve or argue for a more positive account of women's nature did exist, though they never became mainstream. For examples of these less conventional interpretations which highlight strands of medieval thought that sought to challenge misogynistic readings of Eve see Alcuin Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1998), 96-125.

When considered together, these theological foundations established a conceptual foundation in which women's subordination seems both natural and divinely sanctioned. Genesis provided the narrative that woman was created second, created from man, and made for reproduction. As a result, woman was positioned as subordinate and incomplete. Medieval thinkers reinforced this hierarchy through metaphysics and physiology, interpreting Eve's sensory vulnerability as a Augustine played a key role in this idea; even though he believed that men and women's souls were equal, he associated rational thinking with men and argued that the female body holds back this rational side, which led to the view that women were less intelligent and needed to be controlled by men. The duality between Eve and Mary intensified this logic, offering a virtuous exception whose purity only underscored the fallenness attributed to all ordinary women. This framework would structure every subsequent discourse on female virtue, vice, and prophetic authority examined in the rest of the chapter.

The Naturalisation of Difference and Women's Virtues

Medieval theories of women's inferiority and lesser reason did not arise solely from scripture. During the Middle Ages, Aristotelian biology strengthened their beliefs. Aristotle provided the concepts to reaffirm the hierarchy of the sexes. In *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle wrote that "The reason is that the female is, as it were, a deformed male; and the menstrual discharge is semen, though in an impure condition; i.e., it lacks one constituent, and one only, the principle of Soul."[79] This biological difference extends to the psychology and character of the sexes. The male supplies the form, motion, and rational principle, while the female contributes only matter.[80] These formulations allowed medieval thinkers to transform gendered hierarchy into a naturalised truth: women's intellectual and moral deficiencies were not merely the consequence of Eve's sin. They were inscribed into the structure of nature itself. Thomas Aquinas attempted to reconcile the Genesis with Aristotle's natural subordination of women, according to which the semen of man is the crucial element to reproduction.[81]

[79] Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck (Harvard University Press, 2015), 175.
[80] Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 184-188.
[81] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 40.

Citing Augustine, Aquinas asserts that the image of God can be found in both man and woman, in the mind where there is no sexual distinction. But, because woman was created for man, the image of God can, in a sensory sense, only be found in man.[82] Although she possesses the capacity for rationality, the nature of her body positions her outside of reason.[83] Reproduction takes place through the joining of an active male power with a passive female power, which is a theory based on the degree of perfection of their bodies. Although a woman is imperfect, she is a necessary component in reproduction.[84]

Aristotelian commentaries from the thirteenth century said that women lack the rationality needed to govern their passions, and that women were considered fragile, malleable, irrational, and emotional.[85] Gilbert of Tournai and Aquinas denounced female 'chatter' and felt the need to suppress it. According to Gilbert, women dared to speak in public and of matters of the Scripture.[86] Women were only allowed to speak in the private sphere. The silence of a woman was one of her virtues, according to thinkers of the Middle Ages. Giles of Rome wrote that the natural tendency of women to speak before thinking must result from their defective rationality when compared to that of men.[87] The silence of women was highlighted as a virtue even by Augustine. In the household he grew up in, women did not speak because they had no reason to, since it would not have added anything to his upbringing.[88] Augustine learned to speak by himself, not because of his nurses.[89]

Women were virtuous when they were modest, which was a concept derived from monastic tradition. Women should not be expressive and should not perform lively gestures.[90] Women, for having a weaker nature, should accept that they should be in the custody of a man. According to medieval thinkers, women were accustomed to this.[91] Chastity was also a woman's virtue, and to protect

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[82] Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, 35.
[83] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Volume 12 Human Intelligence*, ed. and trans. Paul T. Durbin (Blackfriars, 1968), 135.
[84] Børresen, *Subordination and Equivalence*, 158-159.
[85] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 87.
[86] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 40.
[87] Giles of Rome, *The Governance of Kings and Princes: John Trevisa's Middle English Translation of the De Regimine Principum of Aegidius Romanus*, ed. David C. Fowler et al., Garland Medieval Texts, vol. 19, (Taylor and Francis, 1997), 206; paraphrase based on the Middle English text, translated using the Middle English Dictionary of the Middle English Compendium (University of Michigan).
[88] Paffenroth and Labinski, *Augustine and Gender*, 39.
[89] Augustine, *Confessions, Volume I: Books 1-8*, trans. Carolyn J.B. Hammond, Loeb Classical Library 26 (Harvard University Press, 2014), 23-24.
[90] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 95.
[91] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 89.

it, she must not wander from home. Giles of Rome said that a woman who wandered around lost her shyness and social embarrassment, and that she was "one of those wild animals which grow accustomed to the company of men and become tame, letting themselves be pet and stroked."[92] Showing once more that the main use for a woman was reproduction. Women were also described as being curious, a vice that they had received from Eve, who was curious enough to be tempted by the serpent. Women were seeking something new, which disturbed preachers and moralists.[93] The virtue of a woman lies in being enclosed indoors, being silent and uncurious, caring only about reproducing. There is no use in seeking intellectual knowledge, as she is an imperfect man, brought to life for man, not for herself.

Taken together, these theological and natural-philosophical frameworks produced a cohesive account of why women were unfit for public speech, intellectual authority, or participation in reason. From Eve's seduction and Aristotelian biology to Aquinas's sensory hierarchy and the fixation on modesty and silence, medieval discourse constructed a woman who was, by nature and by body, inclined toward passion, instability, and error. Her virtues were defined precisely in opposition to the capacities associated with rational judgment and authoritative speech. Yet it is against this enforced silence and supposed intellectual deficiency that a phenomenon emerged: women who claimed to speak on behalf of God. The rise of female prophecy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries confronted the Church with a paradox. If women were naturally irrational, passive, and unsuited to teaching, how could some appear to possess divine insight that commanded authority? The next section turns to this, examining how medieval authors negotiated the uneasy coexistence of misogynistic anthropology with the undeniable presence of female prophetic voices.

Female Prophecy and the Problem of Women's Authority

During the Middle Ages, the clergy heavily enforced Timothy 2:12, "no woman is to teach or have authority over men." Canon law, exegesis, and theology were used together to prove that women were

[92] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 84-85.
[93] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 87.

unsuitable for teaching or preaching. They were to be excluded from the public sphere and subordinated to men and kept in the domestic sphere, for the reasons we have learned above. Women were excluded from schooling, and universities were exclusively for male scholars to transmit their knowledge to one another.[94] However, women did begin taking up more space within the theological and spiritual realm. Women preached God in heretical movements, and some claimed to have mystical tendencies that gave them the ability to speak to and about God. But clerics denied that women could preach, since this would require the male intellect that women did not possess. The only way women could preach was if they were endowed with prophecy by God. However, the task of verifying the authenticity of the prophecy of women was left to the men of the church.[95]

A prominent female prophet during the twelfth century was Hildegard von Bingen, who, after receiving visions from God for a long time, finally accepted that these were prophetic visions and began convincing the clergy that she was a prophet. Her prophecy was questioned, for example, by monk Guibert, who asked her questions, including whether Hildegard had prior knowledge of the scripture and whether she received her visions in ecstasy or in dreams. After writing him back, Monk Guibert decided that no woman had received such a great gift from God since the Virgin Mary, and that Hildegard "has transcended female subjection by a lofty height and is equal to the eminence not just of any men, but of the very highest."[96]

Hildegard reinforced the misogynistic stereotypes of women to convince those around her of her authority. She persisted in saying that she did not believe in her prophecy for most of her life, as she was just a weak female.[97] Hildegard did not claim equality with men in any form, but said she had been given the prophetic gift by god despite the sins of Eve, because the "wise and strong" men had fallen even lower than women.[98] Hildegard complained of "effeminate times," in which males were weak, and God had resorted to choosing feminine leaders.[99] By doing so, Hildegard created a way for women to

[94] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 99-100.
[95] Klapisch-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 100.
[96] Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (University of California Press, 1998), 16.
[97] Kneupper, *Prophecy and the Battle for Spiritual Authority*, 57.
[98] Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 17; Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature*, The Middle Ages Series (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 6.
[99] Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 31.

continue to be described as weak, while also exercising authority. This concept was echoed by mostly male writers because it could acknowledge female sanctity and confess certain failings of their own sex while still affirming that men were naturally superior to women, as it took a special grace from God to elevate a woman.[100]

One of such writers was Alphonse of Jaén, who wrote his *Epistola Solitarii* to instruct his readers on distinguishing true and false prophecy, and who wanted to prove the prophecy of Brigitta of Sweden. He was pro-female prophecy, writing that "some religious men, more secular than spiritual, derided and detracted from her revelations, deeming it nearly impossible that God might speak through divine revelations through an ignorant little woman."[101] His arguments for female prophecy were (1) the numerous female prophets in the Old and New testaments as well as the prophecies of unlearned men, (2) the danger of rejection prophets without proper consideration, exemplified by the destruction of Cyprus after the ignored warning of Brigitta, and (3) the concept of the weak used by God to confound the men, as formulated by Hildegard.[102]

The phenomenon of female prophecy in the Middle Ages reveals an ambiguity. Women could step outside of their inferiority, but only by reinforcing the very logic that subordinated them. Figures like Hildegard von Bingen and Brigitta of Sweden gained authority not by challenging misogynistic assumptions, but by inhabiting them. By presenting themselves as weak vessels chosen by God precisely because of their weakness. Their legitimacy always depended on male validation, whether from clerics like monk Guibert or defenders such as Alphonse of Jaén, who argued that divine grace could elevate even the 'poor little figures of women.'[103] So, female prophecy served as an exception that proved the rule: it allowed for extraordinary women, but only within a framework that reaffirmed the naturalness of male authority and the supposed irrationality of the female sex.

[100] Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 154.
[101] Kneupper, *Prophecy and the Battle for Spiritual Authority*, 55.
[102] Kneupper, *Prophecy and the Battle for Spiritual Authority*, 56-58.
[103] Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 16.

Women as the Internal Other of Reason

Medieval Christian thought required a boundary figure against which the masculine intellect could emerge as orderly, disciplined, and attuned to divine truth. Eve provided the first example: she embodied the reminder that her susceptibility to sensation, curiosity, and deception is at the basis of the Fall of humanity. Aristotelian biology and its scholastic adaptations reinforced this structure, grounding women's instability not only in moral failure but in the material organisation of her body. It is interesting to see how Christian polemics adopted Aristotle's philosophy and biology, since Aristotle was a pagan. It is likely that theologians simply accepted Aristotle's gender theory since it provided rational support for their pre-existing views on women.[104] In Aquinas's synthesis, the image of God resides in the rational soul, yet appears in its fullness only when unhindered by the feminine body; woman's subordination becomes the condition under which male rationality can manifest its divine image. Even the regulation of female prophecy reproduced the same logic. Women could speak for God only insofar as their weakness confirmed the superiority of the men tasked with judging them. Their rare elevation served to preserve, not to challenge, the hierarchical order. Female visionaries functioned as exceptions that proved the rule of female incapacity.

This reveals that the exclusion of women from prophecy did not emerge from a neutral appeal to reason, but from a system in which male authority decided on the definition of reason itself. Medieval theologians framed their criteria for prophecy, coherence, doctrinal stability, and the capacity to interpret divine illumination as rational standards. However, men exclusively articulated, enforced, and embodied these standards. The question of whether female prophecy was possible was judged by a gendered authority, rather than by impartial epistemic criteria. Male clerics reaffirmed their positions as protectors of reason and truth by making the realm of reason inseparable from themselves. This was an epistemic judgment that, through the denial of female prophetic authority, also reasserted that the male voice was embodied Reason.

[104] For more information on the use of sources by medieval Christian authors see Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 106-110.

In this sense, Woman serves as Christianity's internal counterpart to rationality, structurally parallel to the figure of Muhammad in Christian polemics. Both are constructed as embodiments of failed revelation, each marked by excess sensuality, corrupted desire, and an unregulated relation to the divine. Where Muhammad represents the external threat of false prophecy, woman represents the internal threat. She represents the possibility that reason might collapse back into the bodily, the emotional, or the uncontrolled. The boundary that excludes her is therefore the same boundary that stabilises the Christian ideal of rational, masculine subjectivity.

Chapter 3

The Philosophy of Medieval Polemics as Tools for Exclusion

Medieval Christian polemics did more than denounce their opponents. They articulated the boundaries of who could count as a rational, authoritative knower of truths. These truths could be either divine truths or corporeal truths. Whether directed outward against Muslims or inwards against women, these polemical discourses deployed shared philosophical tools and rhetorical strategies to secure the authority of the Christian male intellect. Polemics against Muhammad constructed the Muslim as the outsider whose revelation failed the proper criteria of truth, while polemics against women identified the feminine as the internal limit of rationality itself, the bodily and affective principle that reason must overcome. This chapter examines how these polemics work: how they construct error and formulate epistemic boundaries. In doing so, it argues that the Christian subject of reason emerges through active exclusion. The formation of the Christian rational identity occurs through the production of figures that embody the failure of proper reason, revelation, and authority.

The Logic of Polemics

Within medieval intellectual culture, polemics functioned as a classificatory practice. To call a doctrine a heresy was not simply to express disagreement but to situate the opponent within a pre-existing framework of error. Heresy signified a deliberate corruption of revealed truth, superstition indicated practices detached from divine illumination, and error represented a more general divergence from

orthodoxy. Together, these categories were philosophical tools for organising the social structures and epistemic frameworks. They enabled writers to categorise rival claims into boxes. Muhammad is labelled as the heresiarch, Islam is deemed an erroneous religion, and female religious speech is characterised as a realm of superstition and delusion. Once categorised, the knowledge and beliefs of these figures no longer needed to be refuted.

Talal Asad's analysis of religion as a historically produced category helps to clarify this. Asad argues that "there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes."[105] Medieval polemic does not describe Islam or female speech as erroneous. It also constructs what a 'true' religion is. Christian writers were shaping the boundaries of what counted as legitimate revelation, correct doctrine, and authorised speech. In this sense, polemic is not a reaction to others only, but an activity that stabilises Christian orthodoxy by creating a clear-cut contrast of it.

At the foundation of medieval polemic is the metaphysical assumption that Truth exists, is knowable, and that it will be revealed to legitimate authorities. Truth is related to the salvation of the community, and false belief can endanger it. It sways individuals away from the truth, leading to their damnation. Medieval writers, as we have seen, especially regarding the revelations of Muhammad, pose error as something that needs to be contained and stopped from spreading through imitation, seduction, or false authority. Islam, in this view, is dangerous because Christians believe it is a false law, which might seduce unlearned Christians to convert due to its sensual appeal or political success. Likewise, unregulated female preaching is treated as an outbreak from the general epistemic order. It threatens to bring into the world unverified, emotionally charged, or demonic claims, due to women being too fragile or irrational to know when they obtain true or false knowledge. Polemic, therefore, emerges as a defensive strategy aimed at preserving Christian knowledge.

Averil Cameron describes the intellectual climate surrounding John of Damascus, among others from his time, which helps clarify the epistemic structure in which he wrote his polemic against

[105] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 15.

Muhammad and the Qur'an. His works functioned as *compendia*, which are not guides to the use of reason, but handbooks of absolute truth. This is exactly the function of John of Damascus' *De Haeresibus*. A *compendium* is a collection of doctrinal truths that systematises what counts as correct beliefs. These works were not used for rational discussion but simply stated what was considered true or false.[106] John of Damascus's classification of Islam as a heresy then becomes not only a polemical judgment, but also an epistemic exclusion. By adding Muhammad and the Qur'an to a list of earlier existing heresies, he excluded them from the fixed framework of truth.

Most polemics we have discussed operate from a presupposition of epistemic hierarchy. Polemic reaffirms the superiority of Christian knowledge. Medieval writers did not write these works to ask Muhammad whether he was divinely inspired or to question women's potential for rational capacities, which the writers believed they lacked. The polemic did not warrant a true conversation or a response from the attacked opponent. The polemical writer asserts a position of truth, and the opponent is defined by falsity or incapacity. The polemic is not used to persuade the reader of the hierarchies, but to reaffirm them. Polemics demonstrate to medieval Christian readers the epistemic inadequacy of their opponents, a belief they already held. Having established the epistemic assumptions that make polemics possible, we can now turn to the rhetorical structures through which these assumptions are actively reshaped into figures of error.

Rhetorical Structures of Polemics

Medieval polemic shows the opponent as the embodiment of error, not just in argument but also in rhetorical structures. Through strategies such as narrative inversion, caricature, and polemical texts transform their opponents into enemies. Muhammad does not become a political leader or reformer, but a sensual deceiver, heresiarch, or an Antichrist. Similarly, women are considered inferior, and therefore, when they speak on matters of religion, they are portrayed as deluded or demonically

[106] Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, 1st paperback pr, Sather Classical Lectures 55 (University of California Press, 1994), 220.

influenced. These rhetorical strategies do not describe their objects; they create them. The opponent is presented as the opposition of Christian gendered truth and rationality.

Polemicists, either deliberately or not, use fabricated biographies or premeditatedly changed readings of the biographies of the figures of Muhammad and Eve to epistemically invalidate Muslims and women. These can be formulated as the rhetorical strategy of pseudo-biographies or caricature. Biographies of Muhammad that circulated had nothing, or barely anything, in common with the Islamic counterparts that describe the life of Muhammad. Polemicists infused myths into the narrative of Muhammad's life to reinforce the caricature they aimed to present to their readers. Those myths, as we have seen in chapter one, include Muhammad's association with monk Bahira, the fabrication of miracles using animals, Muhammad claiming to rise to heaven after his death, and the hanging of his casket from the ceiling of a mosque. While the polemical biographies diverge from the *sira* traditions, it is important to note that the Islamic biographies of Muhammad are themselves shaped by the theological commitments of the Muslim community. Their biographies are not neutral either, but were written to affirm Muhammad's prophetic authority. Both Christian and Muslim accounts of the life of Muhammad are constructed in their own theological and ideological frameworks.

The Islamic version of Muhammad's biography, of which a summarised version will follow, counters everything that is said about him in the polemicists' biographies. Muhammad was a member of the Quraysh clan, and around 610, while on a personal retreat to a cave, Muhammad received his first revelations from God, brought to him by the angel Gabriel. He received them in visions and sounds. At first, Muhammad was terrified and reluctant to accept his role as the Prophet of God. His wife was the first to accept his prophecy, and after her comforting Muhammad, he began preaching the oneness of God, the reality of the Last Judgment, and the need for God-fearing behaviour. His tribe felt their polytheistic beliefs were attacked and did not accept Muhammad's prophecy and new religion. He was met with resistance and abuse and was only able to gain a small group of followers, with whom he travelled to Medina.[107]

[107] Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origin of Islam* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 40-43.

In Medina, Muhammad's political activity began. He mediated between the inhabitants of Medina and the new arrivals, establishing the first *umma* (community). Muhammad and his followers established a mosque. Muhammad and his followers performed some raids on the surrounding villages after this and later attacked a caravan of the Quraysh in the year 624. The Meccans of the Quraysh sought revenge, and in the Battle of Uhud, Muhammad was defeated. The Jewish Nadir clan of Medina was plotting to kill Muhammad, and so he turned on them. In 628, Muhammad and his followers marched unarmed to Mecca to perform the first *'umra* (lesser pilgrimage) but were turned down by the Quraysh. After some negotiations, which included a ten-year truce, the Muslims were allowed to return for the '*umra* the following year. The Quraysh, however, did not uphold the truth, and Muhammad sent for a conquest of Mecca. At the end of March 632, Muhammad performed the *hajj* (major pilgrimage) in Mecca for the first and last time, as he fell ill after and died in his home, underneath which he was buried.[108]

The Islamic *sira* (biography) tradition of Islam presents Muhammad as a reluctant, morally upright person. He receives his revelations from the angel Gabriel, but he is reluctant to step into his role as prophet. But then he gradually gathers his Islamic community and works, although sometimes using violence, to establish peace and monotheism among his opponents. His violence is presented as defensive or a means for legislation. His political decisions are tools to build his community and spread the word of God for the salvation of this community. His prophecy and revelation are authenticated by his spiritual experience, as before revelation, he indulged himself in meditation and seclusion often,[109] his character, as his tribe praised him for his intelligence and honesty,[110] and the development of the Qur'an. As Muhammad was illiterate, the Qur'an is portrayed as a miracle, since its contents, spoken by Muhammad, show beautiful prose and coherence.[111]

The polemicists' narratives of the biography of Muhammad are opposite to those of the *sira*. They are not only pseudo-biographies, often based on earlier polemicists and a definitive lack of

[108] Donner, *Muhammad and the* Believers, 44-50.
[109] Donner, *Muhammad and His Believers,* 40.
[110] Donner, *Muhammad and His Believers,* 40.
[111] Rahim Acar and M. Cüneyt Kaya, eds., *Philosophy of Religion in Islam: A Reader of Classical Sources* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), 240.

knowledge of the Islamic tradition and therefore fabricated, but they are anti-biographies as well. His call to prophecy becomes demonic influence, his initial fear becomes instability, his illiteracy becomes proof of irrationality, and his political endeavours become tyranny. Where Islamic tradition interprets Muhammad's authority as grounded in divine command and the moral integrity of his character, polemics reimagine it as rooted in delusion and fraud.

Although Eve is a canonical biblical figure rather than a historical person like Muhammad, the polemicists tend to treat the Genesis story as her biography that could be morally interpreted. The misogynist commentaries act much like a pseudo-biography, using it to create a typology of women. The misogynist readings of Eve reaffirm the medieval notions that women were irrational and delusional. The figure of Woman and their characters become symbols of moral vices. All women are generalised as possessing the same character, the caricature of Eve. They are curious, they think before they speak, and they are emotional. Traits that stem from Eve in Genesis, transmitted through generations. Through pseudo-biographies, these caricatures of Muhammad and Eve assert that passions, not reason, rule the opponents of the polemicists. Muhammad cannot be a true prophet because his inspirations stem from demonic influence, and he is violent and deceitful. Women cannot be authoritative because their speech stems from the bodily weakness of Eve. These pseudo-biographies show that epistemic disqualification is inherent in their characters.

Another rhetorical strategy heavily employed by polemicists is narrative inversion, which is embedded in the creation of pseudo-biographies and caricatures. In narrative inversions, the story is deliberately altered to emphasise a different perspective or set of conventions. It entails the twisting of tropes. In medieval polemics, writers turn the origin stories of Muhammad and women, through Eve, into proofs of deception. As we saw in chapter one, Muhammad is often portrayed as a trickster, heresiarch, and Antichrist. His revelations, presented originally by Islamic traditions as encounters with the angel Gabriel, are inverted to encounters with demons, monk Bahira, or Satan. His private encounters with the angel are reinterpreted as lacking witnesses, and the reception of the revelations is portrayed as hallucinatory. His miracles are well-developed tricks to deceive the Arabs into believing his prophetic mission.

The biblical account of Eve listening to the serpent becomes a philosophical ground for the assertion that women are inherently deceivable and irrational in the polemical accounts of women. The caricature of Eve is not necessarily a narrative inversion, but rather a narrative fabrication, since multiple narratives and interpretations of the Creation and Fall of humanity are possible. Narrative inversion or fabrication delegitimises the possibility of reason and revelation for the Others of the Christian polemicists. Since the origins of the Muslims and women are corrupted, all subsequent claims to knowledge are invalid. The polemicists eliminate the epistemic position of the Others from their origin onwards.

In polemics, bodies are described as inferior, where deception and error are imagined as inherent. This approach is used as another rhetorical strategy. We have seen this most explicitly for female bodies, which is the grounds for their inferiority. According to Augustine and Aquinas, there is equality between the souls of men and women. However, since the woman was given the imperfect body, the male and rational part of the soul cannot fully develop and remains in an almost animalistic state. Women's bodies are a sign of intellectual defect. Similar logic is applied to Muslims. The Qur'an, according to polemicists, speaks to the Muslims because they, much like Muhammad, are governed by bodily desire over rational discipline. The Qur'an allows for sensual pleasures, accommodating carnal pleasures rather than disciplining them, as the Bible does. Polemic writers claim that Muhammad created a law suited to the sensual image of the Arabs. In this way, the Qur'an becomes a text that does not elevate its adherents to God but allows them to fulfil the desires of the body.

For writers constructing polemics about women and Muslims, then, the body becomes an epistemic argument: sensuality means error. A body insufficiently governed by reason cannot perceive truth reliably. Overcoming carnal pleasure is equated with rationality, self-mastery, and closeness to God. And so, both women and Muslims are portrayed as inferior to Christian men, who, by virtue of being male and properly Christian, are imagined embodying the ideal union of rationality and spiritual discipline. The authority of the Christian male depends upon this contrast.

The rhetorical trope of the "weak leading the weak" was made explicit by Hildegard von Bingen in chapter two, and those who wrote in her favour. Female 'chatter' is said to mislead or seduce

others. This too stems from Eve in the Genesis and the Fall. Eve is suspected of having misled Adam into eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, causing the sinful fall of humanity. This has continued to be inherited by women throughout time. In the Middle Ages, women were silenced, since their speech could not bring new knowledge to the knowledgeable and rational men around them. Even female prophets, such as Hildegard and Brigitta, were silenced until their male counterparts could help prove their prophecy. They primarily gained prophetic authority through emphasising the weak nature of their femaleness. They marked their authority through conforming to the misogynistic ideals of men. By saying that they were weak females, only given prophetic vision because the men around them were weak in God's eyes, men could accept their prophecy. They could accept their shortcomings while maintaining that they were superior, and the only reason these women gained prophetic insight was that the effeminate times had to change and needed to become more masculine. Men needed to reclaim their place.

The Christian narratives about Muhammad and monk Bahira claim that they adapted Christian teachings into a simplified, sensual law to control the masses. The Arabs needed something easier than the original Christian scriptures so their simple minds could understand. In this polemical imagination, Islam appears as a degraded imitation of a theological system, rather than a valid one. It is a repackaging of a diluted form of Christianity, created for a less rational group of people.

The trope of the weak leading the weak justifies both theological and social containment of error. It frames the exclusion of Muslims and women not only as the domination of Christianity but also as the protection of the community from error. If the weak are prone to deception, the strong (male Christians) must guard doctrinal purity.

Taken together, these rhetorical strategies do more than misrepresent their targets of Muslims and women. They construct them into categories of people that are inherently incapable of knowledge and truth. Medieval polemics transform disagreement with their opponent into epistemic disqualification. The other is not only wrong but also incapable of participation in the realms of revelation, reason, and spiritual authority. These strategies are philosophical tools to demarcate the

boundaries of truth. They assert who may speak authoritatively and who may not. Rhetoric becomes an ontology and creates the superior identity of the Christian man.

Epistemic Boundaries and Authority

Through asserting in their polemics who is incapable of participating in revelation and reason, Christian authors could claim the authority of Christian men. For medieval Christian epistemology, legitimate knowledge required (1) properly validated authority, (2) demonstrative proofs, and (3) a proper subject of knowledge. From the perspective of these writers, Muslims failed all three requirements because they relied on a source of teaching that did not meet Christian standards of epistemic legitimacy. Since their prophet lacked prior validation within the Christian scriptural tradition, his followers were grounding their knowledge in an authority that could not be authenticated. The subjects of the Qur'an are not included in the Scripture of the Christian church, making them appear irregular and irrational. These reasons situate Muhammad and his followers outside the epistemic boundaries of the polemical writers. This exclusion was not descriptive but constitutive: by marking Islam as epistemically impossible, Christian writers simultaneously affirmed their own exclusive access to both revelation and rationality.

Women, too, were positioned outside these boundaries. They lacked authority completely; they were forbidden from teaching or holding authority over men. Second, their rational capacities were deemed insufficient to provide reliable testimony, so they are unable to provide their own demonstrative proofs. Finally, even when women did receive visions, the content of their revelations was to be evaluated by men. In these ways, women violated these criteria for legitimate knowledge by the definition of their being, rather than their actions. And since women were naturally incapacitated of actively participating in rational thinking and revelation, they needed those who could validate their knowledge. This is a form of epistemic injustice, something that Miranda Fricker thoroughly discussed

in her book *Epistemic Injustice.*[112] The form of injustice here is testimonial injustice, derived through 'identity power.'[113] Identity power is defined by Fricker as follows:

> *There can be operations of power that are dependent upon agents having shared conceptions of social identity—conceptions alive in the collective social imagination that govern, for instance, what it is or means to be a woman or a man, or what it means to be gay or straight, young or old, and so on. Whenever there is an operation of power that depends upon such shared imaginative conceptions of social identity, then* identity power *is at work.*[114]

When identity power is at work, there exists a hierarchy between the hearer and the speaker of a testimony. Either intentionally or unintentionally. It does not necessarily mean that this hierarchy is consciously considered to be true for both parties, but merely that the foundation of their social network does have this hierarchy embedded in it.[115] When identity power is in play, and a speaker is not taken seriously in their knowledge, this is an epistemic injustice, where the speaker is wronged in their *capacity as a knower.*[116] Most often, this is caused by conscious prejudice in the hearer, which takes away the credibility of the speaker as a knower. Fricker often uses the case of prejudice between men and women to exemplify her claims, but it could extend to other prejudices based on race, religion, and other social exclusions. For example, she writes that:

> *Social-imaginative ideas of 'Negro' or 'woman' distort the hearer's credibility judgment, and this operation of identity power controls who can convey knowledge to whom and, by the same token, who can gain knowledge from whom. [...] In testimonial exchanges, no one is neutral; everybody has a race, everybody has a gender.*[117]

Although Fricker presents these terms as modern ideas and with modern examples, they can be applied to the medieval polemics we dealt with over the past chapters. For Christian male thinkers in the Middle Ages, both Muslims and women lacked the capacity to know. They examine and argue for this thoroughly in their polemics, as we have seen throughout this paper. By removing the capacity of

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[112] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007).
[113] It is important to note that Miranda Fricker discusses these terms not in medieval context. She did not write these theories with polemics in mind. Therefore, my use of testimonial knowledge and identity power is analytical. I apply the structure of her analysis to a different historical background.
[114] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 14.
[115] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 15.
[116] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 20.
[117] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 90-91.

knowing from these groups, and this becoming the general idea in the Christian West, Muslims and women were not given an audience. It can even be imagined that they were unable to speak up for themselves and argue for their capacity of knowing, since the audience of Christian males would shut them down through their own polemical belief systems. This is what Kristie Dotson describes as, although again in modern terms, *testimonial quieting.* This is defined by her as "when an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower."[118] This often results in a loss of *intellectual courage,* which in turn results in a loss of epistemic agency.[119] This reminds one of the silencing of women in the Middle Ages. The loss of intellectual courage of women can be seen in the story of Hildegard von Bingen, who began receiving revelation from an age much earlier than the age in which she began to accept and preach it, since she herself could not believe a woman would receive the Word of God.[120] This disbelief in her own capacity for epistemic knowledge and agency must have stemmed from the general belief that women do not have the capacity for knowledge and are undeserving of an audience. This must have extended to all women in the Middle Ages.

Only true prophets from these groups could claim epistemic agency and authority. But for this, prophetic authentication was necessary. Criteria for true prophecy, as we have seen in Augustine, Aquinas, and Alphonse of Jaen, are demonstrative proofs of prophecy in the form of miracles, validation of earlier prophets, and the continuation of the Christian doctrine. Additionally, one must be moral and intellectual, which are defined exclusively by Christian conceptions of those characteristics. These criteria for true prophecy are therefore not neutral but formulated in explicit Christian terms, which functioned as epistemic boundaries that only allowed for a very specific subject that could be a legitimate bearer of divine knowledge.

Muhammad fails to meet these criteria and is defined as a false prophet. He is external to the Scriptural tradition and cannot have valid authority. He provides no miracles in the eyes of the Christians, though this is debatable.[121] And his military success is not a form of divine protection, but

[118] Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence: Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 242.
[119] Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence: Tracking Practices of Silencing," 243; Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 49.
[120] Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 37.
[121] This is debatable since according to Islamic tradition, Muhammad performed various miracles, with the most significant being the revelation of the Qur'an. While Muhammad did not directly write the Qur'an, his recitation

only political opportunism. Muhammad is portrayed as a powerful outsider with worldly ambition, who fakes his prophecy to fulfil his political goals. Women, by contrast, fail to fall in the realm of revelation, prophecy, and reason, not due to being external threats, but having internal deficiencies. Women are permitted to speak prophetically only if their speech is mediated and confirmed by male authority, which is a rare occurrence. Only those women who emphasise their inferiority were to be considered for prophetic evaluation.

Muhammad, Muslims, and women occupy opposite ends of the spectrum of revelatory and rational illegitimacy. Muhammad and his believers are external challenges, whereas women represent internal deficiencies, causing each of these groups to be incapable of knowledge. These two figures may rhetorically be distinct, but they operate within the same epistemic framework. They each mark the boundaries that define what Christian prophecy and rationality are not. Each provides a contrast by which the proper subject of revelation and knowledge is constructed. This dynamic of constructing identity by excluding different kinds of Others leads directly into the next section. There, we can see how medieval Christian intellectual identity was constructed through the rejection of the external religious rival and the internal embodied threat, producing a model of the Christian reason that depends structurally on both.

Medieval polemics present themselves as the practice of disciplined reasoning. Polemicists use Scripture, Aristotelian logic, criteria for prophetic legitimacy, and theories of the soul to justify exclusion. Their arguments follow their understanding of rational logic: classification, deduction, appeal to the authority of early prophets, and evaluation of testimony. Polemics, although they may seem irrational in themselves through the arguments presented in this study, are not failures of reason. They are simply products of reason operating within a limited medieval Christian framework. Their rationality is not impartial but lies in the applications of presuppositions that are considered irrefutably true, which already define Muslims and women as epistemically deficient. Polemic is a form of reasoning whose conclusions are guaranteed by its starting points.

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of its verses is regarded as his greatest miracle, among others. For further discussion on the miracles of Muhammad, see: Acar and Kaya, *Philosophy of Religion in Islam,* 239-241.

Rather than opposing reason, polemics depend on it. Polemical texts find their strength in the claim that they express the criteria of rational judgment. However, since these criteria were themselves shaped by male clerical authority, polemic becomes the instrument through which reason protects its own boundaries. The relationship between polemics and reason is almost cyclical. Polemic presents itself as the voice of reason, and reason appears authoritative because polemics eliminate other epistemic possibilities. Reason makes polemics effective.

The medieval case of polemics shows that reason and logic can justify injustice. When the criteria and premises of rationality are structured by gendered and theological hierarchies, they generate epistemic injustice. Women and Muslims are not excluded because they truly lack reason, but because the definition of reason in these communities has been formed to exclude them. Reason here becomes an instrument of identity power. It controls who is allowed to speak and know, and whose testimony may count as credible. Rational judgment and the authority of reason are achieved through the systematic exclusion of others.

Identity Formation Through Exclusion of Internal and External Others

Polemics in the medieval Christian world were never mere attacks on doctrinal error. They also functioned as a tool for identity formation, particularly of the identity of the rational Christian man. By defining the boundaries between truth and falsehood, and revelation and delusion, polemical works provided the conceptual tools through which Christian men articulated who they were and who they were not. For this section, we can use Charles Taylor's theories on the sources of the self. Although these are modernised conceptions, they apply to this research. As Charles Taylor argues, a sense of identity depends on our orientation to the good and drawing on distinctions between what is higher and lower goods, and what is rational or misguided.[122] By drawing these distinctions, a framework of values and beliefs is formed, which becomes a shared framework of those who adhere to it.

Charles Taylor writes that:

[122] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 3-4.

I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way, in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another, in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding, and of course, these classes may overlap. A self exists only within what I call 'webs of interlocution.'[123]

Taylor's notion of a web of interlocutors refers to those with a shared moral and conceptual framework that binds a community together. But this shared framework also creates boundaries: certain groups that are incompatible with this framework. In the medieval Christian context, rational Christian men constituted such a web, united by common assumptions about reason, virtue, and divine order. Taylor writes that our moral intuitive reactions are shaped by the cultural frameworks that form us. When individuals encounter beliefs or behaviours that violate these intuitions, they position the offenders outside their moral community and, in doing so, reinforce the values within it. Our culture tells us who we are to respect and who we are to disrespect. This involves "denying the description of those left outside: they are thought to lack souls, to be not fully rational, or perhaps to be destined by God for some lower station, or something of the sort."[124] For medieval Christian men, Muslims and women did not belong to the shared web of rational and authoritative knowers, but they still functioned as crucial interlocutors in the negative sense. Both groups were deficient through being inferior or lacking rationality. This exclusion did more than identify others; it produced the identity of the rational Christian man. Excluding error was therefore inseparable from shaping the self. Medieval Christian men became who they were by defining what Muslims and women were not.

A further clarification of this can be found in George Herbert Mead's notion of the *generalised other*. Mead argues that the self emerges when individuals internalise the shared norms, expectations, and structured activities of the broader community. The "organised community" enters their thinking and gives unity to the self.[125] This is the structure in which medieval thinkers operated. Their criteria for legitimate knowledge were never private philosophical preferences, but expressions of the internalised standpoint of the Christian community. As Avril Cameron has shown above, *compendia* systematised

[123] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 36.
[124] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 4-5.
[125] George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviourist*, ed. Charles W. Morris (The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 154-156.

this communal voice, creating shared truths that thinkers absorbed into their frameworks of reasoning. It is important to note here that this internalisation of the communal framework was not only done by men. Medieval women generally participated in and reproduced this same epistemic order as well. This demonstrates that the exclusion operates not only through domination but also through the standards of the community that structure epistemic authority. In this sense, polemical boundary-making expresses the communal identity that Christian men and women alike inhabited, even if its hierarchies were lived differently.

Taylor insists that human identity emerges through dialogue, confrontation, and mutual interpretation. This relational account of identity is important for analysing medieval Christian polemics. Taylor writes that even when someone defines themselves against others, those others remain part of one's web of interlocutors. Exclusion is not the absence of relation, but a mode of relation. The self is shaped not only by positive relations of confirmation but also by negative relations with what one rejects.[126] This insight clarifies the logic of medieval Christian polemics. The polemical representations of Muslims and women did not put them completely outside the male Christian conceptual world, but they became negative reference points.

The identity of the rational Christian man was formulated through polemics, which defined women and Muslims as the negation of their being. In medieval Christian thought, the female body served as a philosophical limitation in which rationality dissolves into instability and passion. Woman's incapacity for knowing is the negation of the capacity of knowing that Christian men ascribe to themselves and their identity. Masculine rationality is not merely presumed but produced through distancing from the feminine, which functions as the emblem of ungoverned sensibility. The perfection of the male intellect is a metaphysical achievement and an identity constituted through the exclusion of women through their imperfection.

A similar argument can be made about the exclusion of Muhammad and Muslims. Muhammad is the external negation, against whom identity boundaries are formed. In Christian epistemology, Muhammad is the antithesis of the principles of prophecy, and he becomes the figure of deception and

[126] Taylor, *Sources of the Self,* 37.

irrationality. Muhammad is the embodiment of false transcendence, and his followers are considered irrational in their belief in Muhammad and his religion. By putting Muhammad in the category of deception and his followers as irrational, Christian thinkers establish the purity and spiritual hierarchy of their prophetic tradition and their adherence to it. Christian identity is formed through the systematic negation of what Muhammad is made to symbolise. The negation of both groups stabilises the ideal Christian knower as male, disciplined, and spiritually aligned with Christian doctrine. Medieval Christian subjectivity emerges as an identity produced through contrast with others, defined positively only because women and Muslims are put in a thoroughly negative light. The rational Christian man identifies what he is through what women and Muslims are not.

For medieval Christians, revelation is considered the highest and purest form of knowledge, and whoever controls the criteria of true revelation controls the doctrine, teaching, interpretation, and the boundaries of the frameworks of the community. The Christian man had taken this control immediately. Therefore, we can view polemical writings about Others as a form of governance. Through maintaining the Others as delusional, passionate, and irrational in writing, the Christian men also maintained their control. Polemics ridicule their opponent to delegitimise their epistemic authority and agency. The authority of the clergy is reinforced each time false revelation is named.
The result is a heavily enforced power structure. By determining who may receive revelation and who may interpret it, the clergy claim authority over truth. Within this structure, polemics are not always accidental outbreaks of hostility but tools that help to maintain masculine and clerical dominance, excluding women and Muslims so that Christian male authority appears both natural and necessary. In this way, theological polemic becomes a mechanism for preserving institutional order, ensuring that challenges to doctrine, hierarchy, or identity can be dismissed as the errors of those who were never authorised to know in the first place.

Medieval Christian rationality was shaped through polemics, where polemical writings protect truth by identifying, containing, and excluding error. Polemicists generated structured narratives that made their opponents incapable of epistemic participation. The rhetorical strategies, narrative inversion, the creation of pseudo-biographies and caricatures, and the trope of ‘weak leading the weak,’ did more

than merely insult their targets. They provided the arguments through which Christian authors demonstrated that certain kinds of people could never be legitimate participants in revelation or reason. In this system, women became bodies incapable of stable intellect, and Muslims became voices without legitimate authority, defined by deception. Through excluding these groups from the realm of reason, Christian men became the only subjects capable of knowledge and truth. Polemics constructed the epistemic boundaries of the medieval Christian world. Identity forms in relation to others. Christian men become rational, authoritative knowers because women and Muslims are put down as those who cannot know. The negation of the internal other of women and the external other of Muslims produces a medieval Christian subject who is male, spiritual, and capable of reason and revelation, which is defined by the errors he excludes. Polemic becomes a mode of identity formation by creating the boundaries of what a rational agent is and is not in the eyes of the Christian community.

Conclusion

This study has shown that medieval Christian thought created its claims to rationality, revelation, and authority through deliberate acts of exclusion. Across polemical depictions of Muhammad and gendered constructions of women, Christian authors produced a definition of reason that was inseparable from the Christian framework. What first seems like a theological disagreement or social prejudice proves to be a structured epistemic framework. Polemic becomes the way for Christian thinkers to define who may know, whose testimony counts, and which forms of insight can be recognised as true. The exclusion of the figures of Muhammad and the medieval Christian woman, one external and one internal, was central to this. Their exclusion not only marked the limits of orthodoxy but also reinforced the identity of the Christian male rational subject.

Christian polemicists did not describe the historical Muhammad, but they constructed him. Despite generally having barely any reliable knowledge of his life, they wrote about who he was and what he represented. In their texts, Muhammad appears as a false prophet, trickster, heresiarch, and Antichrist, all categories that point to epistemic failure. These categories imply judgments about false revelation, unreliable senses, faulty reason, and the lack of divine illumination.

Polemicists invented or distorted biographies of Muhammad, infusing them with myths and falsities to exaggerate their opinions. They used narrative strategies to help their argument that Islam is a religion of false revelation. Pseudo-biographies and inverted narratives of polemics become tools to invalidate Muhammad's epistemic authority, and with it, that of the Qur'an. By defining Muhammad as a false prophet, they also reinforced the meaning of true prophecy. According to Christian thinkers, Muhammad failed to meet every criterion of true prophecy: public reception of revelation, prior announcement by earlier prophets, coherence with established doctrine, and confirmation through miracles. By not meeting these criteria, Muhammad becomes the antithesis of true prophecy. Through this, Christian thinkers established boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge.

In this framework, Muhammad becomes the external other of medieval Christian reason. Islam appears not only as a rival religion and a threat, but also as the boundary against which Christianity and Christian epistemology define themselves. By depicting Muhammad as a false prophet, Christian writers

positioned Islam as a threat to the coherence of Christian knowledge. The figure of Muhammad embodied an external irrationality that Christian authors needed to stabilise their own claims to truth. The exclusion of Muhammad was therefore not merely rhetorical. Islam became the negative mirror through which Christian rational identity was produced and affirmed.

Where Muhammad is positioned as an external threat to reason through polemics, women became the internal threat. Women were constructed as inherently epistemically inferior to men. Writers did this through Genesis, Aristotelian biology, and scholastic psychology. Eve's role in the Fall was taken as scriptural proof that women are weak and susceptible to deception, even deceivers themselves. Aristotelian thought provided a naturalised foundation, describing the female body as a defective version of the male body. According to this theory and the scholastic thinkers who built on it, the female body inherently lacks and suppresses the rational male part of the soul. Women were therefore imagined as governed by their passions and senses, inherently unstable, and incapable of rational judgment. The female body itself became an epistemic argument. Female error was expressed through the vices of women that they inherited from Eve. Female "chatter," their curiosity, and emotionality were framed as sources of error. Women were virtuous if they were silent and remained in their homes. This functioned as epistemic containment.

Female prophecy, however, was possible and reveals a contradiction. According to Scripture, women were forbidden to preach and teach the word of God, yet some women experienced visions and prophetic experiences. Their claims to prophecy could only be recognised when they were validated by male clergy. Female prophets were required to frame their authority through the oppressive language of their communities. They portrayed themselves as weak, dumb, and inferior to men, rather than as rational subjects. In this way, female prophecy became the exception that confirmed the rule. Women could only speak when their speech reinforced the hierarchy of the sexes. The possibility of female prophecy did not challenge male authority, but showed that it was necessary, since a woman's prophetic claim was only accepted if it reaffirmed her epistemic subordination.

Women became the internal other of reason. By portraying women as sensual, unstable, and susceptible to deception, authors constructed femininity as the mirror of the ordered and disciplined

intellect they associated with the Christian male. This contrast established male authority from within the boundaries of the Christian community. The deficiencies of women served as internal signs reinforcing the need for male governance. In this way, the figure of women reaffirmed the epistemic hierarchy from within, making the authority of male reason appear self-evident.

What becomes clear throughout this study is that medieval Christian polemics were not the opposite of reason but an expression of it. Polemical writing used tools that presented themselves as rational, such as logical classification, scriptural exegesis, and the authority of inherited tradition. These texts claimed objective judgment, even though the premises from which they argued already predetermined the exclusion of their targets. Polemics functioned as reason but operated in a closed epistemic framework, where rationality enforced its boundaries. Polemics helped determine what counted as true revelation, rational belief and legitimate doctrine. Instead of fostering a debate, polemics removed the possibility of one by labelling its opponents as epistemically incapable. Muslims and women were unreliable knowers, so there was no use in discussion. Polemics, therefore, decided who could participate in the realm of reason.

This function of polemics relied on rhetorical and narrative strategies to create the figures of irrationality. Muhammad's life was rewritten so that Islam itself appeared as a false revelation. Eve, in turn, became the model of feminine epistemic failure, establishing a template by which all women could be imagined to be epistemically inferior. Such portrayals were not merely judgments but philosophical acts of boundary-making. The outcome of this process was epistemic injustice. Both groups were subjected to testimonial injustice. Their claims were denied credibility, and their testimony was disqualified because of who they were. They were also subjected to testimonial quieting. Their capacity to function as a knower was actively limited. Hildegard's hesitation to express her prophecy shows how epistemic hierarchies could become internalised. The possibility of divine illumination in a woman was inconceivable because the community had taught women that their knowledge was limited. Reason became an instrument of injustice, where medieval rationality was shaped by Christian male authority.

Polemics shape the epistemic boundaries that define Christian identity. Muslims were cast as the external other, marking the outer limits of true revelation and true reason. Women served as the

internal error that defined the inner limits of rational stability. Together, these exclusions reinforced the epistemic framework in which the Christian male became the sole legitimate knower. Christian male subjectivity required contrasting figures who embodied what he was not. Polemics created these figures to stabilise the identity of rational Christian men. By determining who could know and who could speak, Christian authors controlled orthodoxy and the Christian community. Polemics maintained the hierarchy of the medieval Christian epistemic order and reinforced the authority of Christian men, while excluding the possibility of other forms of knowledge.

This shows that medieval Christian rationality was constructed through exclusion and that polemics were the tools through which this was rationalised and stabilised. By defining Muhammad as the external other of reason and women as its internal other, Christian writers produced a system in which only the Christian male could stand as a credible knower. Polemics, therefore, did more than attack opponents; they built the medieval Christian epistemic framework.

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