

The Hybridization of Europe and the Muslim World

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In this monumental work, three historians study the political, military, cultural and economic interactions between Europe and the Muslim world over the past millennium and a half. One of the original sides to their approach is that they don't confine themselves to the religious divide, which enables them to refute the theory of an inevitable clash between the European and Arab Muslim worlds.

Reviewed: Henry Laurens, John Tolan, Gilles Veinstein, *L'Europe et l'islam. Quinze siècles d'histoire*, Paris, Odile Jacob, "Histoire" series, 2009, 473 p.

The intersections between the history of Europe and that of the Muslim world are not confined to reciprocal conquests or conflicting universalist claims. *L'Europe et l'islam. Quinze siècles d'histoire* ["Europe and Islam: Fifteen Centuries of History"] by Henry Laurens and Gilles Veinstein (Professors at the Collège de France) and John Tolan (University of Nantes), three specialists whose reputations precede them, is a major historical survey that shuns all ideological approaches – which is not always the case in this area of inquiry.

The most conspicuous feature of this fresco is its vast temporal and geographical scope, covering an immense area between the Atlantic and Indian oceans, including Continental Europe and the Arab and the Turco-Ottoman worlds. The three co-authors share with us their extensive knowledge of the relevant languages and their command of a wealth of sources as they work the details of their wide-ranging research into the bigger picture. They also furnish some telltale exhibits for non-specialists among us, such as this January 21, 1916 proclamation by the ulema of Al-Azhar, issued in compliance with the joint wishes of France and Great Britain:

Consider the part of Iraq currently occupied by the British, look at the lot of Lebanon and that of Arabs in the West protected by France, and you will perceive the difference between British and French conduct and that of the Turks. The Turks bear a grudge against the Arabic language, the language of the Prophet and the Koran, the language of prayer, and seek to annihilate it in order to substitute their own language [...]. In Syria, the Lebanese, through their copious writings, and the Jesuits, through the combination of their talents, have become the propagators of Arabic. In Egypt, thanks to British support, this language is flourishing.[...] Just recently, moreover, France showed the greatest solicitude towards the Arab Congress during its meeting in Paris.

This is a remarkable expression of propaganda serving the interests of the Entente, but it signifies more than mere submission to the reigning powers of the day. The point of this

quote is not to illustrate the influence and forms of domination of certain powers over others. And yet the symbols are legion in this historical survey. For example, the very first words uttered on the threshold of the New World in 1492 were spoken in the “language of the Koran” by one Luis de Torres, a Jewish convert to Christianity¹ who disembarked with Columbus on the island in the Bahamas which Columbus subsequently dubbed San Salvador. Other noteworthy examples include the Muslim Ibn Jubayr charmed by a Christmas mass during the Crusades; French explorer Pierre Belon du Mans vaunting the merits of slavery under the Turks in the 16th century, at a time when the latter posed a formidable threat to the European Orient; and Isabelle Eberhardt, a Catholic who converted to Islam at the height of European colonization of the Muslim world. So one could write a history without any mention of friction, hitches or bloodshed, a fitting narrative for an “age of dialogue,” but this is not the option the authors have picked.

Alliances, reversals and interactions

The demonstration – for this is what it boils down to – begins with the facts. This *histoire croisée* covers the history of armed conflicts from the first incursions into the Italian and Iberian peninsulas to the eventual decolonization of the Maghreb, as well as the taking of major cities, which shows the then current military might of one of the protagonists (far more than the political consequences thereof): Seville in 712, Jerusalem in 1099, Acre in 1291, Constantinople in 1453, Belgrade in 1521, Alger in 1830. Small or large-scale massacres, all manner of destruction, submission of “the other” to an inferior status before the law, persecution, forced exile and conversions, suspicions and accusations of treason, slave trade in the Mediterranean, churches turned into mosques and vice-versa – these unsavory sides of the past are related without pretense or value judgments: history is not made to reassure fragile or partial minds.

The portrayal of three major realms of the Middle Ages – one determined by Latin Christianity, the second by Byzantine Christianity, the third by Islam – reveals a variety of coalitions, alliances and reversals: the Muslim conquest of southwest Europe was carried out with the help of Christian contingents, while the Christian conquest of the east coast of the Mediterranean was abetted by Muslim support. Half a century after Saladin’s victory at Hittin in 1187, al-Nâsir Dâwûd gave Jerusalem to his Frankish allies without even retaining control over the mosques of the esplanade. In the following phase, the Ottoman sultans had little difficulty finding Christian vassals to establish their authority in the Balkans or to settle their wars of succession; a reverse alliance was forged between the Sublime Porte² and François I, and the eastern *limes* became the locus of heavy fighting, involving Tatars and Cossacks in particular. In yet another context, the British and French empires could count on several hundred thousand soldiers of Muslim faith, even to fight against some of their coreligionists.

The history of trade, treated with the same rigor in this entangled history corroborates the description of ongoing transactions between so-called enemies. The authors reject Pirenne’s popularized theory that the armed advent of Islam along a broad section of the southern rim of the Mediterranean engendered a rift between the two shores that was never closed again. To be sure, the Rhenish axis took on central importance during the Latin Middle Ages, and Bagdad was turned more towards the wares of the Indo-Chinese subcontinent than

¹ To avoid expulsion from Spain under the edict of 1492. De Torres was Columbus’ interpreter on his first voyage and the first Jew to settle in America. – Translator’s note

² Aka the Ottoman Porte (i.e. the gate to the main government buildings in Constantinople), a metonym for the central government of the Ottoman Empire.

towards Aachen. But the authors rightly distinguish between the phases of conquest and those in which new social relations were established, and they point out that the “boundaries between war, race, piracy and trade were [...] very blurred.”

The Caliphate of Cordoba traded with the Christian realms, and the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem as well as the County of Tripoli were not cut off from a hinterland containing Muslim and Christian populations in proportions far different from those today. The islands (Sicily, Crete, Cyprus, Malta, Balearics) switched sides according to the fortunes of war, although the population itself didn't necessarily follow the victor. Pisa, Genoa and Venice displayed an astonishing dynamism, and Byzantium, although in decline, still retained a certain sway. Its pivotal role in the arts is well known, even if the manner in which part of its ancient heritage was passed on and part of its empire was transformed into an Arab-speaking region (before rejoining and being re-adapted to the Latin world) has been a subject of recent controversy³. These interactions, although not interrupted, did undergo a relative decline between the 16th and 18th centuries; the territorial division was more pronounced then, even when nascent Russia is included in the overall picture. The interaction resumed, under a new balance of power, in the age of European colonization, that first wave of globalization.

From “barbarity” to “modernity”

The survey juxtaposes the traces of past acts with portrayals of the protagonists at the time and their successors. The historians' provide a useful list, without claiming to be exhaustive, of the successive names of the “barbarian” and the – ever-shifting – borders keeping him away: over here, he was called Saracen, Moor, Turk, heretic, Muslim, Arab; over there, Frank, infidel, Christian, European, Westerner. John Tolan points out that the term *jihād* was already complex from the time of Muhammad, the term *crusade* was not coined till the 13th century, and the *Reconquista* was “essentially an invention of 19th-century historiography,” even if its main features had already been articulated as far back as the 9th century. Gilles Veinstein provides little-known information about the quest for the “golden apple”:

This fabulous fruit was the symbol of the city to be conquered, the ultimate city whose possession would mean that the [Ottoman sultan's] armies had accomplished their task and that their master would thenceforth exercise the universal domination for which he was destined.

Henry Laurens provides clues about the way in which the Arabic-speaking world assimilated and partly modified representations forged north of the Mediterranean. These depictions were meant to express an otherness, and were more often than not degrading – even racist in some cases –, in line with criteria elaborated in philosophy and the humanities at the time. The same goes for the Arabic language (less fully covered in this survey), vaunting the superiority of the Muslim believer and denigrating black Africans, who are sometimes referred to as *'abid* (slaves).

The rhetoric seconds the actions: it helps to better understand why, in the second half of the 19th century, the nationality principle could be championed for the sakes of Christian populations of the Balkan peninsula, whereas North Africa “in its entirety was destined to fall

³ Over S. Gouguenheim's book, *{Aristote au Mont-Saint-Michel. Les racines grecques de l'Europe chrétienne}*, Paris, Seuil, 2008. See then M. Lejbowicz (dir.), *{L'Islam médiéval en terres chrétiennes. Science et idéologie}*, Éditions du Septentrion, 2009.

under the yoke of direct colonial domination.” Religion was not the only discriminating factor: Ethiopia under the rule of the Copts was bound to undergo a fate similar to that of its Sudanese neighbors, albeit belatedly and owing to Italy’s ambitions.

The major shift, ushered in by the advent of modernity, began in the 16th century, and although some in Europe were still resorting to the themes of the crusade even in the 20th century, the population north of the Mediterranean came to define itself less and less along lines of faith. The “crisis of European conscience in the aftermath of the wars of religion” was decisive, as summed up in John Locke’s exhortation: “Neither pagan nor Mahamedan nor Jew ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the Commonwealth because of his religion.” A nascent body of laws began to assert itself as the universal norm following the Congress of Vienna in 1815. “Ottoman diplomacy,” like that of every state entity founded since then, subsequently followed that “forced Westernization” that was antinomic to traditional law. And that was not mere show, but a fundamental transformation brought about not only by the spread of the printed book and the sweeping changes which that instrument ushered in. Ernest Renan, a champion of scientism, was out to undermine not only Islam, but Christianity and Judaism as well.

Call for a new inquiry

In the backdrop to state-building and those protean entities called nations, a comparative history ought to be written of the progress towards autonomy of the law vis-à-vis all revealed scripture, and of the relationship between law and the various disciplines of knowledge. And a comparative survey of censorship should be written, one that goes beyond a merely religious framework with a view to presenting a general panorama of thought, of its media of distribution, and of universities, seminaries and other libraries.

The authors acknowledge how difficult it is to determine “what is quite simply borrowed and what is the synchronicity of evolution” – which goes to show researchers still have their work cut out for them. The authors do, however, emphasize the measurable markers of change: demographic vitality, administrative efficacy, the solidity of military infrastructure, military technology, progress in transportation and communications – elements to which one might add, without being too prosaic, the spread of the use of the fork.

But all this does not fully account for the shift in the balance of power. The deliberate choice not to treat “Islam and Christianity [...] as religions” leads to a focus on politics, geopolitics and economics. It overlooks the intensive efforts at justification and reconstruction in the philosophical, anthropological and cosmological discourse of each faith which form the background to the officially proclaimed orthodoxies. This choice does not help us understand why, as Henry Laurens puts it, “Islamism became the dominant discourse in Muslim societies from the 1980s.” To grasp, for example, what is involved in imported concepts like *hurrîyyat al-dhamîr* (freedom of conscience), we need more critical editions of writings in the languages of the Islamic world (Arabic, Persian and Urdu), accompanied by research findings in historical linguistics. I’d be willing to bet such an *histoire croisée* would spawn a new generation of researchers capable of defusing, along the Mediterranean littoral and beyond, the specious arguments that fuel widespread fear and hatred.

Related links

Histoire croisée of Europe and the Islamic world

- John Tolan's web page at University of Nantes: <http://www.univ-nantes.fr/tolan-j>
- Maria Rosa Menocal, *L'Andalousie arabe. Une culture de la tolérance, VIIIe-XVe siècle*, Paris, Autrement, 2003.
- Pierre Guichard, *Al-Andalus 711-1492. Une histoire de l'Andalousie arabe*, Paris, Hachette Littératures, 2000.
- Nadia Hamour, *L'Europe et le monde arabe depuis 1914*, Paris, Ellipses, 2009.

Essays on Europe, Islam and the Muslim world today

- Islamophobia in the West: <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/La-peur-de-l-islam.html>
- Article by Jocelyne Césari on Islam in Europe: <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2000/04/CESARI/13696>
- Essay by Henry Laurens on the Middle East at the beginning of the 21st century: <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/La-politique-de-l-erreur.html>
- Articles about Europe and Turkey: <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/dossiers/europe-turquie/index.shtml>
- Olivier Roy, *Vers un islam européen*, Paris, Éditions Esprit, 1999.
- Tariq Ramadan, *Être musulman européen. Étude des sources islamiques à la lumière du contexte européen*, Éditions Tawhid, Lyon, 1999.

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