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Fall 2011

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#### Repository Citation

O'Brien, P. (2011). Islamic civilization and (western) modernity. *Comparative Civilizations Review*, 65, 18-32.

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## Islamic Civilization and (Western) Modernity

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### INTRODUCTION

Much historiography of the last three decades has undermined the sway of Eurocentrism. Though unabashedly Eurocentric histories still become bestsellers,<sup>1</sup> revisionists have shown that the ideas and developments that spawned modernity hardly sprang *sui generis* from European soil. In their historic re-awakening starting at the end of the Middle Ages that ushered in the Renaissance, Reformation, Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, Europeans borrowed and augmented a vast array of ideas, institutions, and practices particularly from Islamic, but also Indian and Chinese, civilization.<sup>2</sup>

This article contends that such revisionism, itself now putative, does not probe searchingly enough the inter-civilizational encounter with Islam. The revisionist perspective underestimates or altogether overlooks not only the grave diffidence that Europeans (Latin Christians) developed through their medieval rivalry with Muslims, but, more importantly, the pivotal role that such civilizational solicitude played in motivating the urge to reform. Self-deprecation born of defeat against the archrival initiated the pattern of relentless introspection that led Europeans to question the foundations of the medieval order.

Revisionists and Eurocentrists alike tend to obscure European diffidence because they view the late Middle Ages anachronistically from the vantage point of (modern) hindsight. The subsequent accomplishments of European (early) modernity that catapulted the West past Islam are considered both immanent and imminent, projecting retrospectively a confidence among pre-modern Europeans that did not exist. In fact, the latter were desperately scrambling just to keep pace with an unequivocally superior rival. It is not inconceivable that without the daunting challenge posed by Islamic civilization, modernity would not have originated in Europe.

One caveat is in order. This paper is written from the perspective of (for the most part, educated) medieval Catholics. It presents evidence of what *they* wrote and said (thus the many quotations) as well as of what they can be reasonably presumed to have known (for instance, battles lost or books widely distributed and discussed). That subsequent research may have shown their views of themselves or their Muslim rivals to be in error does not change the fact that they held the views and were moved to action by them.

As intimated, just such anachronistic hindsight or retrospection has obscured the role that Islamic civilization played in the generation of (Western) modernity.

### Failed Crusades

The Crusades preoccupied the late medieval Roman Catholic mind like no other event. In launching the First Crusade on November 27, 1095, Pope Urban II ultimately sought to return Rome to world predominance by seizing control of Jerusalem and the surrounding territories considered the nucleus of the civilized world.<sup>3</sup> Much vehement scholarly debate swirls around exactly when and how the Latin world became effectively cut off from the richer, more civilized East. The Pirenne Thesis blames the isolation on the Muslim invasions in the seventh century;<sup>4</sup> the Belgian's detractors, on the Germanic invasions in the fifth.<sup>5</sup>

No one disputes, however, that by the time of the First Crusade Latin Christendom lay isolated and nearly fully severed from the thriving societies of the Mediterranean east that Rome itself considered to be the core of the known world. In declaring that initial crusade to free Jerusalem from Muslim control, Urban II exclaimed: "This royal city, therefore, situated, at the centre of the world, is now held captive by His enemies . . . She seeks therefore and desires to be liberated, and does not cease to implore you to come to her aid."<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the actual campaigns for Christ, prosecuted intermittently over the course of more than three centuries, fulfilled no such lofty ambition. Although the *milites Christi* managed to capture Jerusalem in 1099 as well as establish a handful of Crusader states in the Levant, they more often met with defeat. The Franks failed to conquer, for instance, Aleppo and Damascus, the two biggest cities in the region, and nothing east of Edessa.<sup>7</sup> The Muslims swiftly fought back. Roger of Antioch was vanquished in 1119 at the battle of Balat ("Field of Blood"). Zengi took back Edessa in 1144.

Eugenius III initiated the Second Crusade (1147-48) to recapture Edessa, but it ended in fiasco. Damascus was unsuccessfully besieged, and Edessa remained in Muslim hands.<sup>8</sup> The disappointed pontiff referred to the expedition as "the most severe injury of the Christian name that God's church has suffered in our time."<sup>9</sup> Eventually, Nur al-Din and Saladin (Yusuf Ibn Ayyub) reunited the Muslims, stymied the crusaders in Egypt, and repossessed Jerusalem (on October 2, 1187).<sup>10</sup> Upon hearing of the loss of the Holy City Pope Urban III purportedly expired out of grief.<sup>11</sup>

Frederick Barbarossa, Richard I (the Lionhearted) and Philip II joined hands in the Third Crusade to try to liberate Jerusalem. In the end they struck a deal that returned the Levantine seaports to Christian control but left the Holy City under Muslim tutelage. The Fourth Crusade got no further than Constantinople, which the Latins sacked and looted in 1204, further deepening the rift within Christendom itself.<sup>12</sup> The

Franks did negotiate for control of Jerusalem from 1228 to 1244. But thereafter the Mamluks forced the Crusaders to beat an ignominious retreat.

The Fall of Acre on May 18, 1291 is traditionally understood as the end of Frankish rule in the area. Crusading missions recrudesced after 1291 but amounted to a succession of humiliating defeats culminating in the trouncing delivered by the Turks in 1396 at Nicopolis.<sup>13</sup> This is to say nothing of the Arab invasions before the Crusades (for instance in Iberia starting in 710)<sup>14</sup> or the devastation wrought in eastern Europe by marauding Mongols, who eventually embraced the Quran.<sup>15</sup> Defeats to the “infidels” culminated in the alarming capture of Constantinople in 1453 by the Ottomans. “We have never lost a city or a place comparable to Constantinople,” lamented Enea Silvio Piccolomini (anointed Pope Pius II in 1458). “The Turkish sword is now suspended over our heads, yet meanwhile we are engaging in internal wars, harassing our own brothers, and leaving enemies of the Cross to unleash their forces against us.”<sup>16</sup>

The Crusades opened Latins’ eyes to further dimensions of Islamic superiority beyond military prowess. Reports and tales of what the Crusaders experienced in the far off lands were immensely popular back home.<sup>17</sup> This literature overflowed with descriptions of splendors unknown to Latin Christians. The Arab cities were larger, the palaces lovelier, the merchants wealthier, the wares finer, the food tastier. In point of fact, many of the most coveted luxuries in Europe – rubies, emeralds, carpets, ceramics, silk, damask, sugar, bananas – reached Europe via major ports in the Near East where European merchants conducted business with worldlier Muslim traders connected to the Far East.<sup>18</sup>

European bluebloods asked to have many of their finest possessions adorned in *Kufic*, Arabic calligraphy, to give them an air of unexampled refinement. Similarly, Islamic decorative inscriptions were emulated in much Gothic ornamentation.<sup>19</sup> William of Aquitaine, the putative father of European poetry, learned to compose courtly vernacular lyric in Muslim Spain, where he crusaded during the eleventh century.<sup>20</sup> Other renowned troubadours such as Guiraut de Borneil, Arnaut Daniel, Piere Vidal, Marcabru, Raimbaut d’Orange, and Piere d’Auvergne are known to have admired and aped Muslim counterparts. In fact, the word “troubadour” likely stems from the Arabic *Taraba*, “to sing.”<sup>21</sup>

Ramón Llull urged Christian authors to appropriate styles and stories from Islamic literature because of its superior mythical and allegorical force.<sup>22</sup> His advice was heeded. Numerous popular tales, such as *Dame Sirith*, have oriental origins, though the characters and settings were Europeanized.<sup>23</sup> Marco Polo may have never visited China, and instead likely lifted the stories and descriptions of the Far East from Persian and Arabic sources.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps the most stunning, and humiliating, revelation of Islamic superiority occurred in philosophy, natural and metaphysical. By the time of Charlemagne (742-814), medieval Latins had lost all but the thinnest contact with the tradition of ancient learning. The Church became the sole (official) authority of what counted as knowledge. Rome established Scripture – and here even the vulgate Bible as opposed to original Old and New Testaments – as the fount of all knowledge.

The commentaries of the Church Fathers, above all Augustine, were also countenanced as legitimate sources of knowledge. Practically all serious inquiry took place in monasteries under the supervision of the Roman Curia and amounted to little more than learning, developing and occasionally modifying patristic *dicta* or *Sentences*, to quote the title of Peter Lombard's oft cited collection.<sup>25</sup>

By contrast, cultivated Muslims embraced ancient learning. Not only did they preserve and venerate the works of Greek masters such as Plato, Aristotle and Euclid that were lost to the Latins, Islamic and Jewish sages the likes of Musa al-Khwārizmī, al-Farabi, al-Ghazzali, Abu Ma'shar (Albumasar), Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroës), and Maimonides augmented and improved the inherited storehouse of knowledge.<sup>26</sup> No wonder, then, that exposure to this corpus stunned the less mature Western mind "like a bombshell."<sup>27</sup>

Exposure to the superior Islamic intellect came through various portals but none more important than Toledo, captured by Crusaders in 1085. Al-Ma'mun had compiled there one of the finest libraries in the medieval world, and when the victors found its treasures, they encountered hundreds of books and treatises of which they had neither knowledge nor understanding. Dorothee Metlitzki rightly describes the conquest of Toledo as "one of the most important events not only in the political but in the intellectual history of medieval Europe. At one stroke the Christian world took possession of a civilization next to which the Latin West seemed...provincial and barbaric."<sup>28</sup>

The knowledge transmitted to Latin Christendom via Islamic civilization touched and upset virtually every discipline. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, devoted the lion's share of his scholarly attention to wrestling with theological and epistemological quandaries stemming from Arab philosophy.<sup>29</sup> Was knowledge of God in fact inaccessible to the human mind, as Ibn Sina maintained? Was Absolute Truth ascertainable through reason in addition to revelation, as Ibn Rushd averred?<sup>30</sup> The Arab innovations in natural philosophy were even more disruptive. Al-Khwārizmī's *Algebra* established an entirely new branch of mathematics. The notion of a flat earth was overturned by Ptolemaic astronomy, itself superseded by Ibn al-Shatir's more sophisticated models.<sup>31</sup>

The astrology of Arab savants such as Abu Ma'shar intrigued Europeans so much that horoscopes for Jesus appeared.<sup>32</sup> Ibn al-Haytham's *Optics* set the standard for that field for centuries and laid the foundations for the scientific method based on empirical experimentation.<sup>33</sup> Ibn Sina's *Canon* became the leading reference in medicine.<sup>34</sup> In other applied sciences the Arabs excelled with such inventions as the abacus, the conical valve, the astrolabe, and the lateen sail.<sup>35</sup>

Lettered Europeans scrambled to absorb this torrent of new knowledge pouring in from their rivals. Those who could, journeyed to loci of Islamic erudition. "Since at present the instruction of the Arabs...is made available to all in Toledo," explained Daniel of Morley, "I hastened there to attend the lectures of the most learned philosophers in the world."<sup>36</sup> Both Adelard of Bath and Ramón Llull travelled to the Levant to learn Arabic, study Arab texts and carry the newly acquired knowledge back to Europe.<sup>37</sup> Curious men of power, such as Alfonso ("the Wise") X, Frederick II, and Peter the Venerable, assembled around them scholars familiar with Arab works and commissioned Latin translations of them. Peter, the Abbot of Cluny, had many of these works compiled in the *Corpus cluniacense*, which became the most treasured source of Islamic writing in Europe.<sup>38</sup>

Eventually, several schools of Oriental languages were established.<sup>39</sup> Bernard Lewis notes that "until the Renaissance and Reformation...Arabic was probably the most widely translated language in the world."<sup>40</sup> No small number of Catholic students enrolled in *medressas*, a coveted credential that enhanced their chances of securing professorships in the first European universities, which were patterned after the Islamic seminaries.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, do expressions such as holding a "chair" or being a "fellow" and practices such as wearing robes have Islamic origins.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, core curricula of medieval European universities became significantly arabized.<sup>43</sup>

Medieval Catholics were in no position to contemplate matching, let alone surpassing, the Islamic intellect. It took centuries of the greatest efforts by the brightest minds simply to comprehend what the Muslims already knew.<sup>44</sup> A striking example of this protracted game of catch-up the Europeans were forced to play turns up in the case of Hindu-Arabic numerals which it took Europeans over a quarter of a millennium to master.<sup>45</sup> The gnawing paradox of the Crusades for Christendom, then, was that they caused Islam to be "at one and the same time the great enemy and the great source of higher material and intellectual culture."<sup>46</sup>

No development did more than the Crusades to forge a distinct identity among (still proto) Europeans – the seed out of which would grow the awareness of what we today call "Western Civilization."

The campaigns for Christ were, in the first place, joint efforts undertaken, supported, and experienced collectively by Catholics from Italy and Spain to Germany and France and England. In the second place, the Crusades defined Islam as the significant Other, the great "Them" that makes the sense of "Us" possible.<sup>47</sup> We must keep in mind, however, that those early inklings of a "Western Us" formed with an unequivocal sense that "We" were losing to "Them."

### Questioning Medieval Order and Authority

It was in this atmosphere of defeat and humiliation that (proto)Europeans first began to question and then challenge the medieval order. The Roman Catholic Church, the custodian of that order, had long assured adherents that its teachings corresponded to Absolute Truth possession of which portended universal Christian empire.<sup>48</sup>

Unmistakable evidence to the contrary occasioned frustration and indignation, especially among the learned, who felt hoodwinked by the Pope. Numerous literati such as Daniel of Morley, Adelard of Barth, Roger Bacon, Peter Abélard, and William of Conches scoffed at their brethren who stubbornly clung to conventional teachings while eschewing Muslim philosophers simply because they were considered infidels.

Daniel chastised his culture as "infantile."<sup>49</sup> Adelard was livid with disgust for his own people: "violence ruled among the nobles, drunkenness among the prelates, corruptibility among the judges, fickleness among the patrons, and hypocrisy among the citizens." He looked forward to but one thing in this sorry place: "*Arabum studia*."<sup>50</sup> "Philosophy is the special province of the unbelievers: we have it all from them," declared Bacon.<sup>51</sup>

Interestingly, some of the earliest mavericks to stray from the Church's canon were those who sought a more precise understanding of the infidel's creed. Rome portrayed Saracens as the offspring of Hagar who venture wayward in the desert where they embrace paganism. In some accounts, like the famous Song of Roland, the idolaters believe in three gods, in others as many as forty. Mohammad is invariably caricatured as a heresiarch who utilizes magic to bewitch his credulous followers.<sup>52</sup>

However, in 1110 Petrus Alfonsi appended a nearly accurate description of the tenets of Islam to his *Dialogi contra Iudeos*, which gained a wide readership across Latin Europe in cultivated circles. Alfonsi could provide the fairer assessment because he relied not on the Church's teachings, rather on his own Arabic education and personal experience in Andalusia, where adherents of all three monotheistic faiths regularly interacted.<sup>53</sup> Not long thereafter, Peter the Venerable commissioned Robert of Ketton to translate the Quran into Latin. With its publication in 1143, serious students of Islam no longer had to rely on Scripture or myth; they could read the competing sacred text firsthand.

Caricatures of Islam hardly vanished inside Christendom after 1143. In fact, misrepresentations intensified with each defeat in the Crusades.<sup>54</sup> But now the fulminations of fanatics had to stand alongside soberer studies.

With *Opus maius* (1266-68) Roger Bacon essayed to convince Clement IV to relinquish the Crusades on grounds that they were unwinnable. He audaciously cautioned the Pontiff not to trust Scripture as a reliable guide to understanding the Saracens. "Three [sects]," he maintained, "are very rational: the sects of the Jews, the Saracens, and the Christians."

If Christians were to have any chance of converting Muslims – since conquering them was out of the question – it would have to be in a language they understood, namely the voice of reason.<sup>55</sup> Humbert de Romans, grand master of the Dominican Order, filed a report that concluded that Bacon's ideas were widely held.<sup>56</sup> William of Tripoli, for one, kept this more secular approach alive after Bacon landed in prison for reproaching the Catholic clergy.<sup>57</sup> William, based in Acre, wrote an account of Islam for the archdeacon of Liège in 1273 that concluded: "it now manifestly appears that they are near to the Christian faith and not far from the path of salvation."<sup>58</sup> Ramón Llull espoused the unification of the Abrahamic creeds, and in *Libre del gentil* had the pagan protagonist lectured to by three "wise" men – a Christian, Jew and Muslim – who gloss over the differences between the three faiths to make the case for monotheism.<sup>59</sup>

Other Church teachings came under rigorous scrutiny by those versed in Greco-Arab philosophy. Long before Galileo wrote to the Grand Duchess Christina in 1615, "the Bible tells us how to go to Heaven, but not how the heavens go,"<sup>60</sup> students of the Arabs had developed an independence of mind that led them to doubt the Church Fathers.

"Let no one be shocked," warned Daniel of Morley, "if while dealing with the creation of the world I invoke the teachings not of the Fathers of the Church, but of the pagan philosophers, for, although the latter are not from among the faithful, some of their words...should be incorporated into our instruction."<sup>61</sup>

Adelard of Bath, who was the first to translate Euclid's *Elements* from Arabic and to introduce Arabic numerals to Europe, complained of his brethren back home: "It is difficult for me to discuss the nature of animals with you, because I learnt from my masters, the Arabs, to follow the light of reason, while you are led by the bridle of authority; for what other word than 'bridle' can I use to describe authority?"<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, Peter Abélard maintained that "authority is inferior to reason because it deals with opinions about truth rather than with truth itself, while reason concerns the thing itself and can settle the question." "For I was taught by my Arab masters to be led only by reason, whereas you were taught to follow the halter of the captured image of authority."<sup>63</sup> His widely read book, *Sic et Non*, enumerated the countless flaws in Church doctrine. The Church's condemnation of his teachings caused "such a state of despair that I thought of quitting the realm of Christendom and going over to the heathen [Saracens]."<sup>64</sup>

Although he did not, like Abélard, name his son "Astrolabe,"<sup>65</sup> William of Conches did read Arabic and urge others to do the same. He insisted, "it is not the task of the Bible to teach us the nature of things; this belongs to philosophy."<sup>66</sup> He assailed the story of Genesis by which "'He divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters that were above the firmament.' Since such a statement as this is contrary to reason let us show how it cannot be thus."<sup>67</sup>

Another Arabophile of the twelfth century, Thierry of Chartres, in *De sex dierum operibus*, authored one of the earliest attempts in the Christian West to explain the formation of the world through natural causes and to separate cosmology from theology.<sup>68</sup>

The ideas of these *moderni*, as the innovators referred to themselves, seeped into the universities. As they became wellsprings of the new knowledge, the universities first rivaled and then, in the thirteenth century, surpassed monasteries as centers of learning.<sup>69</sup> At Oxford, Paris or Bologna, for example, it became as common to study Avicenna or Averroës as it was to study Augustine. Indeed, entire schools of Latin Avicennism and Averroism took root at different universities during the thirteenth century and became an integral part of the incipient tendency of questioning Church authority.<sup>70</sup>

Rome assigned its sharpest mind the task of refuting the *moderni*. Thomas Aquinas dedicated most of his intellectual energies to parrying the criticisms of Catholic orthodoxy that emanated from Islamic learning. In addition to *Tractatus de unitate intellectus contra Averroistas* (1269-72), he penned *Summa contra Gentiles* (1259-64).

The latter came in response to a request from his Dominican brothers who in their endeavors to convert Muslims were at a loss as to how to respond cogently to retorts that Islam was a more rational creed than Christianity. There were dozens of specific conundrums raised by Greco-Arab philosophy that conventional Christian doctrine seemed ill prepared to solve.<sup>71</sup>

However, the central challenge issued forth from Averroës in his assertion that reason represented a second, indeed superior, route to Truth beside revelation. Aquinas' attempted solution, which became the cornerstone of Aristotelian scholasticism, was to reconcile reason and faith. Reason operated in the world of sense perception by comprehending the principles according to which things functioned. Because God designed those very principles, the study of the natural world brought man closer to God.

Yet, there were limits to what reason could know. Faith alone could yield understanding of the divine itself (not merely the things God created). Thus philosophy and theology did indeed address different subjects, even using different methods, but this did not make the two fields incompatible. On the contrary:

Though the...truth of the Christian faith surpasses the ability of human reason, nevertheless those things which are naturally instilled in human reason can not be opposed to this truth. For it is clear that those things which are implanted in reason by nature, are most true, so much so that it is impossible to think them to be false. Nor is it lawful to deem false that which is held by faith, since it is so evidently confirmed by God. Seeing then that the false alone is opposed to the true, as evidently appears if we examine their definitions, it is impossible for the aforesaid truth of faith to be contrary to those principles which reason knows naturally.<sup>72</sup>

Although Rome canonized the Dominican's dogma, the holes poked in Catholic theology were too many and deep to dike the flood of incredulity. Unable successfully to refute the intellectual challenges, Church authorities were forced to ban them.

In the list of 219 condemned propositions assembled in 1277 by Etienne Tempier, bishop of Paris, we discern some of the profound challenges confronting the medieval Church: "the absolutely impossible cannot be done by God;" "theological discussions are based on fables;" "nothing is known better because of knowing theology;" "the only wise men of the world are philosophers;" "there is no more excellent state than the study of philosophy."<sup>73</sup> Tempier's censure backfired, and Greco-Arab learning became a mainstay in the curricula of most European universities by the end of the thirteenth century.<sup>74</sup>

## **Conversion and Apostasy**

Numerous and/or salient conversions of Muslims to Christianity could have ameliorated the humiliation of losing to one's archrival on so many other fronts. As mentioned, the Dominicans made converting Muslims a primary goal of the order. Dominic himself travelled among Muslims with this in mind but met with little success.

The same can be said of the Franciscans, whose final rule commands proselytizing among Muslims. Francis was no hypocrite, and even approached the sultan to no avail. "He came into our army, burning with the zeal of faith, and was not afraid to cross over to the enemy army," recounted an eyewitness. "There he preached the word of God to the Saracens but accomplished little."<sup>75</sup>

No few pontiffs and Christian princes sent emissaries to prominent Muslim rulers, such as the king of Tunis or the Mongol Khan, in an effort to win their souls for Christ. They all failed.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, it was Christian conversion to Islam that was on the rise in territories overtaken by Muslims. The Vatican naturally dismissed and denounced such mass apostasy, for instance in Andalusia, as "conversion by sword." Involuntary conversion does not appear to have been the norm, however, because in so many places where Christians eventually regained control of erstwhile Muslim lands, the multitude of supposed "crypto-Christians" did not relinquish Islam when free to do so.<sup>77</sup>

Even many who remained nominally Christian committed a kind of cultural apostasy by enthusiastically emulating Muslim ways. Hear the laments of the staunch Christian Paul Alvarus of Córdoba:

The Christians love to read the poems and romances of the Arabs; they study the Arab theologians and philosophers, not to refute them but to form a correct and elegant Arabic. Where is the layman who now reads the Latin commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, or who studies the Gospels, prophets or Apostles? Alas! All talented young Christians read and study with enthusiasm the Arab books; they gather immense libraries at great expense; they despise the Christian literature as unworthy of attention. They have forgotten their language. For every one who can write a letter in Latin to a friend, there are a thousand who can express themselves in Arabic with elegance...<sup>78</sup>

Indeed, Alvarus' own son composed poems in Arabic.<sup>79</sup> This, of course, occurred in a place governed by Muslims. But in some territories ruled by Christians, such as the court of Henry IV in Castile or of Frederick II in Sicily, all manner of Arabophilia were practiced and the Christian religion ignored, even derided.<sup>80</sup>

As noted above, somewhat less audacious and conspicuous emulation of Arab philosophy coupled with derision of Christian theology formed in many European universities.

We can look to Dante as a poignant symbol of the vexation caused Latins by the rivalry with Islam. The Italian bard seems to have composed *La commedia*, that culmination of the Catholic medieval worldview, at least in part to counter Islam's irksome appeal. And yet, the literary form of the epic poem Dante appears to have adopted from Islamic *miraj* literature, in which Muhammad is guided through hell and heaven during a nocturnal journey.<sup>81</sup>

### Conclusion

As students of the so-called "Renaissance of the Twelfth Century" point out,<sup>82</sup> the intellectual origins of Western modernity lie in the late Middle Ages with the growing tendency to question ecclesiastical authority.<sup>83</sup> Rome's slippery grip on the determination of what counted as knowledge is too well known to recount here in detail.

Three overlapping but still distinguishable avenues of inquiry into new understandings of universal knowledge stand out. One sought a purer, uncorrupted Christianity, beginning with the likes of Marsellio of Padua (1270-1342) or Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260-1328), continuing through reformers such as John Wycliffe (ca. 1320-84) and Jan Hus (1370-1415), and culminating in Martin Luther (1483-1546) and the Reformation.

Along a second path, ultimately en route to the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, curious minds like Nicholas Oresme (1323-82), Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), Francis Bacon (1561-1626), René Descartes (1596-1650) and Isaac Newton (1642-1727) plumbed the depths of natural philosophy and human intellect for new knowledge and authority.

A third route pointed back in the direction of antiquity. Men of letters like Francesco Petrarch (1304-74), Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75) and Bruni (1370-1444) exalted the this-worldliness of ancient (and it seems Ottoman<sup>84</sup>) thinkers and sought in their rhetoric renewal and rebirth. It was Renaissance scholars who coined the term "Middle Ages" -- a long, moribund period between antiquity and its rediscovery and revival in the *quattrocento* -- and fabricated the notion of a direct, continuous link between Greece, Rome and Catholic Europe.<sup>85</sup>

We know, however, that the link was severed and re-established (primarily) through contact with Islamic civilization. But even this revised view fails adequately to assess the impact of the *rivalry* between Christendom and Islam. Late medieval and early

modern Europeans did not question and reform -- in a word, modernize -- their outlook simply because they became wiser, though they did. Theirs was not a collective exercise in unalloyed ratiocination aided by the discovery of some Muslim texts. The Latin Christians also acted out of desperation that if they stubbornly clung to their habitual beliefs and ways, they would forever come out on the losing end in the rivalry with Islam.

In this piece, I have pitted Islamic against Western civilization. Yet, in truth, my analysis underscores the protracted and intense contact between Muslims and Christians.

Perhaps we would do better to see the two groupings as regional cultural clusters within a single (monotheistic) civilization that includes non-Latin Christians and Jews as well.<sup>86</sup> Keep in mind that Western interest in the Islamic intellect did not cease with the Middle Ages.

The list of prominent early modern and even Enlightenment Europeans who felt it wise to consider Islamic perspectives as part of their general erudition includes Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, da Vinci, Erasmus, Machiavelli, Spinoza, Montaigne, Leibniz, Racine, Bodin, Boulainvilliers, Montesquieu, Ockley, Voltaire, Shaftesbury, and Lessing, to name but a few.<sup>87</sup>

Contempt for Islamic civilization as utterly foreign and inferior does not recrudescence until the late 18th and early 19th centuries as a byproduct of European imperialism.<sup>88</sup> Similar contempt has intensified since the 9/11 attacks, though Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* was published well before that fateful morning.<sup>89</sup>

As the incisive research of Olivier Roy trenchantly demonstrates, however, Muslims today, Islamists included, do not represent a separate, anti-Western culture. Rather they are part and parcel of a single, modern civilization in which actors are trying to come to terms with relentless globalization.<sup>90</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Cahill, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages and the Beginning of the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Toby Huff, *The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China, and the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 208; Dionisius Agius and Richard Hitchcock (eds.), *The Arab Influence in Medieval Europe* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1994); K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); John Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Fernandez-Armesto, Felipe, *Millennium: A History*

of the Last Thousand Years (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1995); and André Gunder Frank, *ReOrient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup>John France, *The Crusades and the Expansion of Catholic Christendom, 1000-1714* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 21-25 & 39; Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2006), pp. 62-78 makes a similar argument about Urban II's grandiose ambitions.

<sup>4</sup>Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*. London: Unwin, 1940; also see John J. O'Neill, "Did Islam Destroy Classical Civilization?" *Comparative Civilizations Review* 62(Spring 2010): 10-20.

<sup>5</sup>Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse *Mohammed, Charlemagne, and the Origins of Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Thomas F. Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Andrew Wheatcroft, *Infidels: A History of the Conflict between Christendom and Islam* (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 161.

<sup>7</sup>Tyerman, *God's War*, pp. 124-64.

<sup>8</sup>Jonathan Phillips, *The Second Crusade: Extending the Frontiers of Christendom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Tyerman, *God's War*, p. 336.

<sup>10</sup>See M.C. Lyons and D.E.P. Jackson, *Saladin: The Politics of Holy War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>11</sup>Tyerman, *God's War*, p. 374.

<sup>12</sup>See Donald Queller and Thomas Madden, *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople 1201-04* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup>Fernández-Armesto, *Millennium*, p. 103.

<sup>14</sup>Roger Collins, *The Arab Conquest of Spain, 710-797* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

<sup>15</sup>See James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup>Quoted in Franco Cardini, *Europe and Islam*, trans. Caroline Beamish (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 128 and in Jacques LeGoff, *The Birth of Europe*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 188.

<sup>17</sup>Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), pp. 39-41.

<sup>18</sup>J.H. Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance: Discovery, Exploration, and Settlement 1450 to 1650* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 41; David Abulafia, "The Role of Trade in Muslim-Christian Contact During the Middle Ages," in Agius and Hitchcock, *Arab Influence*, p. 1; Paul Freedman, *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 80.

<sup>19</sup>Cardini, *Europe*, p. 101; Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain* (London: V&A Publishing, 2010), pp. 76-107.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.* p. 40.

<sup>21</sup>Menocal, *Arabic Role*, pp. xi-xv, 32-33, 63 & 88.

<sup>22</sup>Philip Kennedy, "The Muslim Sources of Dante?" in Agius and Hitchcock, *Arab Influence*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>23</sup>Dorothee Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 98-99.

<sup>24</sup>Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* (Boulder: Westview, 1996).

<sup>25</sup>Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 119-23 and 168.

<sup>26</sup>See Catherine Wilson, "Modern Western Philosophy," in Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy Part II* (London: Routledge, 1966), pp. 1013-15.

<sup>27</sup>R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 8-9.

<sup>28</sup>Metlitzki, *Matter of Araby*, p. 11.

- <sup>29</sup> Eugene Myers, *Arabic Thought and the Western World in the Golden Age of Islam* (New York: Ungar, 1964), p. 16.
- <sup>30</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: The Age of Faith* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1950), p. 954.
- <sup>31</sup> Huff, *Rise*, p. 208.
- <sup>32</sup> Cardini, *Europe*, pp. 102-03.
- <sup>33</sup> Ernest Moody, "Galileo and Avempace: Dynamics of the Leaning Tower Experiments," in Philip Wiener and A. Nolands (eds.), *Roots of Scientific Thought: A Cultural Perspective* (New York: Basic Books, 1957), pp. 209-10.
- <sup>34</sup> Huff, *Rise*, p. 211.
- <sup>35</sup> Donald Hill, "Arabic Fine Technology and its Influence on European Mechanical Engineering," in Agius and Hitchcock, *Arab Influence*, pp. 29-37. Also see in the same volume Jim Allan, "The Influence of the Metalwork of the Arab Mediterranean on that of Medieval Europe," pp. 44-62.
- <sup>36</sup> Quoted in Jacques Le Goff, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 19.
- <sup>37</sup> R.I. Moore, *The First European Revolution, c. 970-1215* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 148.
- <sup>38</sup> Cardini, *Europe*, p. 88.
- <sup>39</sup> S.M. Ghazanfar, "Scholastic Economics and Arab Scholars" *Diogenes* (April-June 1991): 128.
- <sup>40</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 61.
- <sup>41</sup> M.M. Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1966), p. 1367.
- <sup>42</sup> George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981).
- <sup>43</sup> Huff, *Rise*, p. 187.
- <sup>44</sup> R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).
- <sup>45</sup> Huff, *Rise*, p. 344.
- <sup>46</sup> Montgomery Watt, *A History of Islamic Spain* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1965), p.172.
- <sup>47</sup> France, *Crusades*, p. 3. Keep in mind that the Fourth Crusade never got farther than Constantinople, conquest of which further severed ties between Latins and Greeks that were already frayed by the Schism of 1054.
- <sup>48</sup> Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 19.
- <sup>49</sup> Quoted in Metlitzki, *Matter of Araby*, p. 11.
- <sup>50</sup> Quoted in *ibid.* p. 13.
- <sup>51</sup> Quoted in Southern, *Islam*, p. 59.
- <sup>52</sup> For details, see *ibid.* pp. 14-33.
- <sup>53</sup> John Tolan, *Petrus Alfonsi and the Medieval Reader* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), pp. xiii-xv.
- <sup>54</sup> Southern, *Islam*, pp. 68-73.
- <sup>55</sup> Quoted in John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 225-27.
- <sup>56</sup> Cardini, *Europe*, p. 99.
- <sup>57</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1948), pp. 486-87.
- <sup>58</sup> Quoted in Southern, *Islam*, p. 62.
- <sup>59</sup> Cardini, *Europe*, p. 100.
- <sup>60</sup> Quoted in Keith Thomson, *Before Darwin: Reconciling God and Nature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 1.
- <sup>61</sup> Quoted in Le Goff, *Intellectuals*, p. 19.
- <sup>62</sup> Quoted in Tolan, *Petrus*, p. 44.

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- <sup>65</sup> Menocal, *Arabic Role*, p. 43.
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- <sup>68</sup> Raymond Klibansky, "The School of Chartres" in Marshall Clagett, Gaines Post and Robert Reynolds (eds.), *Twelfth-Century Europe and the Foundations of Modern Science* (Westport: Greenwood, 1980), p. 8.
- <sup>69</sup> Le Goff, *Intellectuals*, pp. 66-71.
- <sup>70</sup> Oliver Leaman, "Averroes and the West," in Mourad Wahba & Mona Abousenna (eds.), *Averroes and the Enlightenment* (Amherst: Prometheus, 1996), p. 65.
- <sup>71</sup> Myers, *Arabic Thought*, p. 16. Also see Durant, *Story*, p. 954.
- <sup>72</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1924), Book I, ch. 7.
- <sup>73</sup> Quoted in Edward Grant, "Science and Theology in the Middle Ages," in David Lindberg and Ronald Numbers (eds.), *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 54-55.
- <sup>74</sup> Huff, *Rise*, p. 192.
- <sup>75</sup> Quoted in Tolan, *Saracens*, p. 215.
- <sup>76</sup> Tolan, *Saracens*, pp. 239-45; Southern, *Islam*, pp. 98-103.
- <sup>77</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *Europe in Crisis 1598-1648* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 150; Dennis Hupchick, *The Balkans: From Constantinople to Communism* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 156; Charles Burnett, "An Islamic Divinatory Technique in Medieval Spain," in Agius and Hitchcock, *Arab Influence*, p. 106.
- <sup>78</sup> Quoted in Tolan, *Saracens*, p. 86.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* p. 97.
- <sup>80</sup> Parry, *Reconnaissance*, pp. 26-27; Menocal, *Arabic Role*, pp. 61 & 116-22.
- <sup>81</sup> Miguel Asín Palacios, *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, trans. Harold Sunderland (London: J. Murray, 1926); Menocal, *Arabic Role*, p. 130.
- <sup>82</sup> Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927).
- <sup>83</sup> For analysis of other factors see Huff, *Rise* and McGrath, *Intellectual Origins*.
- <sup>84</sup> See Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli, *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
- <sup>85</sup> See Menocal, *Arabic Role*, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>86</sup> Richard Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
- <sup>87</sup> Peter O'Brien, *European Perceptions of Islam & America from Saladin to George W. Bush: Europe's Fragile Ego Uncovered* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 47-92.
- <sup>88</sup> Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 23; Frank, *ReOrient*, p. 11.
- <sup>89</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
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