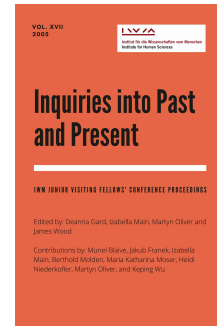


Europe and Islam: A History of Projection

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As it stands, the preamble to the proposed EU constitution states that Europe draws “inspiration from the cultural, religious, and humanist inheritance of Europe.” This phrasing has drawn complaints from the predominantly Catholic countries of the expanded EU who wonder why there is not a more specific reference to the Christian heritage of Europe. For nations such as France and Britain, the generality of the current wording both allows for the “secular” Europe they wish to create as well as diminishes potential conflict for their sizeable religious minorities, particularly Muslims.

It is possible to view this argument from multiple angles and I do not pretend to understand the all the geopolitical complexities of the current issue. What I do want to offer, in perhaps an idiosyncratic manner, is an historical perspective on the friction between Islam and Europe. I believe this tension, in many ways, is a question of identity, and that identity is formed antagonistically as often as it is formed productively. At the same time, to juxtapose Islam with Europe is both an artificial and cross-categorical effort – Islam and the West is perhaps better, “clash of civilizations” much worse. Islam and Christianity is the obvious terminological comparison, but raises the problem of “whose Christianity?” and, even more problematically, “whose Islam?” If France and Poland cannot agree on the role of Christianity for their collective identity, it would be even more difficult to decide on the relationship of this Christianity to Islam – do we mean the historical phenomenon, the cultural trappings, the militaristic conflicts, the personal devotion, or the experience of immigration?

What I propose here is to offer a broad generalization of the relationship between Islam and Europe since the Middle Ages and then to examine a specific example of this relationship starting with the beginning of the 18th century which leads, I feel, to the role played by Islam as a foil for the development of European religious identity. Such an approach risks the dangers of any generalization, and to that I am acutely sensitive. In response, I will also provide a critical, post-colonial reading of the modernist enterprise, hoping to illustrate at the minimum how certain polemical or ideological minutia function

within a larger historical context. Finally, I would hope to open up the question of to what extent the history of the interaction between Islam and Christendom is a self-defining act of projection and to wonder about its effect in our present world.

A Brief History

There have been numerous encounters with Islam since the eighth century: the Moorish Empire in Spain, where Europe sent its best and brightest to be educated at Muslim universities; the Crusades, an odd mixture of warfare and cultural exchange; the late Medieval translation of Islamic medical, scientific, and philosophical texts are but some of the Medieval highlights. However, the time from around 700 CE until the end of the 1600's might not inaccurately be labeled as a period of ignorance regarding Islam.[1] Although there were some notable exceptions, the picture of Islam in the West largely consisted of religious polemic, casting Muslims simply as infidels. Furthermore, nuanced distinctions between ethnicity and religion were never a major component of Western thinking about Islam. John Tolan, in his book *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, writes: "... medieval Christian writers did not speak of 'Islam' or 'Muslims,' words unknown (with very few exceptions) in Western languages before the sixteenth century. Instead, Christian writers referred to Muslims by using ethnic terms: Arabs, Turks, Moors, Saracens." [2] These terms accompanied descriptions of Islam as a grand heresy, devil worship, a pagan religion from the desert, or any number of other inventions. Most typically, Islam was understood as the worship of Muhammad, who was sometimes portrayed as the Jesus figure in a mocking satire of the Christian trinity, rounded out with Apollo and the obscure Termagant, as it is in *The Song of Roland*. I will not say more about this period other than to note that Europe's opinion of Islam largely consisted of two questions: either, how can we defeat them in battle; or, how can we convert them? This second question became broadly feasible only between the successful end of the Reconquista in 1492 and the final repulsion of the Ottoman Empire in 1683 – in the interceding two hundred years, Europe had much to learn.

As the Renaissance slowly gave way to modernity and the Enlightenment, the Medieval attitude toward Islam also shifted. Albert Hourani, an historian of Islam and the Arab peoples, writes about the European attitude toward Islam in the 18th century, and suggests that principles of the Enlightenment coupled with a sense of strength in European empires allowed for a new attitude toward the so-called Orient. He remarks:

For the most part, however, it was the imagination rather than the intellect which had changed: a new desire to seek and appropriate what was distant and strange moved travelers, collectors and those seeking to furnish the new and larger palaces and mansions which the wealth and security of western Europe made possible to build. For a brief period this movement of the imagination was not mixed with the contempt of the strong for the weak, or with the moral condemnation based on new ethical systems.[3]

Precisely how and why these attitudes shifted is a long topic, but I suspect that philosophical ideas suggesting that Christianity was the pinnacle of religious expression found significant support from the strength of the modern empire. Especially after the

Turks were stopped at the gates of Vienna, it seemed more and more that Islam was in retreat, no longer the great religious and military threat to Christian Europe that it once was, but instead a heretical deviation naturally overcome by the forces of time, science, and righteousness. That is, Islam, Arabs, or Ottomans were no longer frightening and significant challenges to Christendom but transformed into adornments signifying Western imperial and religious success. Ottomans, figuratively, became footstools; the marauding Moors became *mohr in hemd* – a dessert still served in many of Vienna’s finer cafes.

Because Islam no longer appeared as a threat to the “enlightened” West, and because “Muslim” armies were no longer a material threat to the colonizing West, academics, politicians, and the bourgeoisie could reorient themselves to this religious and cultural other. This reorientation, however, did little to adjust the collapse between the terms Arab and Muslim. The rise of racist ethnology in the 18th and 19th centuries further muddied the conceptual waters. While this might seem counter-intuitive, the drive to define the Arab or Oriental “mind” meant that religion and ethnicity came to be understood as co-determiners of non-Christian peoples.

The shifting social circumstances and pre-established prejudices asserted themselves in the new intellectual epoch of the 18th century, updating the image of Islam for the rationalist, colonialist, modern world. Rather than operating from the perspective of religious polemic, scholarly and artistic works depicting Islam worked from a position of assumed intellectual dominance. As John Tolan describes it:

Thirteenth-century Europeans defined their perceived “superiority” primarily as religious (though cultural and other concerns were inseparable from religion); their twentieth-century counterparts tend to see themselves as culturally or intellectually superior: more “enlightened,” more technologically advanced, and so on.[4]

I argue that this shift in perceived superiority from the religious to the intellectual began in the 18th century and created the environment in which the West could study the “Oriental” world with a belief in a kind of enlightened objectivity. At the same time, I would argue that the Western conceptual framework for understanding Islam has its roots in a subjective and explicitly Christian world-view. The field of religious studies, as historically conceived, begins with rationalist assumptions emerging from a liberal, Protestant framework, skewing the discipline from the outset toward these contextually subjective principles. From this vantage point, a religion is a religion to the extent that it operates in accord with this framework – religious traditions that do not do so are therefore bound to be lacking. Thus, non-Christian religions lack the normative principles of the Enlightenment, namely its version of rationality, and therefore become objects of anthropological or sociological, but not religious, curiosity.

Edward Said points to this in his book *Covering Islam*:

The experts whose field was modern Islam – or to be more precise, whose field was made up of societies, peoples and institutions within the Islamic world since the eighteenth century – worked within an agreed-upon framework for research formed according to notions decidedly *not* set in the Islamic world. This fact, in all its complexity and variety, cannot be overestimated. There is no denying that a scholar sitting in Oxford or Boston writes and researches principally, though not exclusively, according to standards, conventions, and expectations shaped by his or her peers, not by the Muslims being studied.

[5]

As I have proposed it, this is contentious, and self-incriminating, issue, and to be sure history is spotted with people possessing the good will and intellectual flexibility to see, or at least try to see, Islam on its own terms. But we must search bravely for these examples – on the whole, attitudes towards Islam remained overwhelmingly negative, be they religiously polemical, a product of exoticism, or the result of assumed intellectual superiority.

Strange Furniture

It is helpful to explore a specific example where we can see the new, modern attitude manifest itself in the discourse about the religiously Other. While I hope to avoid some of the contentious aspects of this discourse by focusing on literature, the sad fact remains that even the best of intentions seem to the modern eye to be the worst of transgressions. This is especially clear if we examine *A Thousand and One Nights* and the perception of it as representative of Islam and Muslims, an imaginative correlation that is, I believe, still with us today. Beginning with Antoine Galland's translation in 1704, the text that became popularly known as the *Arabian Nights* enjoyed phenomenal literary success on both sides of the Atlantic. According to Robert Irwin in his *Arabian Nights: A Companion*:

From the eighteenth century onwards, translations of the *Nights* circulated so widely in Europe and America that to ask about its influence on western literature is a little like asking about the influence on western literature of that other great collection of oriental tales, the Bible. ... If one asks what was the influence of the *Nights* on western literature, then one is asking not for a single answer, but rather for a series of answers to a group of questions which relate to one another in complex ways.[6]

One answer is that this text, made popular through affordable editions and an increase in literacy, came to represent Islam and Arabs in the Western imagination. That is, this work of fiction created certain popular assumptions and was presented to its Western audience as an ethnographic or anthropological survey of a people. Thus, just as “that other great collection of oriental tales” was mined for information about or condolences for the marauding Saracens, this second oriental text filled in the sociological gaps left by the Bible's rather spotty account. In her article “English Travellers and the *Arabian Nights*,” Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud writes:

Galland's translation was from the first advertised as a book where 'the customs of Orientals and the ceremonies of their religion were better traced than in the tales of the travellers. ... All Orientals, Persians, Tartars and Indians ... appear just as they are from sovereigns to people of the lowest condition. Thus the readers will have the pleasure of seeing them and hearing them without taking the trouble of travelling [sic] to seek them in their own countries'.[7]

While the *Arabian Nights* is by no means the sole vehicle of this imaginative impression, it is a significant literary touchstone around which the issues of modernity, culture, and religion can be explored. Emanating from the primary text are translations, commentaries, letters, literary adoptions of the "oriental style", and visual representations – what I call the text's "literary afterlife" – all of which can help us trace the evolution of an image – in this case, the image of Islam in the West.

Perhaps the most famous of all the translations of the *Arabian Nights* is that of Sir Richard Burton's, finished in 1888 and consisting of sixteen volumes. According to Jorge Luis Borges, the *1001 Nights* was the primary text of Orientalism. In Borges' evaluation of the various translations of Scheherezade's tale, he asks the translator's questions of fidelity, accuracy, and style, judging, ultimately, that it is the translator's "infidelity, his happy and creative infidelity, that must matter to us." [8] I should, perhaps, back up, to illustrate what Mr. Borges means and why this matters for us. Because the text of the *Arabian Nights* is, in its essence, an amalgamation of tales, cultures, times, places, languages, predilections, and opinions, the search for any "true" or "perfect" manuscript that a translator could "accurately and faithfully" translate is impossible. This fact is the text's greatest strength, and perhaps curiously, its greatest deficiency. Galland's original manuscript discovered in Syria and dating to the 13th century consisted of only 212 stories, a slight text he supplemented with the tales of a mysterious Maronite Christian who accompanied him back to Paris. Beginning with Galland's edition and continuing in increments until Burton's, 789 additional, non-original tales were somewhere found and included in the text.

It is precisely because of this that the *Arabian Nights* so fascinates. Nearly all translators of the text, Burton foremost among them, not only admit, but gleefully admire the quilted pastiche of the text, reveling in the notion that the essence of this text is the fact that it is without an essence other than openness to addition. For Borges, then, the translator's infidelity is required, but the text itself is nothing if not unfaithful. We might wonder how consciously Borges chose his terms, as it is the issue of infidelity, or the possibility of infidelity, that drives the narrative conceit of the text. We might also wonder, given the text's mongrel origins, why Scheherezade becomes the paradigm for the Arab, and Muslim, woman, and her murderous husband Shahriyar, the bloodthirsty face of all Muslim rulers. It is this essentializing event that so disturbed the late Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Though admitting vast respect for Burton as a scholar and author, Said remains dismayed that Burton's impression of the "Orient" manifests itself as "a sense of assertion and domination over all the complexities of Oriental life. Every one of Burton's footnotes ... was meant to be testimony to his victory over the sometimes scandalous system of Oriental knowledge, a system he had mastered by himself." [9] That is, Said

attests to the fact that, despite knowing *The Arabian Nights* to be a text of mixed origin and circumstance, as a scholarly edifice, Burton used it as an opportunity to illustrate his knowledge of, power over, and authority in all things Oriental. I quote here from a footnote in Burton's addition that intends to "explain" why Shahriyar's first wife cuckolded him with a black cook:

Debauched women prefer negroes on account of the size of their parts. I measured one man in Somali-land who, when quiescent, numbered nearly six inches. This is characteristic of the negro race and of African animals; e.g. the horse; whereas the pure Arab, man and beast, is below the average of Europe; one of the best proofs by the by, that the Egyptian is not an Asiatic, but a negro partially white-washed. Moreover, these imposing parts do not increase proportionally during erection; consequently, the "deed of kind" takes a much longer time and adds greatly to the woman's enjoyment. In my time no honest Hindi Moslem would take his women-folk to Zanzibar on account of the huge attractions and enormous temptations there and thereby offered to them. Upon the subject of Imsak = retention of semen and "prolongation of pleasure," I shall find it necessary to say more.^[10]

It is difficult to determine whether Burton is trying to provocatively out do the sexuality of the text with his own inventive descriptions, couched in the language of anthropological objectivity or if he intends this with all seriousness. The pseudo-scientific claims Burton makes here – we can well imagine the horrendously comic scene of Burton with his tape measure – perversely contribute to the "scandalous system" of knowledge of the Orient, as well as the inverse, a systematic scandal. That he presents these "observations" as he does, as part of the scholarly apparatus of the text, contributes nothing to the narrative itself. Instead, it creates Burton, the white male European, as the one who measures, and "negroes," "Arabs," "Egyptians," and "Asiatics" as those so measured, an amazingly complete triumph over all manner of subjugated peoples. At the same time, Burton implicates himself, and other Europeans in his standards: they are neither the undersized "Asiatics" nor the bestial "negroes," but instead occupy the reasonable middle position from which one can judge in all directions.

To explain, although the text is as Occidental as it is Oriental, Burton's, and the West's, very conscious creation of it was meant to serve as an opportunity to define, and thus dominate, the Orient – in this case through the presumed physiology of the size of various races' penises. Burton, along with all the others, created Scheherezade, and her lover's erotic equipment, so that they might own her. We should not be surprised that Burton also was among the first translator's of the *Kama Sutra*.

New Twists to Old Tales

From a moral and political point of view, Edward Said demands that we find this repugnant. From an aesthetic point of view, Borges rejoices in it. And both are correct. Said explains how *The Arabian Nights* as a thing, and Burton as a functionary in the Orientalist enterprise, contribute to the accumulation of knowledge by colonial powers in order to manipulate and control, and even more so, to define, the vast land, peoples, religions, and cultures that came to be understood as the "Orient." To be fair to both

Burton and Said, Said expresses a significant degree of sympathy for Burton as an individual caught in a cultural apparatus not of his own making. He understands Burton to have been between both East and West, at least insofar as any British Imperialist agent could be: “Burton thought of himself both as a rebel against authority (hence his identification with the East as a place of freedom from Victorian moral authority) and as a potential agent of authority in the East. It is the *manner* of that coexistence, between two antagonistic roles for himself, that is of interest.”[11] According to Said, this “manner of coexistence” was partially predetermined by the systems of power/knowledge already in place (and indeed, Said’s writings are indebted to Foucault’s postulation of this institutionalized force). Although “Burton took the assertion of personal, authentic, sympathetic, and humanistic knowledge of the Orient as far as it would go in its struggle with the archive of official European knowledge about the Orient,”[12] he was nevertheless prevented from a completely humanistic portrait of the peoples he encountered there due to the pervasive influence of imperialism. This point cannot be overstated for Said – no matter the personal charisma and humanizing impulse, Western scholars, authors, and critics of the East were – and perhaps are – unable to extract themselves from the forces that define the discourse. For Said, Burton’s genius, for which we ought continue to praise him, was the scope and nuance of his learning – the command of languages, sensitivity to traditions, and cultural understanding Burton acquired were perhaps more comprehensive than any other man (and it was a man’s world) of his time, and he had done it on his own. The tragedy for Burton is that any expression of his experience became part of the Orientalist system of knowledge – and Burton’s very self became defined by this system.

According to Said, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.”[13] For Said, Orientalism is in part the West’s way of “restructuring” the orient, the theoretical extension of which argues that beyond being an imaginative work of art like Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel fresco, the invention of “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.”[14] More specifically, the extent to which a writer engages in the Orientalist enterprise, he or she is actually (conscious or not) engaged in a process of self-definition. The subversive effect of Orientalism, then, becomes primary when compared to any individual author or text:

For if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author’s involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of *his* actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or an American first, as an individual second.[15]

This projection of identity moves in two directions – as the writer constructs the Orient, he or she simultaneously constructs him or herself in opposition to that which he or she has constructed. In other words, and beyond just the project of Orientalism, the proclamation of identity always creates the radically other against which the individual self can be compared.

The above has been an orthodox, post-colonial interpretation of Burton's conceit. Without taking away from the gravity of this criticism, I feel it is also useful to say another word about Borges and his aesthetic judgments. Despite denying the moral ingenuity of *1001 Nights*, Borges himself engages in a fair bit of disingenuousness. As I've noted, his praise for the more fictive translations of the text indicates something of the appreciation for the creative enterprise of the text as a whole. He writes, "the versions of Burton and Mardrus, and even by Galland, can only be conceived of *in the wake of literature*. Whatever their blemishes or merits, these characteristic works presuppose a rich (prior) process."^[16] I would argue that these works also occur in the wake of religion, or at least in the West's construction of Islam. Just as we can read the products of Orientalism as a negative projection of Islam, so too can literature project a humanizing image of a religion or people. While we should be wary of the perfidious effects that come from attempting to define a people, we can also celebrate the ways in which literature brings us closer to our fellow humans. Just as a few remarkable souls found in the Bible a rationale for understanding Muslims as being the children of a self-same God, so too might the *Nights* become an opportunity for reflection and understanding, although one must always be present to the dangers of objectification. It is perhaps because of this that many contemporary Muslim writers have reappropriated the text in order to tell the tale on their own terms, from Naguib Mahfouz to Fatima Mernissi to, provocatively, Salman Rushdie. In the end, we are all writing in the wake history, but history ought not be told from only one perspective.

Conclusion

Given this strange story, only a small portion of which has been touched upon here, I cannot help but wonder whether the current debate regarding religion and European identity in some way continues, or adds to, the multiple stories the West has told about itself over the centuries. Indeed, the US was quick to redefine itself post 9/11 as a home to all three "Abrahamic faiths" – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – in recognition that the standard "Judeo-Christian" label was inaccurate regarding the current facts on the ground. Of course, this neglects Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, and any other religious tradition. And of course, the conservative voices in the States issued strong denials of this shared inheritance, grossly denigrating Islam and seeking to affirm the Christian foundation of the nation. You might object that cultural inheritance and current population statistics are not the same, but it seems to me that the act of identity projection is rarely only about "them," and often says more about who "we" think we are. While it is true that Christianity has a long history in Europe and America, the impulse to define ourselves as such tends to occur when our individual identities feel challenged – a challenge the geopolitical melting pot that is the EU certainly generates. The tragic violence in Madrid and London has thoroughly complicated this situation for all of Europe: When one is no longer a name, nor a tribe, nor race, nor a nation, one can still be a religion – the consolation of being a continent is of little comfort.

I sometimes wonder if the current state of tension between Muslim and Western nations, as imprecise as those terms are, signals a new age of ignorance. This would not be an ignorance of facts or an ignorance of existence, but an ignorance of common history. As

people struggle to define themselves in the contemporary world, they could do worse than to remember that there are few strict lines of demarcation, and these lines, like the geopolitical lines of the former colonized countries, are often artificial. An inverse possibility is that many Muslim nations are only too well aware of this shared history, and that it is a history of projection often at odds with their own self-understanding. In the long story that I have only briefly outlined, the common thread seems to be that insofar as we are all story-tellers, and insofar as these stories are an attempt to determine identity, we would be wise to make a careful study of how the projection of one story can overshadow another. And when it comes to the history of religions, an assumption of preeminence often only highlights failures.

Notes:

1. R.W. Southern makes this case emphatically in his book *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962).
2. John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), xv.
3. Albert Hourani, *Islam in European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1991), 137.
4. Tolan, xvii.
5. Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 19.
6. Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 237.
7. Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud, “English Travellers and the *Arabian Nights*,” *The Arabian Nights in English Literature*, ed. Peter Caracciolo (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 95.
8. Jorge Luis Borges, “The Translators of *The Thousand and One Nights*,” *Selected Non-Fictions*, trans. Esther Allen, et al, (New York: Viking, 1999), 106.
9. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 196.
10. Richard Burton, *The Arabian Nights: Tales from a thousand and one nights* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 732, note 7.
11. Said, *Orientalism*, 196.
12. Said, *Orientalism*, 197.
13. Said, *Orientalism*, 1.
14. Said, *Orientalism*, 1-2.
15. Said, *Orientalism*, 11.
16. Borges, p. 108.

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