Islam and the West: Some Examples of Myopia

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Very few if any scholars would deny that in the last two or three centuries the mutual perceptions of the peoples of the Near and Middle East and those of Europe and North America have been profoundly influenced and often determined by the political, economic and cultural domination of the latter over the former. By the end of World War I nearly the whole Islamic world was under direct or indirect European rule. This state of affairs began to change almost immediately and after World War II the rate of change became very much faster so that today it is only in Central Asia that large numbers of Muslims are still in any sense subjects of a European empire. This, however, has not affected these perceptions as much as might have been expected, for in many respects the change was illusory. At first the economic and cultural supremacy of the West was hardly impaired. Indeed, those countries which preserved or achieved their independence mostly did so by adopting Western techniques and models of political, industrial and military organisation. Atatürk affords an obvious example, but such a course was naturally unacceptable to many Muslims, even in Turkey itself where the outcome might have been thought so satisfactory. More recently, especially in Iran, there have been movements which challenge, not merely Western supremacy, but many of the assumptions on which Western societies, including those of Eastern Europe, have been based.

In this paper I should like to comment briefly on three aspects of the history of these mutual perceptions which have been obscured because of this recent dominance. In modern times the study of the traditional and classical languages, literatures, history and philosophies of the Islamic countries has been very much indebted to the work of Western scholars. Al-Birūnī and Ibn Baṭṭūṭā, to mention...
only two obvious examples, owe their modern fame in the East to the efforts of Western students of their writings. It is therefore tempting to suppose that in mediaeval times the Christian world was better informed about Islam than it was. In fact, educated Muslims were much more knowledgeable about Christianity than their Christian contemporaries were about Islam. There was good reason for this. There were large, prosperous and sometimes powerful Christian communities in several Muslim countries, and the more able and learned members of these communities often attained to professional and even political positions of importance. It is not surprising that we do not find Muslim writers of the standing of, say, St. John of Damascus writing about Christianity the kind of nonsense which is ascribed to him about Islam. It would have been readily exposed. This Muslim knowledge of Christianity, however, was in no way kept up to date. Islam, confident in its own right guidance and in its wealth and power, almost totally ignored the Latin West. It is well known that hardly any Latin books appear to have become known to the Muslims except for the geographical portion of Orosius and the chronicle of Martin of Oppau, utilised in some form by Rashid al-din. A remarkable instance of this petrification of knowledge is an account of the divisions among Christians compiled in the entourage of the Amir "Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri during his exile at Amboise in the mid-nineteenth century; it is significant that it contains no reference whatsoever to the Reformation or to Luther or Calvin, though the Amir was a deeply religious man who had had discussions with Christian clergy. The sectarian differences it records are those which had resulted from the Christological controversies of the fifth century and with which the Arabs became familiar in their early conquests.

Another misunderstanding that has been common recently among Arab and Muslim writers is to suppose that Western commentators on Islam have always subscribed to the opinion expressed by Sir William Muir in the well-known sentences with which he concluded his history of the Caliphate: "As regards the spiritual, social and dogmatic aspect of Islam, there has been neither progress nor material change. Such as we found it in the days of the Caliphate, such is it also at the present day. Christian nations may advance in civilisation, freedom, and morality, in philosophy, science, and the arts, but Islam stands still. And thus stationary, so far as the lessons of the history avail, it will remain." The ease and rapidity with which vast numbers of Muslims had been brought under their rule and the readiness with which so many of them at least seemed to acquiesce in it, as well as their own technological superiority, promoted in Western nations a confidence in the superiority of their beliefs, institutions and traditions as compared with those of Islam, and this sometimes extended to a belief that the "white" races enjoyed a genetic pre-eminence over all others. Of course, any believing Christian held that his own religion was preferable to a Muslim’s, and vice versa; they could have been neither Christian nor Muslim otherwise. But it is wrong to assume that, even in the age when European expansion began, the explorers and colonisers assumed that they had any other advantage over Muslims. The Portuguese had no doubt whatsoever about the importance of their achievements; they saw themselves as the emulators and successors of Alexander the Great. Yet when the Ethiopian Emperor asked their ambassador who had
taught the Turks to make bombards, Dom Rodrigo de Lima replied that "the Turks were men, and had the skill and knowledge of men, perfect in all respects excepting in the faith."1

The favourable remarks of Busbecq and other visitors to Constantinople on certain aspects of Ottoman society are well-known; it is sometimes forgotten how much respect there was for it in England, a country which was never in danger of being conquered by the janissaries. Richard Knolles, who, being a schoolmaster, had a proper reverence for the Romans, wrote in the preface to his Generall Historie of the Turkes: "At this present if you consider the beginning, progresse and perpetuall felicity of this the Othoman Empire, there is in this World nothing more admirable and strange; if the greatnesse and lustre thereof, nothing more magnificent or glorious, if the power and strength thereof, nothing more dreadful or dangerous: which wondering at nothing but the beauty of it selfe, and drunke with the pleasant wine of perpetuall felicity, holdeth all the rest of the World in scorne." He went on to consider the reasons for this:

In them is to be noted . . . such a rare unitie and agreement amongst them, as well in the manner of their Religion (if it be so to bee called) as in matters concerning their State (especially in all their enterpises to be taken in hand for the augmenting of their Empire) as that thereof they call themselves Islami, that is to say, Men of one minde, or at peace amongst themselves; so that it is not to bee marvelled, if thereby they grow strong themselves, and dreadful unto others. Joyce unto this their courage, conceived by the wonderfull successe of their perpetuall fortune . . . Their frugalitie and temperatenesse in their dyet and other manner of living; their carefull observing of their antient Military Discipline, their cheerefull and almost incredible obedience unto their Princes and Sultans; such, as in that point no Nation in the world was to be worthily compared unto them. All great causes why their Empire hath so mightily increased, and so long continued. Whereunto may bee added the two strongest sinewes of every well governed Commonwealth; Reward propounded to the good, and Punishment threatened unto the offender; where the prize is for vertue and valour set up, and the way laid open for every common person, be he never so meanly borne, to aspire unto the greatest honours and preferments both of the Court and of the Field; yea even unto the neerest affinitie of the great Sultan himselfe, if his valor or other worth shall so deserve."2

Knolles might be suspected of having exaggerated the attractions of his subject—he presumably wanted his book to sell—but this is not applicable to Thomas Fuller, a clergyman who, like Knolles, never left England, and who wrote a history of the Crusades under the title The History of the Holy Warre. He too made the comparison with the Roman Empire: "The Turkish Empire is the greatest and best-compacted (not excepting the Romane it self in the height thereof) that the sunne ever saw."3 He too remarked upon the religious unity of the Turks: "Nor is it the last and least part of the strength of this Empire, that all
her native people are linked together in one religion: The discords about which in other kingdomes have been the cause, first of the unjoynting, and then of the finall ruine & desolation of many worthy States; Whereas here, the Mahometane religion (if I wrong it not with so good a name) is so full of unitie and agreement, that there is no difference & dissension about it. Yea well may that coat have no seam that hath no shape."  

Fuller was aware that Muslim governments had usually been tolerant towards their Christian subjects: "Sometimes they enjoyed the libertie and publick exercise of their religion: and to give the Mahometans their due, they are generally good fellows in this point, and Christians amongst them may keep their consciences free, if their tongues be fetterd not to oppose the doctrine of Mahomet."  

Not surprisingly, he speaks well of Saladin in his narrative: "He wanted nothing to his eternall happinesse but the knowledge of Christ."  

On Al-Malik Al-Kāmil ('Meladine') and the events of 1221 he comments: "Let Christians speak of him as they found: whose courtesies to them when they were half drowned in Egypt, if they will not confesse, they deserve to be wholly drowned for their ingratitude."  

He was repelled by the frequency with which the Christian princes broke faith with the Muslims and enumerates this as one reason for the failure of the Crusades: "The second grand error in prosecuting the Holy warre, being the Christians notorious breaking their faith with Infidels."  

He cites seven instances and then asks: "And how could Safetie it self save this people, and blesse this project so blackly blasted with perjury . . . a sinne so repugnant to all morall honestie, so injurious to the quiet & peace of the world, so odious in it self, so scandalous to all men, To dissolve a league when confirmed by Oath . . . a sinne, I say, so hainous that God cannot but most severely punish it.”  

Knolles and Fuller had only a very superficial knowledge of Islam but their condemnation of it had nothing to do with any claim to racial superiority.

Lastly, I should like to comment briefly on the nature of the Islamic response to Western domination. The historical experience of the two religions has been very different in one important respect. Christianity was for the first three centuries of its existence a religion liable to persecution, though of course not continuously subject to it. Its thinkers were concerned, not with the duties of Christian rulers and how they should treat their non-Christian subjects, for there were no Christian rulers, but with the extent to which Christian subjects of non-Christian rulers might comply with their laws and injunctions. On the other hand even during the life of the Prophet it was necessary to decide on the status to be accorded to Jews and Christians living in subordination to the Muslim community. The Arab Empire, if one may use such a term, certainly contained a majority of Christian subjects and there still are sizable Christian minorities in several Muslim countries. Until about the end of the seventeenth century, however, there were few examples of Muslims living under anything but Muslim governments. In the Crusader states a small number lived under Latin rulers. In Spain, as the Reconquista proceeded, some Muslims stayed behind in cities like Toledo. The Mongols ruled over large Muslim populations for several generations, and there was some persecution of Islam especially under the house of Chaghatai, but their shamanism could not hope to be an effective alternative to Islam, which was
eventually adopted by those Mongols who lived among Muslims. The only country where a considerable Muslim population lived for any length of time under non-Muslim government was China. But Chinese Islam, however remarkable its capacity to survive has been, has had very little impact on Islam anywhere else. I can think of no Chinese ‘ulama’ or fuqahā’ or sufis who have exercised any significant influence outside their own community. Thus, whereas Christianity attained political power with the conversion of Constantine but was theologically quite unprepared for its exercise, Islam was equally unprepared for the situation of subordination to Christian or secular rulers in which increasingly large numbers of Muslims found themselves from the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Their response was twofold. There were some, notably among the Turks, who accepted that in some respects the Muslims had been surpassed, and they advocated the study of the techniques that had enabled the West to succeed, while preserving their faith intact and continuing to obey the precepts of the sharī'a. There were also those who regarded what had happened as God's punishment for their laxity, perhaps a sign of the approaching end of the world, and saw as the only possible remedy a return to the practice of the Companions and their immediate successors. Until recently this second option was available only to those who lived in remote and barren regions not easily accessible to Europeans and too unproductive for the imperial powers to make the considerable effort that would have been required in order to bring them under control. Such were Najd and the Libyan oases, the homes of the Wahhabis and the Sanusis respectively. Until the end of World War II it seemed that only those Islamic countries which adopted Western ideas and institutions would be able to survive as viable political entities. The obvious model was Turkey, a secular republic, with a Western legal system and an apparently stable regime, which Iran was trying to imitate. Since then two new factors have emerged and have falsified these expectations. The discovery of oil deposits has brought enormous wealth and consequent power to states which had formerly been among the poorest in the world, so that precisely those countries whose poverty and isolation had permitted them to preserve the traditional Islamic way of life suddenly found themselves able to disrupt the economies of the industrialised West. The second factor has been the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, notably but by no means exclusively, in Iran. Some exponents of this reject Western concepts so radically that discussion, even mutual perception, becomes excessively difficult. In this juncture it is as well to bear in mind a saying of Coleridge: ‘Until I understand a man’s ignorance I deem myself ignorant of his understanding.”
Notes

   The quotations are from "The Authors Induction to the Christian Reader."