Muslim Perceptions of the West

Bernard Lewis

Princeton University

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Between the two terms of this title, there is an obvious asymmetry. The perceiver is defined as a member of a religion; the perceived as a compass point, representing a civilization. The inconsistency however is more apparent than real, since each is defined in its own terms. “West” is a Western term, and is the modern way of denoting part or all of the cultural entity which had previously been defined, at different times, as Europe or Christendom. “Muslim” denotes the still predominant self-identification of most of the peoples who profess Islam.

Until the 19th century Muslim writers on history and geography knew little or nothing of the names which Greeks, and later Europeans, had given to the continents. Asia was unknown; an ill-defined Europe—spelled Urūfa—receives no more than a passing mention, while Africa, Arabized into Ifrīqiya, appears only as the name of the eastern Maghrib, consisting of Tunisia and the adjoining areas. Muslim geographical writers, following the ancient Greeks, divided the world into “climates,” but this was a purely geographical classification, without any of the cultural or political implications injected into the names of the continents in modern parlance. The term “West”—in Arabic Maghrib—was indeed commonly used in Arabic and other languages in a more than geographical sense. It referred, however, not to Western Europe but to the Islamic world’s own west, in northern Africa and for a while in Spain.

For the Muslim, religion was the core of identity, of his own and therefore of other men’s. The civilized world consisted of the House of Islam, in which a Muslim government ruled and Muslim law prevailed. The basic distinction among mankind was the acceptance or rejection of the message of Islam. Those
who professed Islam were called Muslims and were part of God’s community, no matter in which country or under what sovereign they lived. Those who rejected Islam were infidels, in Arabic kāfir. Outside the House of Islam, the rest of the world was considered as dār al-harb, the House of War. It is noteworthy that until comparatively modern times Muslim ambassadors and other travellers in Europe, whichever the country from which they came or in which they travelled, defined themselves as Muslims or as representatives of Islam, and their hosts as kāfirs or as Christians. It is only where the context specifically requires it that the infidels are given a local habitation and a name. The terms most commonly used are Rūm and Franks (Franj, Firengi, etc.). The first means Romans, Byzantines, and hence Greeks; the second, originally used of the Empire of Charlemagne, came to be the generic term for Catholic and Protestant but not Orthodox Europeans. Medieval Arabic and Persian writers very occasionally mention individual European monarchs, and several show awareness of the institution of the Papacy. It is not however until about the 16th century that Ottoman and other Muslim authors begin to have some idea of the political map of Europe. They know little more.

The great Muslim historian and sociologist, Ibn Khaldūn, writing at the end of the 14th century, gives an account of the origin and growth of the rational sciences. After describing the genesis of science among the Greeks and Persians and other peoples of antiquity, he goes on to discuss its development under Islam and its spread westward across North Africa into Spain, and concludes: “We have heard of late that in the lands of the Franks, that is in the country of Rome and its dependencies on the northern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, the philosophic sciences are thriving, their works reviving, their sessions for study increasing, their assemblies comprehensive, their exponents numerous and their students abundant. But God knows best what goes on in those parts. God creates what he wishes and chooses.”

The point of the concluding quotation from the Qurʾān seems to be that even something as extraordinary as a birth of learning among the Franks is not beyond the scope of God’s omnipotence.

Ibn Khaldūn was the author of a universal history to which his better known Muqaddimah was an introduction. The second volume deals mainly with the pre-Islamic and non-Islamic peoples, including ancient Arabia, Babylon, Egypt, Israel, Persia, Greece, Rome and Byzantium. In Europe only the Visigoths are mentioned—a brief account of them is necessary as an introduction to the Muslim conquest of Spain and is part of the tradition of Spanish Arab historiography. Ibn Khaldūn’s universal history did not extend north of Spain nor east of Persia. That is to say, it was limited to his own civilization and its direct predecessors, and thus resembled most of the so-called universal histories written in the western world until very recently.

This lack of interest in the West—the more remarkable in a historian who was himself a Tunisian, a native of that part of the Islamic world in closest touch with Europe—is characteristic of Islamic literature in general. It is in striking contrast, not only with the European interest in Islam which began at an early stage
and developed rapidly, but also with the attitude of Islam to its other neighbors, that is to India and China in the east.

The Muslim discovery of Europe may be considered in four phases. During the first, in the earlier Middle Ages, most of Europe was still a remote and unknown land beyond the borders of civilization. Parts of it had been brought into the Islamic fold; the rest awaited a similar good fortune. About these distant lands and barbarous peoples the Muslims knew little and cared less.

A second phase began with the Crusades, when Europe launched its first major counterattack on Islam, recovering some of the lost territories in Spain and Sicily and finally sending a west European expeditionary force to the heart of the Islamic Middle East, in Syria and Palestine. At first relations between Crusaders and Muslims were predominantly military, but before long there was some development of diplomatic relations and very much more extensive commercial relations. The rich Arabic historiography of the Crusades period has much to say about the Crusader states in the Levant—their wars, their diplomacy, even their commerce. At no time, however, do the Arabic historians show the slightest interest in who these people were, or in whence and why they had come. Even the words “Crusade” and “Crusader” are lacking, and do not appear until much later, when they are taken over from Christian Arabic literature. To Muslims of the time, this was no “Great Debate,” but just another wave of barbarian invasions, this time of peoples known as Franks.

A third phase is dominated by the rise and expansion of the Ottoman Empire, which undertook the second major Islamic invasion of Europe, this time not from the southwest but from the southeast. For the 15th century Ottoman, as for the 8th century Arab, Europe was a frontier—a land of infidel barbarians to whom it was their duty, at once sacred and rewarding, to bring the enlightenment of the Muslim faith and the benefits of Muslim rule. During this period the Ottomans, followed by such lesser Islamic powers as Iran and Morocco, also entered into diplomatic and commercial relations with Europe. However, while European interest in these countries was considerable and produced an extensive literature, the Muslims for their part still disclosed a striking lack of curiosity.

A fourth phase began in the latter part of the 18th century and continued in the early 19th. In this period Europe, hitherto regarded with disdain by the Ottomans and other Muslims from an altitude of higher religion and greater power, suddenly revealed itself as rich, strong and dangerous; the threat of domination made Muslim rulers aware, for the first time, of the need to undertake a serious study of the languages and ways of Europe and to learn something of its science, its technology and above all its politics and its warfare.

Our best source for Muslim perceptions of Europe during these periods is in the vast geographical and historical literature written in Arabic, Persian and Turkish. In the world picture of Muslim scholars of the Middle Ages, the center of the world was the realm of Islam, stretching from Spain across North Africa to the Middle East and beyond, and containing within itself almost all the peoples and centers of ancient civilization. To the north, the Christian empire of Byzantium
represented an earlier, arrested stage of that civilization, based on divine revelation, which had reached its final and complete form in Islam. To the east, beyond Persia, there were countries which had achieved some kind of civilized living, albeit of an inferior and idolatrous kind. Apart from that there were only the white and black barbarians of the outer world, in the north and south. It is with the growth of Muslim knowledge about some of these northern barbarians that we are here concerned.

In general, interest in Western Europe was minimal, and it is not until comparatively late Ottoman times that Muslim authors devote serious attention to the history of Western Europe. Even then, such writings reveal a low level both of interest and of knowledge.

In the earlier stages this poverty of information may be attributed to lack of access and difficulties of communication. But from the high Middle Ages and certainly from Crusading times, neither information nor opportunity was lacking. What was missing was curiosity, and the modern observer cannot but be struck by the almost total indifference of Muslims to what was happening on the other side of the wall.

In the course of the centuries, however, a certain body of information was accumulated, transmitted from writer to writer, and gradually supplemented with new scraps of information obtained for the most part by chance, reported and preserved haphazard, and recorded with little concern for either accuracy or relevance.

The earliest interest is geographical. Muslim scholarship, particularly in the classical period, devoted much attention to the geographical sciences. The Muslim world had inherited some geographical literature translated from Greek and to a lesser extent from other languages of antiquity. Muslim scholars added significantly to the store. Their interest in the West, such as it was, was due not to any belief in its importance but rather to a desire for completeness. Geography—"the picture of the earth"—in principle covers the whole world, and should therefore include even the distant lands of darkest Europe. One Muslim writer, the 14th century Egyptian al-'Umarī, even apologizes to his readers for including such dull and unimportant matters and cites the need for comprehensiveness as his excuse.2 The reader of Muslim geographical literature will note the slight importance given to Western Europe as contrasted with other lands outside the Islamic oecumene, such as China, India, Africa and even eastern Europe. This lack of interest in the Christian west is found even among western Muslim geographers in North Africa and Spain, hardly less than among their eastern colleagues in Iraq, Iran and central Asia.

By Ottoman times there is a certain change. For the advancing Ottomans, Frankish Europe was no longer the mysterious wilderness that it had been for medieval Arabs and Persians. It was their immediate neighbor and rival, replacing the defunct Byzantine Empire as the millennial and archetypal adversary of the House of Islam. Fighting against Europe, the Turks were ready to learn the European arts of war. They were quick students and before long acquired a working knowledge of European navigation and cartography. They were soon able to copy, translate and use European sailing charts and to make coastal charts
of their own. Piri Reis (died ca. 1550), the first noteworthy Turkish cartographer, seems to have known some Western languages and to have made use of Western sources. As early as 1517 he presented a world map to Sultan Selim I, which included a copy of Columbus' lost map of America made in 1498. This was followed in the course of the 16th and early 17th centuries by some other cartographic and even geographic works. The first major Ottoman work on general geography was the Jihannuma of Hajji Khalifa, a leading Ottoman scholar of the 17th century, who tells us in his preface that he almost gave up hope of being able to compile a universal geography when he realized that the British Isles and Iceland could not be described without recourse to European works, since all those available to him in Arabic, Persian and Turkish were incomplete and inaccurate. He had, he said, consulted through intermediaries the geography of Ortelius and the atlas of Mercator. Then, just at the moment when he was hoping to find a copy of Ortelius he "had the good fortune to find the Atlas Minor, an abridgement of the Atlas Major" and at the same time to make the acquaintance of a former French monk who had come over to Islam." With the help of this Frenchman, he completed a Turkish translation of the Atlas Minor in 1655.

In the same year, Hajji Khalifa was moved to write a little book dealing specifically with the West. It was called "Guide for the Perplexed on the History of the Greeks and the Romans and the Christians." In his preface he explains his reasons for writing this booklet. The Christians had become very numerous. They were no longer confined to that part of the inhabited world in which they had previously lived, but had spread to many other parts of the world. Sailing across the eastern and western seas, they had become masters of a number of countries. They had not been able to encroach on the Ottoman Empire, but they had won victories in the New World and had taken control of the ports of India. They were thus approaching nearer to the Ottoman realms. In the face of this threat, all that the Islamic histories offered about these people was "manifest lies and grotesque fables." This being so, it was necessary to provide better information so that the people of Islam should no longer be totally ignorant concerning the affairs of these hell-bomd people, nor unaware and uninformed concerning these hostile neighbors, but on the contrary should awaken from their sleep of neglect, which had already allowed these accursed people to take certain countries from the hands of the Muslims, and thus turn Muslim lands into the House of War.

The first part of the book is introductory. It consists of two sections; one an outline of the Christian religion, the other a review of European systems of government. Given the primacy of religion in Muslim considerations and Hajji Khalifa's own definition of his topic not as Europe nor as the West but as Christendom, it is natural that he should begin his exposition with a discussion of the Christian faith. What is striking is its almost entirely early medieval character. Hajji Khalifa discusses the basic dogmas of the Christian faith as defined in the early creeds, and explains the Christological controversies and the disagreements of both the Nestorians and the Monophysites, noting correctly that the latter include the Armenians. His information is drawn entirely from earlier literature in Arabic.
The second part of Hajji Khalifa’s introduction presents a series of definitions of European political terms, such as emperor and pope, as well as the ranks in both church and state, between which he is careful to distinguish. The introductory section concludes with a brief statement on the language used by Europeans, a subject about which the information available to Muslim readers was remarkably vague and inaccurate.

The remainder of the book consists of nine chapters, dealing with the Papacy, the Empire, France, Spain, Denmark, Transylvania, Hungary, Venice and Moldavia, these apparently being the countries of Europe to which Hajji Khalifa thought it necessary to draw attention. The information given usually consists of little more than numbered lists of popes or rulers, some a century or so out-of-date, and interspersed with odd scraps of information. The only State of which the system of government is discussed in any detail is Venice, for which Hajji Khalifa speaks of the great council (Divan) and procedure of voting “with balls called ballots.” On two countries, France and Spain, he also offers some limited historical and geographical information. Following the normal human tendency to see others as mirror images of ourselves, Hajji Khalifa explains that in matters of government the Christians are divided into three mezhebs—the term used to designate the different juristic schools or rites which Muslims follow, and which are named after their founders. The Christian political mezhebs are monarchy, the school of Plato, aristocracy, the school of Aristotle, and democracy, the school of Democritus. Despite this somewhat startling distribution of founding fathers, Hajji Khalifa gives fairly accurate summaries of the principles and practices of each, noting that most of the states of Christendom are monarchies, Venice is an aristocracy, and Holland and England are democracies.

Hajji Khalifa was certainly well intentioned. His writings on geography and cartography attest to his interest and to the efforts which he made to obtain information from such informants as were available to him. He is no doubt right in his characterization of the earlier literature, on which his own description of Europe certainly represents a substantial advance. Nothing comparable is available in either Arabic or Persian until the 19th century. Even so, however, his presentation of European history and current affairs, written in 1655, seems naive and trivial when compared with the contemporary European picture of the Ottomans.

Of the human geography of Europe—the different peoples who inhabited the countries that loomed vaguely on the Ottoman horizon, there is little information in Ottoman literature. An interesting exception is a certain Ali of Gallipoli (died 1600), a well known historian, poet and polymath of his time. In at least two works Ali attempts a kind of ethnology of Europe. In the fifth volume of a work on universal history (not including Europe), he offers a digression on the various races encountered by the Turks. A parallel passage in another work discusses the different types of slaves and servants and the racial aptitudes of the peoples from whom they are drawn. Ali is naturally best informed about the races within the Empire, and richly reflects the normal prejudices of the slave owner. Outside the Empire he mentions only the Russians, Hungarians, Franks and Germans (Alman). The Franks and Hungarians, he says, somewhat resemble one
another. They are clean in their habits regarding eating, drinking, clothing and household appurtenances. They are ready of understanding, quick witted and agile. They are, however, inclined to be devious and cunning and are very crafty in acquiring money. As regards good breeding and dignity—qualities to which Āli attaches importance—they are middling. They are, however, capable of conducting an intelligible conversation. While often marked by beauty and elegance of appearance, few of them enjoy good health and many are subject to various diseases. Their physiognomies are open and easy to interpret. They are extremely capable in commerce and, when gathered together for drinking and jollity, take their pleasures judiciously. All in all, says Āli, they are smart people. The Germans on the other hand are stubborn and ill-disposed, skilled in handicrafts and the like, but otherwise rather backward. They are heavy of tongue and slow of movement. They are, however, excellent fighters, both as cavalry and as infantry.⁵

Āli was, of course, writing mainly from hearsay. Half a century later another Ottoman writer, the great traveller Evliya Çelebi, attempted a comparison between the Hungarians and the Austrians based allegedly on direct observation. Evliya notes that the Hungarians had been weakened by the Ottoman conquests of the previous century, and those not conquered had fallen under Austrian domination. Despite this he regarded them as far superior to the Austrians, who in his view were very unwarlike. “They are just like Jews. They have no stomach for a fight.” The Hungarians are finer people. “Though they have lost their power, they still have fine tables, are hospitable to guests and are capable cultivators of their fertile land. Like the Tatars, they ride wherever they go with a span of horses, with from five to ten pistols, and with swords at their waists. Indeed, they look just like our frontier soldiers, wearing the same dress as they, and riding the same thoroughbred horses. They are clean in their ways and in their eating, and honor their guests. They do not torture their prisoners as the Austrians do. They practice sword play like the Ottomans. In short, though both of them are unbelievers without faith, the Hungarians are more honorable and cleaner infidels. They do not wash their faces every morning with their urine as the Austrians do, but wash their faces every morning with water as the Ottomans do.”⁶

If the infidel present offered little of interest, the infidel past offered even less, and with very few exceptions Ottoman historians do not concern themselves with the history of Europe. Apart from a short history of the Popes and Emperors by a 14th century Persian historian, the first connected work on European history in an Islamic language is a Turkish translation of a history of France, completed in 1572 at the orders of the Chief Secretary to the Grand Vizier. It seems to have aroused little interest, since it survives in a single copy, and that in Dresden. It was followed in the 17th and 18th centuries by a few other translations and adaptations of European works, mostly unpublished. The major Ottoman historians describe the wars on the frontier, and record the arrivals and departures of ambassadors, but otherwise have little or nothing to say about Europe. Even an event as near to their frontiers and as relevant to their interests
As Others See Us

As the Thirty Years War receives only passing mention—rarely more than a few lines—in contemporary Turkish chronicles.

Some Muslim geographical writing about the West is influenced by another tradition in Islamic literature—that of the strange and the marvelous. Interest in such is a recurring feature and is expressed in popular religion, as well as in tradition and folklore, in literature and in art. Muslim readers, and therefore also Muslim writers, were interested in strange beings, supernatural, human and animal, in strange objects, and in marvelous and extraordinary phenomena. Writings about the medieval West have much to say about such things as the Island of Women, the petrifying lake of Ireland and other such wonders. This was by no means confined to medieval writers, but appears even in Ottoman reports of the 17th and 18th centuries. Thus a janissary officer who accompanied an embassy to Vienna in 1718 devotes some space to describing a remarkable pair of Siamese twin girls of whom he had heard in Hungary. In the same spirit, mechanical devices seen by Ottoman travellers are described in terms of wonderment and amusement rather than of scientific curiosity.

While Muslim travellers were little concerned about the peoples who lived in Western Europe, they were, however, almost always aroused by any Islamic connection. Thus, the janissary officer who in 1718 visited Vienna—a city which must surely have held some interest for Ottoman Turks at that time—is concerned almost exclusively with the two Turkish sieges of Vienna and with the retailing of stories—some of them more than a little strange and marvelous—concerning episodes in these sieges. In the same spirit, Moroccan ambassadors to Spain in the 17th and 18th centuries are keenly aware of the former Islamic glories of that country and hardly mention a place name without adding the formula “may God soon return it to Islam.”

Some of the visitors were, of course, concerned with more practical matters—with the acquisition of useful information. At first this consisted almost entirely of military intelligence likely to be of value in the event of a renewal of armed conflict. Thus the Turkish Embassy reports from Europe usually contain fairly detailed accounts of journeys to and from their destinations, with some descriptions of the roads, the relay stations, and the defenses of the places through which they passed. In time some political information was also adjudged to be useful. But this comes remarkably late. It is almost entirely missing during the Middle Ages, and until the 18th century even Ottoman political reports on Europe are to an astonishing extent fragmentary, rudimentary and inaccurate.

In the 18th century, for the first time, Muslim—mainly Ottoman—visitors to Europe begin to look for things which might be of use at home. Mehmed Efendi, an ambassador who went to Paris in 1721, describes locks and roads and bridges and some other devices lacking in the Ottoman Empire; Azmi Efendi, who visited Prussia in 1790, indicated that the Prussian administrative system might offer a good example and some useful lessons for the reform of the Ottoman state and of its army and administration. The new approach is made explicit by an Ottoman ambassador in Vienna, Ratib Efendi, who for the first time noted that Ottoman weakness might be a consequence of Christian strength rather than, as the Ottoman memorialists were accustomed to say, of a loss of virtue at home.
The Ottoman reassessment of relations with Europe began after the second failure to capture Vienna in 1683. The first Turkish attempt, though not successful, had ended in a stalemate which lasted for a century and a half and still left the Ottomans as a major threat to the heart of Europe. The second failure ended in an unmistakable defeat and withdrawal followed by a peace treaty which, for the first time in Ottoman history, was dictated by a victorious enemy. The lesson was driven home by further defeats and losses, and towards the end of the 18th century Muslims in Turkey and elsewhere were beginning to look towards Europe with concern and fear.

Several changes followed, perhaps the most important being that Muslims traveled to Europe in greater numbers and stayed for longer periods than ever before. In the past, the reluctance of Muslims to venture among infidels was matched by the unwillingness of Christians to receive them. Diplomatic and commercial relations were conducted mostly by European visitors to the Middle East, who learned its languages and established communities in its cities. Muslims did not learn infidel languages or travel in infidel lands, and when such journeys were necessary preferred when possible to rely on their own non-Muslim subjects. Now, for the first time, Muslims begin to travel to Europe and even to stay there for a while. Instead of sending occasional envoys for specific purposes as in the past, the Sultans established permanent resident embassies, and Ottoman officials of various ranks remained, sometimes for years, in Europe. They were followed by students, first a few and then an ever growing flood, sent to Western military schools and later universities by Middle Eastern rulers. Though their purpose was still primarily military, the effects went very much further, and the lessons which these students learned extended far beyond the desires or intentions of their imperial masters.

Conventionally, the modern history of the Middle East is dated from the French expedition to Egypt in 1798. Though not the first Islamic defeat—the Ottoman reverses at the hands of the Austrians and Russians had begun a century earlier and had inaugurated the first phase of modernizing reform in the Ottoman Empire—it offered several significant new features. It was the first to come from western not eastern Europe. It was the first to affect not the outer borders of the Empire in the Balkans or on the Black Sea but the heartlands of the Middle East. And perhaps most important of all, it was the first to result in a Western occupation of one of these heartlands.

During this occupation an Egyptian scholar and historian called al-Jabarti visited the research center and library which the French had established in an abandoned Mamluk palace in Cairo. He noted that they had assembled a large and well-stocked library, in which even common French soldiers came to read, and—still more noteworthy—to which Muslims were readily, even eagerly, welcomed: “The French were particularly happy if a Muslim visitor showed interest in the sciences. They immediately began to talk to him and showed him all kinds of printed books with pictures of parts of the terrestrial globe and of animals and plants. They also had books on ancient history.”

Al-Jabarti visited the library a number of times. He was shown books on Islamic history and on Islamic learning in general, and was surprised to find that
the French had a collection of Arabic texts, as well as many Muslim books translated from Arabic into French. He noted that the French "make great efforts to learn the Arabic language and the colloquial. In this they strive day and night. And they have books especially devoted to all types of languages, their declensions and conjugations as well as their etymologies. These works, al-Jabarti remarks, "make it easy for them to translate whatever they wish from any language into their own language very quickly."

There was nothing comparable on the other side. For an Arab, a Persian or a Turk, not a single grammar or dictionary of any Western language existed either in manuscript or in print. It was not until well into the 19th century that we find any attempt to produce grammars and dictionaries of Western languages for Middle Eastern users. When they do appear, the earliest examples are due largely to imperialist and missionary initiatives. The first bilingual dictionary of Arabic and a European language by a native Arabic speaker appeared in 1828. It was the work of a Christian—an Egyptian Copt—"revised and augmented" by a French orientalist, and according to the author's preface was designed for the use of Westerners rather than of Arabs. The thought that Arabs might need such dictionaries does not seem to have occurred to anyone until much later.

The European student of the Middle East was better placed than his Middle Eastern opposite number in more respects than in the availability of language aids. By the end of the 18th century, he already had at his disposal an extensive literature on the history, religion and culture of the Muslim peoples, including editions and translations of texts and serious scholarly studies. In many respects indeed, Western scholarship on the Middle East was already more advanced than that of the Middle Easterners themselves. European travellers and archaeologists had begun the process which was to lead to the recovery and decipherment of the monuments of the ancient Middle East, and the restoration, to the peoples of the region, of their glorious but long forgotten past. The first chair of Arabic in France was founded by Francis I at the Collège de France in 1539; the first in England was founded by Thomas Adams at Cambridge University in 1633. There, and in similar centers in other west European countries, a great effort of creative scholarship was devoted to the ancient and medieval languages, literatures and cultures of the region; very much less to recent and contemporary matters. All this is in striking contrast to the almost total lack of interest displayed by Middle Easterners in the languages, cultures and religions of Europe. Only the Ottoman state, responsible for defense and diplomacy, and thus for dealings with the states of Europe, found it necessary from time to time to collect and compile some information about the mysterious Occident. The record of their findings shows that until the latter part of the 18th century their information was usually superficial, often inaccurate and almost always out of date.

The feeling of timelessness, that nothing really changes, is a characteristic feature of Muslim writing about Europe—as indeed about other times and places. A physician or scientist is content to translate a book on medicine or science written 50 or 100 years earlier. Hajji Khalifa, writing on the Christian religion in 1655, draws on medieval polemics, without worrying about any changes which might have occurred in the Christian religion during the previous
half millennium, and without reference to the Reformation, the wars of religion, or even to the schism between Rome and Constantinople, which one might have thought to be of greater interest to a 17th century Turk than the ancient disputes of the Nestorians and the Monophysites. In the same spirit an early 18th century Ottoman historian, Naima, equates the European states of his time with the medieval crusaders and disclaims any need to discuss them in detail, and a late 18th century Turkish artist, seeking to portray the costume of European women, draws on 17th century models.

Why this difference in the attitudes of the two societies towards one another? Certainly it cannot be ascribed to any greater religious tolerance on the part of the Europeans. On the contrary, the Christian attitude toward Islam was far more bigoted and intolerant than that of the Muslims to Christianity. In part the reasons for this greater Muslim tolerance are theological and historical; in part practical. The Prophet Muhammad lived some six centuries after Jesus Christ. For Christians and Muslims alike, their own religion and their own revelation represented God’s final word to mankind. But chronology imposed a difference in their mutual perceptions. For the Muslim, Christ was a precursor; for the Christian, Muhammad was an impostor. For the Muslim, Christianity was an early, incomplete and obsolete form of the one true religion, and did, therefore, contain elements of truth based on an authentic revelation. Christians, like Jews, were consequently entitled to the toleration of the Muslim state. For the Christian, dealing with a subsequent religion, no such position was theologically possible. Christians found it difficult enough to tolerate Judaism, at which they might have looked in the same way as Muslims looked at Christianity. For them to tolerate Islam would have meant admitting a revelation after Christ and scriptures later than the gospels. This was an admission which they were not prepared to make.

There were also some practical considerations. Islam came into a predominantly Christian world, and for a long time the Muslims were a minority in the countries they ruled. Some measure of tolerance for the religions of the subject majority was therefore an administrative and economic necessity, and most Muslim rulers wisely recognized this fact. Europe, in general, was subject to no such constraints. In the one European country where they existed, in Spain, there was a heavy price to pay for the intolerance of the Reconquest, in the impoverishment of the country through the expulsion of Moors and Jews.

There is also an important difference between the two civilizations in the interest which they offered and the curiosity which they aroused.

For Christians there was a compelling reason to study and if possible visit the Middle East. This was the cradle of their faith, the site of their holy places, the scene of their sacred history, familiar to them from their scriptures and from the literature and art which those scriptures inspired. There were no such reasons for Muslims to concern themselves with Europe.

Nor was that all. Compared with the vast variety of peoples and cultures in the Islamic world, Frankish Europe must have seemed a very monotonous place. Substantially, it was a region of one religion, one race and in most parts, one culture. There was one kind of dress for each of the few major social classes. All
this is in striking contrast to the kaleidoscopic variety of races, creeds, costumes and cultures in the Islamic world. Frankish Christendom even cherished its uniformity; at least it seems to have had difficulty in tolerating or accommodating any kind of deviation, and spent much energy in the pursuit of heretics, witches, Jews, and others that departed from the norm.

The one respect in which Europe offered greater variety was in language. In contrast to the Arabic speaking world, where Arabic was the sole language of religion, commerce and culture, the treasure-house of the learning of the past and the instrument for the business of the present, Europe used a wide range of different languages, for religion and scholarship as well as for every day purposes. The classics of Europe and the scriptures of Christianity were in three languages, Latin, Greek and Hebrew, to which one may add a fourth, Aramaic, if one takes note of the Aramaic books of the Old Testament. Europeans were thus accustomed from an early stage to the necessity to study and master difficult languages other than their own vernaculars and, more than that, to recognize that there were external sources of wisdom written in foreign languages, access to which involved learning these languages. The situation was very different among the Arabs, for whom their own language was scriptural, classical and practical at one and the same time, and no one therefore felt or conceived the need to learn any other. The subsequent spread of Islam added two more literary languages, Persian and Turkish. In the central Islamic lands, there were no others.

In the Muslim, particularly the Arab, lands, the cities offered an infinite variety of types, augmented by returning travellers, visitors, slaves and merchants coming from the far lands of Asia, Africa and even Europe. The appearance of men with outlandish costumes and unfamiliar features aroused no curiosity in the great metropolises of the Middle East, where such were commonplace. There was nothing to evoke the extraordinary curiosity exhibited by the inhabitants of the monochrome capitals of Europe at the spectacle of Moroccan, Ottoman, Persian and other exotic visitors in their midst.

This eager, often ill-mannered, curiosity was noted by many of the Muslim visitors to Europe. Early in the 18th century Mehmed Efendi was astonished at the strange behavior of Europeans who travelled great distances, waited long hours, and endured considerable inconvenience, merely in order to gratify their curiosity with the sight of a Turk. The word translated as curiosity is hirs, the meaning of which could more accurately be rendered as eagerness, avidity or covetousness. Azmi Efendi, pausing in Copenick on his way to Berlin in 1790, observes: “Since no envoy has been sent from our exalted Sultanate to Berlin for 30 years, the people of Berlin were unable to contain their impatience until our arrival in the city. Regardless of the winter and the snow, both men and women came in carriages, on horseback, and on foot, to look at us and contemplate us, and then they returned to Berlin.”9 Azmi notes that all the way from Copenick to Berlin there were crowds of spectators on both sides. The crowds in the capital were even greater. Another Ottoman ambassador, Vasif, arriving in Madrid in 1787, notes that when he made his ceremonial entry into the city: “five or six rows of spectators crowded the balconies, and I was told that the windows were rented for 100 piastres. Carts and carriages, full of curious onlookers, were parked in the
streets and made our progress slower and more difficult.”10 Most of the other visitors were impressed and not a little flattered at the interest which impelled people to go to much trouble and even pay substantial sums of money for no better reason than to stare at the Muslim envoys. This kind of curiosity was unfamiliar and difficult to describe.

In the earlier stages one might attribute the difference in attitude of the two cultures to the fact that the one had more to learn, the other more to offer. But already by the time of the Crusades this explanation is no longer adequate, and by the end of the Middle Ages it is clear that we are dealing with one of the more fundamental differences between two societies.

It may well seem strange that classical Islamic civilization which, in its earlier days, was so much affected by Greek and Asian influences, should so decisively have rejected the West. But a possible explanation may be suggested. While Islam was still expanding and receptive, Western Europe had little or nothing to offer but rather flattered Muslim pride with the spectacle of a culture that was visibly and palpably inferior. What is more, the very fact that it was Christian discredited it in advance. The Muslim doctrine of successive revelations culminating in the final mission of Muhammad led the Muslim to reject Christianity as an earlier and imperfect form of something which he, himself, possessed in its final perfect form, and to discount Christian thought and Christian civilization accordingly. After the initial impact of eastern Christianity on Islam in its earliest period, Christian influences, even from the high civilization of Byzantium, were reduced to a minimum. Later, by the time that the advance of Christendom and the decline of Islam had created a new relationship, Islam was crystallized in its ways of thought and behavior and had become impervious to external stimuli, especially those coming from the millennial adversary in the West. Masked by the still imposing military might of the Ottoman Empire, the peoples of Islam continued until the dawn of the modern age to cherish—as some of us in the West still do today—the conviction of the immeasurable and immutable superiority of their own civilization to all others. For the medieval Muslim, from Andalusia to Persia, Christian Europe was still an outer darkness of barbarism and unbelief. It was a point of view which might perhaps have been justified at one time; by the end of the Middle Ages it was becoming dangerously obsolete.

Meanwhile Europe itself had radically changed its own attitude to the outside world. The great efflorescence of European intellectual curiosity and scientific inquiry was due in no small measure to the fortunate coincidence of three major developments. One was the discovery of a whole new world, with strange peoples, both barbarous and civilized, and with cultures unknown to the scriptures, classics, and memories of Europe. Such a marvelous phenomenon could hardly fail to arouse at least some stirring of curiosity. The second was the Renaissance, the rediscovery of classical antiquity, which provided both an example of such curiosity and a method of satisfying it. The third was the beginning of the Reformation—the weakening of ecclesiastical authority over both thought and its expression, and the freeing of human minds in a manner without precedent since ancient Athens.

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The Muslim world had also had its renaissance in the recovery of Greek and, to a lesser extent, Persian learning in the early Islamic centuries. It had had its own discoveries, as the expansion of the Arab Muslim armies brought them to civilizations as remote and as diverse as Europe, India and China. But these events did not coincide, and they were not accompanied by any loosening of theological bonds. The Islamic renaissance came when the expansion of Islam had ceased and the counterattack of Christendom was beginning. The intellectual struggle of ancients and moderns, of theologians and philosophers, ended in an overwhelming and enduring victory of the first over the second. This confirmed the Muslim world in the belief in its own self-sufficiency and superiority as the one repository of the true faith and—which for Muslims meant the same thing—of the civilized way of life. It required centuries of defeat and retreat before Muslims were ready to modify this vision of the world and of their place in it.

Notes


