

Review Essay

Contours of an Islamo-Christian Civilization

Books Reviewed: Jack Goody, *Islam in Europe*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004; Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004; James A. Bill and John Alden Williams, *Roman Catholics and Shi'i Muslims: Prayer, Passion, and Politics*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

There can be no doubt that the twenty-first century has begun – and continues – under the ominous cloud of enmity between Muslim groups or nations and western ones, from the attacks on American soil on 11 September 2001 to those in Madrid and London, to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and now in the growing tension with Iran. Unsurprisingly, this has spurred a mushrooming of publications on the troubled relations between “Islam and the West,” with almost every book pointing out the bold Christian rhetoric emanating from a militarily aggressive White House.

Kenneth Cragg, the veteran Christian expositor of the Qur’an, more prolific than ever in his nineties (seven titles since 2002), astutely named one of his latest books *The Qur’an and the West* (Georgetown University Press: 2006). Not only is “Islam” misleading in terms of the wide diversity of cultures, sects, and spiritualities inspired by the Qur’an and the Hadith literature, but for Cragg, Muslims in today’s globalized world, whether living as “exiles” in the West or within Muslim-majority states, will have to choose between the vulnerable faith proclaimed in the early years in Makkah and the religion *cum* political rule exemplified by the Prophet in Madinah. As usual, Cragg also challenges the Christian side, which, in its American incarnation, largely rationalizes the use of power to extend its hegemony from Israel-Palestine to Central Asia in the name of democracy.

Though all three books under review here share Cragg’s motivation to reduce tension and foster greater understanding between Muslims and Christians, only the third (on Shi’ites and Catholics) represents the kind of theological dialogue that Cragg and others have nourished over the years.

The thread running through this review is that the urgent task of breaking down stereotypes and building peace between Muslims and Christians needs the contribution of people on both sides, a contribution graced with a breadth of scholarly expertise and solid commitment.

Jack Goody is a Cambridge emeritus professor of social anthropology with a string of publications to his name, mostly related to West Africa but also touching on general themes of modernity, culture, and economics. Richard Bulliet is another veteran scholar, a Middle East historian at Columbia University. The authors of *Roman Catholics and Shi'i Muslims* are not theologians: James Bill teaches political science and international studies at the College of William and Mary, while John Williams (at the same college) is professor emeritus of the Humanities in Religion and an Islamicist. Each one brings an array of analytical tools to the task of “de-othering” Muslims for Christians and vice versa. Together, they mount a solid case for the internal and external congruence of a Muslim-Christian alliance for human betterment in an irreversibly interconnected world.

Islam in Europe is a deliberate rebuttal of the current western reflex to see in Islam the faith of backward and violent people. Of his four chapters, the first one, “Past Encounters,” is by far the longest (100 pages). In it, he provides a great deal of historical information to support his thesis that from the eighth century onward, Muslims have always been present in Europe, contributing handsomely to European civilization in the fields of science, literature, philosophy, medicine, and the arts. Secular scholars too often either ignore or dismiss outright the religious dimension (p. 10). Goody writes that it is difficult for people with no personal faith to understand the power of religious ideas in shaping one’s worldview and prioritizing action in society, whether individually or collectively. Naturally, faith convictions coalesce with other factors determined by time, location, and culture; they are crucial nonetheless. Witness the staying power of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union or the impact of Islam on the resistance fighters in Afghanistan in the 1980s or today in Chechnya.

Goody sees the “long and massive” Islamic penetration of Europe along three historical fronts: 1) the Arab/Berber invasions of Europe, “the southern thrust,” mostly completed in the first Islamic century; 2) the Ottoman Turks (“the middle way”), who began their westward conquest of Europe after the fall of Constantinople (1453); and 3) “the northern entry” by the Mongol Tartars into the Ukraine (1240) on the heels of “a millennia-old stream of Ural-Altai and Turkic-speaking peoples coming into Europe from the steppes of Central Asia” (p. 49). In light of this pervasive influence, the (rather late) concept of a “Christian Europe” should be reexamined, con-

structed as it was, at least in part, by opposition to the Muslim “other,” easily its equal militarily and much more formidable culturally during the medieval period. Europe, after all, is part of the Eurasian landmass, open to a multitude of influences, and foremost to those of the three Near Eastern religions: first Judaism, then Christianity, and finally Islam. All three have “equal entitlements to be present” (p. 14).

That first chapter offers the reader a plethora of details on these main Islamic thrusts into Europe, while Goody the anthropologist consults a wide range of historical sources. It reads well generally, but the author is at his best when recounting the literary and cultural impact from the southern front, for example, the translation into European languages of Arabic *adab* (etiquette) and wisdom literature and the central role played by animal fables (probably originating in India) in monastic literature and eventually in Chaucer’s works. The *Chanson de Roland*, corresponding to the first Crusade and revolving around the legend of Charlemagne and his battles with the Muslims, is but one sample of medieval *chansons de geste* literature, which, together with the influence of the *Arabian Nights*, gave rise to an abundant European romance literature.

Contrary to popular wisdom, love poetry was not the invention of twelfth-century European troubadours. Ibn Hazm (beyond his other literary contributions) and other Muslim poets had been composing chivalric verse long before this. Poets crossed over from Spain to Provence and beyond, and so did singing girls “sent as gifts by Muslim rulers to their Christian counterparts” (p. 72). Courts both Muslim and Christian looked strangely alike by the fourteenth century. Add to this the vigorous commercial trading between both sides as well as an almost continuous exchange of ambassadors and you have an entirely different picture of “Islam in Europe” from the conventional one.

Goody’s last three chapters also merit close attention. The first, “Bitter Icons and Ethnic Cleansing,” seeks to deconstruct the notion of *ethnic cleansing*, which has more to do with religion than *ethnicity*, and the *cleansing* part, which has, sadly, been an integral part of human history from time immemorial. Next he examines the issue of Islamic terrorism (chapter 3). *Terrorism*, a term first applied to the Jacobins during the French Revolution and defined as the tactic of those who resist the monopoly of force in the modern state, has been practiced by many groups, including Jews in 1930s Palestine: “The terrorists then became the legitimate government” (p. 134). But if terrorism is defined chiefly as the killing of non-combatants, then how can pre-emptive military strikes (i.e., Iraq in 2003) not be labeled as “terrorist”?

Finally, the last chapter returns to the theme of icons, those representations of religious exemplars and concepts in language and art, as well as a long-standing interest of Goody's. Although his point that all major religions (including Buddhism and the Brahman class in Hinduism) started off with serious doubts about the use of representation in whatever medium is certainly valid, it may not be the most germane to his overall argument. The Taliban's destruction of the Buddhist statues in Bamyán or their banning of cinemas (as was done to the theater in Puritan England) may be manifestations of an anti-iconic fundamentalist religion; however, this issue hardly represents the major barrier between Muslims and Christians today.

On another note, some Muslim names are wrongly transliterated – thus *Nasrallah* instead of the *Nasara*, “Nazarenes” as used in the Qur'an (p. 148); Ibn Taymuyah instead of Ibn Taymiyya (p. 150). Also the Shi'ite passion play (developed quite late) was about Husayn's killing, not his father Ali's (p. 155).

Richard Bulliet offers an excellent historico-cultural apologetic for Muslim-Christian understanding – another scholarly work made accessible to a wide audience. For him, the dramatic flare-up of hostilities between Muslim and Christian counterparts since 2001 makes the task of arguing that “the case for Islamo-Christian civilization” is just as plausible as the recent slogan of “Judeo-Christian civilization” (1950s) – and all the more urgent. It is high time to “retire from public discourse” the “clash of civilizations” thesis, with all of its Islamophobic undertones (p. 9): “Civilizations that are destined to clash cannot seek together a common future” (p. 5).

Bulliet also seeks to undercut the condescending western attitude of demanding that Muslims pass various litmus tests before they can be admitted into civilizational membership – “civilization” defined, of course, by western values with secularism at the top of the list. What is needed is a retelling of history, a “master narrative” that sidelines the current one, which sees only fourteen centuries of fearful conflict and harbors the notion that “there is something ‘wrong’ with Islam” (p. 13). By contrast, his own historical narrative reveals Latin Christians and Middle Eastern Muslims as partakers of a “common socioreligious system” embarked for eight centuries on a comparable trajectory of development that, at certain points, virtually overlapped (p. 15). These “sibling societies” faced similar challenges in the thirteenth century, yet responded differently and acted “like fraternal twins that are almost indistinguishable in childhood but have distinctive ... personalities as adults” (p. 16).

Among the highlights of Muslim-Christian expansion, both scriptural traditions (Latin Christians and Muslims from North Africa to Central Asia)

begin to enlarge their regional grip by converting alien populations. While Muslims found this task considerably lightened by the majority presence of monotheistic peoples (Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians) who also had in common a Hellenistic culture with many key texts already translated into a Semitic language (Syriac), the Latins faced formidable obstacles in communicating the gospel to polytheists who had no sacred scriptures, whether from Scandinavia, the British Isles, Germany, Poland, or France. Additionally, starting in the ninth century, both communities “mirrored one another in the rapid growth of bodies of religious specialists” (p. 24): the rise of monasticism with the founding of the Benedictine Order and, on the Muslim side, the increased role played by the ulama (experts in religious knowledge).

With his other three chapters, Bulliet deals less with history and more with its interpretation. In his second chapter, “What Went Wrong?,” he challenges the assumptions made famous by Bernard Lewis in his book by that title. Such a question implies a comparative perspective, he notes, and, importantly, an objective standard by which to judge the “failure” of Muslim countries to live up to the West’s economic, political, and social vitality. The fact is that neither side followed a blueprint to get to where they are now. Europe stumbled on its present course through political and industrial revolutions. Muslims had leaders, such as Muhammad Ali (d. 1849) in Egypt and Kemal Atatürk (d. 1938) in Turkey, who believed that closing the power gap between them and Europe or the United States mandated the implementation of western-style secular policies. Yet Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) was not unique in concluding that the West was decadent and that only the Qur’an and the Sunnah held the secret to the Muslim ummah’s ultimate prosperity.

Through a wealth of examples, Bulliet argues that precisely those Muslims who most wanted to copy the West were also the most “consumed with dreams of unlimited personal power” (p. 60). From the Ottoman sultan Abdülhamit II (d. 1918), Syria’s Hafez al-Asad (d. 2000), and Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak to the monarchs of Jordan, Morocco, and the Persian Gulf, all sought greater independence from western control while tightening their grip on power and exploiting western know-how and finance as best they could. In that sense, the question might be: “What went right?”

Yet here again, a better understanding might come from an Islamo-Christian civilizational perspective. In both societies, monarchs have always struggled to “expand their personal jurisdiction and limit religious jurisdiction” (p. 66). Latin Christendom experienced repeated conflicts between crown and church until the worst of the Protestant-Catholic wars were settled in 1648, with religion being subjected to rulers within their national boundaries. The Muslim world’s ulama, though weaker than their Christian

counterparts, succeeded over the centuries in keeping their rulers in check by a combination of popular appeal and religious posturing. The Shari`ah, after all, laid out specific checks and balances on political power.

Thus, whereas in recent history the West sharply divided church and state, Muslim lands continue to demonstrate a “religious resurgence” that often threatens their autocratic rulers. Having just emphasized this deeply ingrained reflex of Muslim populations to turn to religious leaders in times of crisis, Bulliet, paradoxically, argues that secular turning points profoundly dilute people’s religious fervor. He rests his case by monitoring the frequency of religious names in specific periods of time (see his appendix on “Quantitative Onomastics”), because these illustrate parents’ common attitudes about future trends.

According to him, the American revolution, the state-sponsored reforms in Turkey (*tanzimat*), and the reign of Reza Shah in Iran “triggered long-term declines in religious naming” (p. 78). If anything, the Iranian revolution accelerated this declining trend. Bulliet, it seems to me, is less than clear in explaining the paradox between an observable resurgence of religion and the phenomenon of parents betting on a secular future, especially in view of his conclusion: the challenge is for Muslims to transform the “Islam against tyranny” reflex into a constructive dialogue with contemporary democratic and economic models.

This interest in the emerging trends of Islamic sociopolitical thought is carried out in the last chapter “The Edge of the Future,” in which he argues that considering the vast diversity of movements in Islam’s past and the tendency for change to come from “the edge” (away from the centers of power and orthodoxy), we should expect that new Islamic movements that have not yet appeared are likely to provide profound and creative solutions to the present turmoil caused by jihadists and hard-line religious autocrats. Bulliet’s historical acumen deserves close reading here, even when he ventures into the future. It must also be read with the preceding chapter in mind and the revelation of his own intellectual journey as a scholar of Middle East studies (and past executive secretary of the Middle East Studies Association [MESA]). He states that western scholars should attempt to break the destructive habit of intellectuals and politicians, both of whom seek to find “people they can love” in this region (because they believe and act as they do). In view of this Islamo-Christian civilization that has nurtured us over the centuries, urges Bulliet, we should let our Muslim side work out its own solutions to the church-state puzzle in peace.

The third book under review brings us full circle. Bill and Williams bring together the largest Christian denomination (Catholicism) and a ven-

erable Islamic tradition (Shi`ism, and specifically, the Twelvers), that is particularly in the limelight today because of Iran and Iraq. This is a Cragg-like project, at least in the sense that theological issues take priority. The goal is straightforward: to contribute to a “community of civilizations” (p. 3) by highlighting the common ground between the two traditions. The book’s cover displays a dramatic moment in Shi`ite-Catholic rapprochement: President Khatami’s meeting with Pope John Paul II during the former’s visit to Rome. Whether it was Khatami’s words about commonality and reconciliation or the Pope’s blessing of the Muslim delegation, the encounter was indeed a harbinger of more dialogue to come.

Broadly stated, the book is organized around five common foci: saints and intercessors (chapter 3); redemptive suffering and martyrdom (chapter 4); the common threads among Catholic mysticism and Sufism (chapter 5); shared and contrasting attitudes toward law and the state (chapter 6); and, finally, the same applied to issues of social justice, religious authority, and modern polity (chapter 7).

At the same time, this an ideal textbook for the religion classroom: a seamless and readable text (with minimal notes) by two seasoned scholars in their field; an introductory chapter covering both faiths; a detailed presentation of Shi`ite history, including notes on all twelve imams; a useful three-page glossary of Shi`ite terms; and, as in both previous books, a selected bibliography and index. More than that, they present us with an excellent case study of comparative religion – all the more dramatic because, likely due to our media biases, it is unexpected. In fact, the common ground between these two traditions is spectacular. For example, Jesus (in both faiths) and Imam Husayn (in Shi`ite Islam) are considered sinless: “They both led simple lives and suffered poverty and hardship” (p. 48). Even their passion and the voluntary sacrifice of their lives achieved cosmic significance for their followers. Although Husayn was not known as a warrior, more than anything else he exemplified the quality of one who is *mazlūm* (wronged), who refuses to fight back not out of cowardice, but “because of generosity and forbearance” (p. 49). Both deaths are considered “redemptive,” in that their suffering achieved a “great spiritual victory” and “helped cleanse the world of injustice, tyranny, and corruption and set a great example for their followers” (p. 50). Certainly in comparison to Sunni Islam, the parallel is striking.

Yet stopping at that point may prove misleading, for “redemptive” in the Christian sense goes much further than that. As John the Baptist puts it, Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Shi`ites, although more attuned to redemptive suffering than their Sunni counterparts, recoil from the doctrine of Christ’s atonement for human sin.

As a theologian, Cragg would have unpacked the issue further. Just the same, the commonalities are remarkable.

Consider the parallel between Mary and Sayyida Fatima (the Prophet's daughter, Ali's wife, and the mother of Hasan and Husayn): both are considered sinless, acting as models of devotion and spirituality; both lived lives of suffering, especially through their sons' martyrdom; and both, through their intercessory powers, represent "critical links in the divine chain that connects the human and the divine" (p. 55). Other important linkages between Catholicism and Shi'ism include the Imams' intercessory role and the spiritual power that emanates from the many *imamzadas* (tombs of lesser saints); a strong mystical current; a relatively strong emphasis on reason in the tension between faith and reason – both value philosophy; "the normative nature of politics, politics based on systems of law from divine precepts" (p. 135); and an overriding concern for the downtrodden and the necessity of social justice and equality.

Above all, it is the shared theme of redemptive suffering that acts as a fulcrum for the human dilemma in the religious sphere: the inner element (*batin* [esoteric] as opposed to *zahir* [exoteric]) is "the power of love, sacrifice, and redemption" (p. 144). Yet in the world of politics, where no magic wand can wave away corruption, greed, and injustice, religious leaders seek to establish structures that will minimize the impact of human wrongdoing and seek the good – above all for the poor and the oppressed – as in Latin America's liberation theology and the Middle East's populist Shi'ism.

The authors' last sentence could serve as an apt summary of the books reviewed here: "At this time in history, it is important that the widely diverse world communities and cultures strive to communicate with, tolerate and, most important, understand one another" (p. 146). In useful and complementary ways, all three of these works break down the dangerous prejudices of our day and bring Muslims and Christians several steps closer to investing together their religious faith for the betterment of humanity.

David Johnston
Visiting Scholar, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania