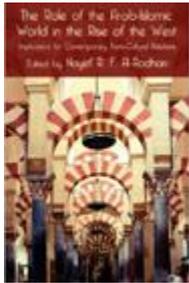


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The Role of the Arab-Islamic World in the Rise of the West: Implications for Contemporary Trans-Cultural Relations



Nayef R.F. Al-Rodhan, Editor

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“An Ocean Model of Civilization”

This book aims to recapture this lost dimension of history, and it is my hope that in so doing it will contribute to a better understanding of both the West and the Arab-Islamic world, their exchanges and shared heritage, as well as help to foster more positive present and future relations. East and West have not, after all, only met in conflict and their common history is not only one of tension and antagonism. Moreover, their positive encounters served to advance our collective knowledge. (84) As I have mentioned in *Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man: A Philosophy of History and Civilisational Triumph*, ‘[e]ach high point in the history of human civilization has taken place where the conditions were ripe and has borrowed and built upon the achievements of other cultures whose “golden age” may have passed’. (85) Advances in human civilization are cumulative and the fruit of collective achievements. The human story is one story. Rather than conceiving of multiple civilizations, we ought to think in terms of multiple geo-cultural domains that together comprise one human civilization. In *Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man*, I have outlined ‘an ocean model of one human civilization’ into which flow multiple rivers that each contribute to its character and depth. (86)

Advances in knowledge during the golden ages of the Arab-Islamic Empire were themselves influenced by the achievements of earlier contributions to human civilization, such as those of ancient China, India and Greece, and were acknowledged as such. (87) Their debt to scholars from other cultures and earlier epochs were always meticulously acknowledged in their citations. The Hadith authenticity methodology served as a cultural and intellectual framework for citation. Islam’s belief system, cultural norms, intellectual codes, moral principles and political regulations are all governed by the Quran and the Hadith. The Hadith are practical dimensions of the Quran’s religious instructions demonstrated by the Prophet Mohammed’s own life. The Hadith are classified according to their level of authenticity. Al-Bukhari and Muslim collections of Hadith are deemed to have the greatest

authenticity. The authenticity of the Hadith are dependent upon those within the chain of people reporting the sayings of the Prophet. (88) The reliability of narrators within this chain was rigorously verified in order to eliminate the possibility of fabrication or inaccuracies. The Hadith methodology may be thought of as providing the basis for the intellectual practice of citation in the Arab-Islamic world that appears to have been missing in Europe.

The debt to Muslim scholars is, for the most part, unacknowledged by European scholars who drew upon their work. Indeed, the work of Arab-Islamic scholars appears, in some instances, to have been copied almost verbatim. For example, the remarkable similarities between Al-Ghazali's work and that of René Descartes have been the subject of much discussion. Both Al-Ghazali and Descartes argued against the infallibility of sense perception. There are also similarities between Al-Ghazali's theory of causation and that of David Hume. (89) The work of St Thomas Aquinas resembles very closely that of Ibn Rushd. Indeed, it is possible that St Thomas Aquinas came into contact with Ibn Rushd's work at the University of Naples, which was founded by Frederick II of Sicily, who was a great admirer of Arabic philosophy. (90) Ibn Al-Haytham's mathematical works are also believed to have influenced those of Roger Bacon, Descartes, Frederick of Fribourg, Kepler and Christiaan Huygens. (91) Da Vinci, John Locke, Voltaire, Descartes, Kant and Rousseau are all believed to have been influenced by Ibn Tufayl's book Hayy Ibn Yazan, which tells the story of a child who grew up on a desert island and through the application of reason became enlightened. (92) What seems to be a lack of correct citation in European scholarship, particularly in the Middle Ages, may have been due to different practices within Europe at the time. However, the reigning religious animosity towards Islam and a sense of inferiority in Europe may also have been partly responsible for European reticence in acknowledging their debt to earlier Muslim works. Europe's failure to acknowledge its cultural and intellectual debt to the Arab-Islamic world not only perpetuates the myth of Europe as the birthplace of modernity, but also understandably continues to anger and frustrate Arabs and Muslims today.

Viewing the successes of the West within the broader context of the development of a collective human civilization, helps to break down Eurocentric assumptions about the nature of its rise, as well as the nature of the Arab-Islamic world, and the binary opposition of a superior, progressive West and an inferior, stagnant Near East that have very real socio-cultural and political consequences. As we have seen, the Arab-Islamic Empire played a pivotal role in the rise of the West.

Fatalistic assumptions about the Muslim world that have tended to abound in the contemporary era, as the notion of the 'Arab predicament' illustrates, also depend to some extent on the assumption of a stagnant Middle East immune to reason, liberty and democracy. (93) When, as the chapters of this book demonstrate, this is confounded by the historical record. Philosophy as well as scientific inquiry existed alongside Islam in large part due to the belief in the human capacity for reason. Islam and faith in individual judgment were not considered incompatible. Moreover, rationalistic forms of authority and just leadership were at the heart of the triumph of the Arab-Islamic world.

The West as an independent pioneer of its own success is also problematized by this approach that stresses collective human civilization. Not only were advances in European knowledge built upon many contributions from the Arab-Islamic world, but trade and finance also flourished alongside Islam.

Even the rationalization of the state so frequently believed to be inherent to the West, largely due to the influence of Weber on sociological thought, is rendered more complex when the role of the Arab-Islamic world in the rise of the West is acknowledged.

By the tenth century, a unified body of laws, the shari'ah, was established throughout the Arab-Islamic Empire. This system of law has four pillars: divine revelation, the sunna, the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammed, consensus and analogical reasoning. From the establishment of Islamic jurisprudence onwards legal scholars have sought to discern immutable ethical principles in the Quran that form the basis of the shari'ah, while allowing the means of applying them to be different according to different circumstances. (94) 'The overriding objectives are generally held to be the promotion of fairness, equality, prosperity, and human dignity, the establishment and maintenance of a government that consults the people, the prevention of injury, the removal of hardship, and moral education.' (95)

While the Arab-Islamic Empire and Christendom coexisted fairly peacefully for many centuries, as we have seen, Islam became Europe's formidable Other. This continued into contemporary times, as the perceived stagnant and despotic Muslim world became juxtaposed with a modern, progressive Europe. In this scheme, the West appeared to be starkly differentiated from the Muslim world. They were conceived as polar opposites, each with their distinct and radically different historical trajectories. This polarization has become largely naturalized and almost commonsensical. While some people may concede that at one time the Arab-Islamic Empire may well have been a beacon that lit up Europe, for the most part they adamantly insist that at some point the Muslim world took a different turn creating stark differences that are insurmountable. This view has gained even more prominence in relation to the rise of political Islam in recent times.

Building bridges is, therefore, essential. Gaining a more nuanced understanding of the Arab-Islamic world's contribution to the rise of the West serves several purposes. First, it helps Westerners to better understand their own position in world history – a history that is not synonymous with that of Europe – and, by so doing, exercising self-reflection. The wealth of exchanges and cultural borrowing that took place with the Arab-Islamic world is not only humbling, but also provides a basis upon which the West may more positively engage with the Muslim world. Knowing our common cultural heritage brings us closer together. We have philosophical, technological, scientific and commercial histories that are intertwined. Once we look back at the richness of our common history, we can see that assumptions made about Islam are also ill-founded. Above all, recognition of the role that the Arab-Islamic Empire played in the rise of the West helps to instil a respect for peoples of the Muslim world that has been sorely lacking..

Despite the fact that the Muslim world has fallen on bad times, not in small part due to European colonialism and its aftermath, this does not mean that it is not a viable partner in today's world. The West has tended to view the Arab-Islamic world as peripheral, only gaining importance in relation to geo-strategic and energy concerns. However, as this book demonstrates, there is a much richer and fruitful basis upon which relations between the West and the Arab-Islamic world can and should be based.

Respect for Muslims and a recognition of Europe's debt and connection to the Arab-Islamic world also help to bring communities closer together in today's pluri-cultural societies. Islam in Europe, for example, is at present a controversial topic, raising fears and encouraging polemical discourses designed to play on those fears. The mistrust with which Muslims are often met contributes to their alienation. The lack of knowledge of Islam and Europe's debts to the Arab-Islamic world must seem astounding to Muslim immigrants, though not inexplicable when we consider that Islam has long been Europe's constructed Other.

It also has a lot to do with the way that history is taught in schools – largely along Eurocentric lines. All of this, as Jack Goody rightly notes, has led to an 'implicit rejection' of the role of Islam in Europe. (96) As a result, Islam has come to be seen as something wholly Other. However, rather than being Judeo-Christian, Europe has been penetrated by Christianity, Judaism and Islam: 'they are all part of Europe, part of our heritage'. (97) This has a significance for those who seek to minimize the public space for Muslims in Europe as well those who claim that the European Union should be defined as Judeo-Christian and, therefore, exclude Turkey. The sense of rejection may also prompt Muslim immigrants to identify more strongly with Islam, as well as result in the burning of possible bridges. Recognizing the contributions of the Arab-Islamic Empire to the rise of Europe and the long-standing presence of Islam in Europe may assist in the acceptance and recognition of Islam in Europe in the present. As the chapters of this book show, there is a substantial basis upon which dialogue may occur and mutual respect may be enhanced. This is all the more important as the world moves forward with even more connectedness and interdependence than in the past.

Each of the chapters of this book focuses on a dimension of the rise of West. In Chapter 2, Jack Goody discusses the role that the Arab-Islamic world played in laying the foundations of the European Renaissance. The central place that the Arab-Islamic world had in the transmission, critique and elaboration of classical knowledge is highlighted, a body of knowledge that was not frozen but built upon by the Arabs and Muslims, who developed their own intellectual traditions in a myriad of fields. In Chapter 3, Frédérique Guerin then discusses the impact the Arab-Islamic world had on the Reformation in Europe, problematizing the dominant historiography of the sixteenth-century reform movement within European Christendom and arguing for a 're-orienting' of the Reformation that may have been inspired by Islam. In Chapter 4, Lisa Watanabe examines the possible influence of Islamic legal institutions on the emergence of a rule of law in Europe, in particular in medieval England, which themselves contributed to the development of the modern, impersonalized state and capitalist social relations. This is then followed by a chapter by John M. Hobson on commerce and finance in the Arab-Islamic Empire and their influence on the development of commercial and financial institutions in Europe, as well as their critical role in enabling and maintaining an emergent global economy. Samar Attar then discusses the influence of Muslim scholars on the development of European philosophical ideas associated with the Enlightenment and modernity. Focusing in particular on the way in which Ibn Tufayl's thinking influenced what is often thought of as a quintessentially European rationalist philosophy, a dimension of the transition from Classical Antiquity to the Renaissance in Europe that is conventionally overlooked in dominant Western accounts of the European Enlightenment. This is followed by a chapter by Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou on the impact of ideas from the Arab-Islamic Empire on humanism and education in Europe. Finally, Mohammed Abattouy outlines the debt that the West owes to the Arab-Islamic world for the transmission of scientific knowledge in

pre-modern Europe and argues that recognition of such a debt is critical to the development of a universal history of science. Each of the above-mentioned authors not only provides a strong critique of Eurocentric interpretations of the rise of the West, recovering the Arab-Islamic world's role in its success, but also reflects on the many ways in which East to West transmission of ideas, techniques and institutions provides the basis for common ground, mutual respect and recognition, and the foundations for cultural dialogue and positive engagement between the West and the Muslim world.

Notes

(84) N. R. F. Al-Rodhan (2009), *Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man. A Philosophy of History and Civilisational Triumph* (Berlin: LIT), p. 137.

(85) *Ibid.*, p. 138.

(86) *Ibid.*, p. 36.

(87) *Ibid.*, p. 138.

(88) I. A. Khan (1992), *Authentification of Hadith: Redefining the Criteria* (Bangalore: Iqra Welfare Trust), pp. XIII–VI.

(89) H. N. Rafiabadi (2002), *Emerging from Darkness: Ghazzali's Impact on the Western Philosophers* (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons), p. 3.

(90) De Lacy O'Leary (2003), *Arabic Thought and Its Place in History* (New York: Dover Publications), pp. 280, 286.

(91) M.H. Morgan (2008), *Lost History: The Enduring Legacy of Muslim Scientists, Thinkers, and Artists* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 104.

(92) S. Hunke, (1997) *Le Soleil d'Allah brille sur l'Occident*, (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel) pp. 23–6.

(93) N. R. F. Al-Rodhan, G. P. Herd and L. Watanabe (2011), *Critical Turning Points in the Middle East: 1915–2015* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

(94) R. Van der Weyer (2003), *The Shared Well: A Concise Guide to Relations Between Islam and the West* (Potomac Books), pp. 46–7.

(95) *Ibid.*, p. 47.

(96) J. Goody (2004), *Islam in Europe (Polity)*, p. 13.

(97) *Ibid.*, p. 14.