

1 In the beginning

In this chapter I explore some of the ways in which Christians living in the region that we think of today as western Europe during the medieval period came to perceive Islam, the new faith that emerged in the Arabian peninsula in the third decade of the seventh century and rapidly spread across much of the world as it was then known to them. As we will see, even the initial western Christian perceptions of Islam and of its adherents did not come out of nowhere or develop in a vacuum. Seventh-century “Europeans” – of course they did not think of themselves as Europeans at the time – already possessed concepts and categories through which this new and frightening phenomenon could be made sense of. Some of these concepts and categories, and the images they generated, would prove quite durable over much of the medieval period, though by the end of this period a handful of scholars had begun to lay the basis for a somewhat better understanding of Islam.

To adequately understand the development of western Christian images of Islam, it is helpful to go even further back in time, to ancient Greece and Rome, and there begin to explore the origins and evolution of the idea of a “Europe” and a “West” often deemed essentially different from an “East.” Over the succeeding centuries these and other ideas and images would be drawn on, in different ways and in changing contexts, to underpin certain ways of dividing the world and categorizing its parts, and thus of understanding Islam.

To begin with ancient Greece and Rome and to discuss medieval western European understandings of Islam is not to suggest that there was any continuous or monolithic Western image of, or attitude toward, the East or Islam stretching from antiquity through the medieval era down to the modern period. But as we will see, at various points over that very long span of time, some European scholars, writers and others appropriated certain images and notions about the East and Islam from what they had come to perceive as Europe’s distinctive past, refashioned them in keeping with their own contemporary concerns, and propagated them as relevant for their own time. It is this process of selective borrowing

and creative recycling, which goes on even today, that makes delving into early images and attitudes useful for understanding how Islam and the Middle East would come to be understood and portrayed even in the modern era.

The cradle of the West?

“Ancient Greece” is itself a term that requires some unpacking. What would much later be given this label, as if it were a unified and coherent entity, more accurately denotes a rather diverse collection of city-states, principalities, towns, villages and islands inhabited largely (but not exclusively) by speakers of some dialect of Greek. After centuries of expansion this zone encompassed a large geographical area, from Athens and Sparta and Corinth and Thebes and other city-states located in what is today Greece eastward to the many Greek (“Hellenic” would be better) settlements in Asia Minor (“Little Asia,” today Anatolia in Turkey), south and east to the islands of the Aegean and Mediterranean seas, northward into southeastern Europe and along the coasts of the Adriatic and Black seas, and westward to the settlements established by Greeks in what are today Italy and southern France.

Many centuries later, Europeans would come to identify ancient Greece, and particularly Athens in its “golden age” (about 500–400 BCE), as the source of core components of the thought and culture of what they had come to call “Western civilization,” indeed as the “cradle” of that civilization, the time and place in which it originated. This identification rests on the notion – popular in the nineteenth century and still powerful today – that over the past four or five thousand years the histories of the myriad peoples and cultures of the world can be most usefully grasped in terms of the successive rise and fall of various civilizations. In this view, each civilization constitutes a more or less coherent entity with its own distinctive core values, beliefs and principles, its own unifying spirit or essence, which clearly sets it apart from other civilizations with different core values and beliefs, different spirits or essences. Furthermore, civilizations are often deemed to have a life cycle similar to that of human beings: they are born in some specific time and place; when young they are vigorous, flexible, creative, able to absorb new ideas; they grow to maturity and reach the height of their cultural and political powers in a “golden age”; then they gradually lose their cultural energy, they grow less creative and innovative, more rigid and insular; and finally they decline toward social stasis and cultural senescence, until they disappear from the scene or are absorbed by some other younger and more vigorous civilization.

I will discuss this conception of history and of how humanity can best be divided up, and how Islam fits into it, more fully later on. For now let us keep in mind that the ancient Greeks did of course not see themselves as Europeans or Westerners, much less as the originators of anything resembling “Western” or “European” civilization. Rather, they regarded themselves as a distinctive and culturally superior people surrounded by less advanced “barbarians,” by which the Greeks meant all those who spoke not Greek but some other language, disparaged as gibberish. Moreover, though many European scholars would later depict Greek culture in the “classical” period of antiquity as wholly new and unique, as an achievement of incomparable genius which the ancient Greeks created virtually out of nothing, we know that in fact the Greeks were very much influenced by, and borrowed from, the cultures of their older, richer and more powerful neighbors to the south and east. These included mighty Egypt, the various empires which arose in the fertile and densely populated lands between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers (Mesopotamia, from the Greek for “between the rivers”), and the Phoenicians, who originated along what is today the coast of Lebanon and who, like the Greeks, ranged far and wide across the Mediterranean Sea as traders and settlers.¹

This is not to say that the philosophers, poets, playwrights, historians and scientists of ancient Greece did not create anything new and distinctive; of course they did. But it is also clear that ancient Greek culture did not exist in a vacuum, that it was always influenced by the cultures of the surrounding peoples (and vice versa), and thus that what the ancient Greeks achieved rested on, and was interwoven with, the achievements of other peoples and cultures. Similarly, while our culture, language and politics are still influenced by elements of classical Greek culture, we need to be very careful about tracing the historical origins of ideas and institutions back into the distant past. We may be able to find what appears to be a familiar idea or institution in some earlier historical setting, but it probably meant something very different in that setting than it would later.

For example, Athens of the fifth century BCE is often depicted – indeed, revered – as the first democracy, the ancestor of today’s western democracies. But in fact the political institutions of ancient Athens, and what those institutions meant to Athenians, were in many important ways different from what we understand by democratic political institutions today. As a result, to trace a more or less direct link between fifth-century Athens and today’s United States or Britain is to distort history by projecting our own conceptions onto the past and assuming that they were shared by the ancient Greeks, whose vision of the world

and conception of themselves were in many ways radically different from, indeed alien to, our own.

As I will discuss later with reference to Islam, this is precisely why treating the West or Islam as self-evidently distinct civilizations has come in for such heavy criticism in recent decades. This way of thinking about the world presumes that the West and Islam each has its own unique and unchanging essence or character which gives it its coherence and continuity across time and space. In this way it becomes plausible, for example, to link the fifth-century Athenian city-state and twentieth-century American democracy as if they were both essentially the same thing, that is, merely different stages in the evolution of the same Western civilization, or to explain today's Islamic political movements by what happened in western Arabia in the seventh century CE, as if both are simply manifestations of an essentially unchanging entity called Islam.

Conceptions of the world

It is in any case to the ancient Greeks that we owe some of the key geographical terms which would for centuries underpin European conceptions of the world, as well as some of the connotations and images bound up with the distinction they drew between East and West. In Greek mythology Europa was a daughter of the king of Tyre (a city-state on the eastern Mediterranean coast, in what is today Lebanon) whom the god Zeus fell in love with and carried off; numerous legends developed around Europa, her siblings (including her half-sisters Asia and Libya) and her offspring. Somehow the mythological Europa came to be associated with, and gave her name to, a particular region: first the mainland of Greece (as opposed to the Aegean islands), later all of Greece including those islands, and then by extension the Greek-colonized lands to the north and west and the regions beyond, inhabited by those whom the Greeks considered barbarians.

At first the Greeks espoused a vision of the habitable world as naturally divided into two parts: Europe to the west of the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea and the Bosphorus straits which connect the two, and Asia to the east of those waters. Somewhat later Greek geographers and philosophers settled on a tripartite division of the landmass that constituted what they believed to be the dry portion of the earth. Surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, which they believed was situated in the center of the landmass (hence its name: "middle of the earth"), lay Europe to the north, Asia to the east, and Libya (also called Africa, meaning the lands of northern Africa west of Egypt) to the south. These lands were in turn surrounded by a great ocean. But there continued to be disagreement over this division of the

world into three zones and over the boundaries that separated these zones, and not everyone located the Greeks in Europe. For example, writing in the fourth century BCE Aristotle compared the inhabitants of the cold lands of Europe, “full of spirit but somewhat deficient in intelligence and skill” and therefore free but politically disorganized and incapable of ruling over others, with the natives of the warmer lands of Asia who were “intelligent and skillful in temperament, but lack spirit, so they are in continuous subjugation and slavery.” However, Aristotle portrayed the Greeks as neither European nor Asian but rather as a distinct people who by virtue of their intermediate location between the two continents were endowed with the best qualities of both. Several centuries later the geographer and historian Strabo (c. 63 BCE–21 CE) would point out that “in giving names to the three continents, the Greeks did not take into consideration the whole habitable earth, but merely their own country, and the land exactly opposite . . .”²

Nonetheless, we can discern among the ancient Greeks a fairly well developed image of the social and political character of the peoples and states of Asia, an image that much later would be drawn on by western Europeans to underpin the sharp dichotomization of East and West and that would eventually be applied to Islam. In large measure this image seems to have been a legacy of the Greeks’ long conflict with the Persians, who established a powerful state based in the Iranian plateau and whose efforts to expand westward threatened the independence of the Greek city-states and their own hopes for expansion. When he died in 529 BCE Kurush (whom the Greeks called Cyrus), “great king” or “king of kings” of the Persians, ruled over a vast empire that comprised much of what is today Iran as well as Armenia, the former Babylonian empire (including Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine), and Anatolia, home to numerous Greek settlements, and his armies were already threatening the Greek heartland. His successors would go on to conquer Egypt and invade southeastern Europe. The Greek city-states, led by Athens, fought a series of wars with the Persians, on land and at sea, over several decades. In 480 BCE a Persian army captured and burned Athens, but eventually the Persians were defeated and compelled to withdraw from Greek lands. Relations between the Persian empire and the Greek states and colonies eventually became less hostile, even relatively normal, and when in the fourth century the Greek city-states fought among themselves for hegemony, some of them would make alliances with their former enemy Persia against their fellow Greeks.

Nonetheless, the Greeks’ long struggle to resist Persian domination and the ways in which they came to understand what differentiated them from the Persian enemy, coupled with their firm confidence in their cultural

superiority over the “barbarians” (i.e., everyone else), left an important legacy, already evident in the passage from Aristotle quoted earlier. In the writings of philosophers, geographers and historians, and in the work of playwrights and poets, the Greeks often contrasted themselves with Asians in rather stark and essentialized terms – that is, in terms that framed the differences between Greeks and Asians as fundamental, as stemming from their entirely different natures. Asian states (like the Persian empire or Egypt of the pharaohs) were, these Greeks asserted, ruled by tyrants, despots whose power was absolute; the people were servile, virtually slaves; society was hierarchical, rigid, almost socially immobile, with an immense, indeed unbridgeable, gap between ruler and ruled; Asian despots and their courts might be immensely wealthy and powerful but they were also vulgar, corrupt and immoral. By contrast, the Greeks tended to depict themselves as a virtuous, modest people who treasured their liberty above all else; the city-state, the *polis*, was composed of free citizens mindful of their civic rights and obligations and resistant to tyranny. Roman political philosophers would later draw on some of these images of the ancient Greek city-state and of its purported opposite, the despotisms of Asia. As we will see in Chapter 2, from the fifteenth century onward many western European political theorists would do something similar, claiming for contemporary Europeans the virtues and characteristics which the Greeks attributed to themselves, in ways that still influence Western social and political thought.³

The images which the Greeks formulated of themselves and of their “others” – those they saw as essentially different from themselves – and the sharp polarity between Europe and Asia, between West and East, which those images buttressed, had little to do with reality. Most of the Greek city-states were far from being democracies in any sense of that term; they were monarchies or tyrannies or oligarchies, ruled by kings or strongmen or elites drawn from powerful local families, clans or factions. Even in Athens, which many later political thinkers would acclaim as the ideal democratic polity, the wealthy and powerful dominated public life, while free citizens constituted only a minority of the population; women were excluded from political life and slaves (usually of Asian origin) made up a large proportion of the city’s inhabitants and produced much of its wealth. For Aristotle as for many other Greeks, Asians (and by extension all barbarians) were naturally servile and were thus well-suited to serve the superior Greeks. At the same time, the societies to which the Greeks contrasted themselves so sharply – late Pharaonic Egypt, the Persia of Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes, and other states and empires of ancient Asia – were all very different from one another. Each experienced profound social, political and cultural changes over time, and none of

these complex, dynamic societies conformed very neatly to the stereotype of what would much later be termed “Oriental despotism,” with an all-powerful ruler lording it over an abject mass of semi-slaves. (“Oriental,” derived from Latin, means “eastern,” and “the Orient” would later come to refer to the Asian lands to the southeast of Europe, stretching all the way to China.)

Moreover, the East/West divide was not really as sharp as it would later appear to many European scholars and thinkers. Greece continued to be influenced by Persian and other eastern cultures after the Persian wars ended, and when the Macedonian king Alexander (“the Great,” reigned 336–323 BCE) defeated and conquered the Persian empire, and much else besides, he promptly adopted the Persian style of kingship and seems to have envisioned the fusion of his own Hellenic culture with that of Persia, much of which he greatly admired. After Alexander’s death his empire broke up into smaller states ruled by his generals. While the dynasties they founded promoted Hellenistic culture, whose influence in the region was considerable, they also adopted many elements of older local cultures, often in novel and creative combinations.

Roman legacies

Roman scholars generally adopted the East/West polarity developed by the Greeks, along with the division of the world into three parts, just as they borrowed so much else from the Greeks. But for the Romans that polarity does not seem to have had the same political or emotional significance that it had had for the Greeks. From their initial base in central Italy the Romans gradually expanded north and west into what they called Gaul (western Europe), Spain and Britain, as well as south across the Mediterranean to northern Africa, east into Greece and the Balkans (southeastern Europe) and on into Asia Minor and Syria, Palestine and Egypt. The empire they created thus encompassed all the lands around the Mediterranean Sea, which the Romans saw as the center of their realm, with an extension into western Europe. Political unity laid the basis for economic unity and the development of a flourishing long-distance trade, by land and by sea, across the empire as well as with India and even China.

The Romans sometimes used the terms Europe and Asia to denote western and eastern parts of the empire, and they fought a series of wars with the kingdom of the Parthians, based in the Iranian plateau. But as one scholar has put it, the Romans – unlike the Greeks – tended to use the term “Asiatic” pejoratively “only in a literary sense – bombastic

and over elaborate composition could be thus described.”⁴ Some Roman writers and politicians decried what they regarded as the morally corrupting influence of the East, but by “East” they often meant Greece, whose culture they saw as “soft,” as lacking in the manly and martial virtues which they believed had allowed the Romans to conquer and rule so vast an empire. Nonetheless, religions, ideas and customs deriving from the eastern Mediterranean lands and beyond (including Christianity) had a significant impact on Roman culture during the imperial period, and over time the empire’s cultural and political center of gravity shifted eastward, toward its wealthier, more urbanized and more secure provinces at the eastern end of the Mediterranean.

This development was manifested most dramatically in the decision in 330 CE by the emperor Constantine (reigned 312–337 CE) to move the capital of his empire from Rome eastward to the city he named Constantinople, after himself – today’s Istanbul, located on the Bosphorus, the waterway which constituted the traditional boundary between Europe and Asia. Constantine also made Christianity, which originated as a Jewish sect in Roman-ruled Palestine but had developed into a separate religion and spread to the point where Christians constituted a numerically significant and increasingly powerful minority, the state religion of the Roman empire. Later, in 395, the empire was divided into two parts, each with its own emperor. During the fifth century the western Roman empire faded out of existence, overrun by Germanic and other peoples who established smaller kingdoms in what had been Roman-ruled Italy, Gaul, Spain and Britain.

Much later, some historians of Rome would attribute the downfall of the western Roman empire to “infection” by the vices of the East, which allegedly undermined the virtues which had once made Rome great. We can see this in Edward Gibbon’s enormously popular and influential *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the six volumes of which were first published between 1776 and 1788. For example, Gibbon (1737–94) asserted that “the manly pride of the Romans, content with substantial power, had left to the vanity of the East the forms and ceremonies of ostentatious greatness. But when they lost even the semblance of those virtues which were derived from their ancient freedom, the simplicity of Roman manners was insensibly corrupted by the stately affectation of the courts of Asia.”⁵ By framing history in this manner, by very selectively choosing which elements of Rome’s culture and history to include in the “heritage” it supposedly bequeathed to Western civilization and by ignoring less pleasant aspects or blaming them (and even the decline of the western Roman empire itself) on corrupting oriental

influences, Gibbon and others who helped shape European thought both built on and further buttressed the old and often highly charged dichotomy between East and West, between Europe and Asia.

In so doing they also tended to marginalize the eastern Roman empire, which scholars would call Byzantium (after the original name of Constantinople) and which would survive for another thousand years after the collapse of the western Roman empire. Though its language of administration and high culture came to be Greek rather than Latin, Byzantium saw itself as the continuation of the Roman empire. Its emperors, who ruled over a state that at its greatest extent (in the mid-sixth century) encompassed Greece, parts of the Balkans, Italy, southern Spain, Anatolia, Syria, northern Mesopotamia, Egypt and much of the North African coast, conceived of themselves not only as the heirs of Caesar and Augustus but as the lords of all Christendom, since they ruled what was for centuries the largest and most powerful Christian state in the world. Yet for westerners “Rome” eventually came to mean the western empire and its Latin culture, and when later European scholars referred to Europe’s “Roman heritage” they tended to ignore or exclude Byzantium, which they often depicted as not properly Roman, as corrupted by oriental influences and culturally alien.

This tendency was exacerbated by the rivalry which developed between Rome and Constantinople, the two main Christian centers of West and East in the centuries after the fall of the western empire. The patriarchs of the eastern church in Constantinople, closely linked to the Byzantine state, rejected the claim to authority over all Christians everywhere increasingly advanced by the bishops of Rome, who became known as popes. But the spiritual primacy of the popes was eventually recognized by the rulers of the various states that emerged in western Europe following the collapse of the western Roman empire. For those rulers, men like Charles, king of the Germanic confederation of the Franks who came to be known as “Charles the Great” (Charlemagne) because he conquered and ruled much of western and central Europe, support for the papacy and the Roman church was a way of rejecting the claim of the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople to dominion over both East and West. Though the Byzantines regarded people like Charlemagne as semi-barbarian upstarts, the pope rewarded him for his support of the Latin church by proclaiming him “emperor of the Romans” in 800. Disputes over Christian doctrine also divided the western (Latin, later “Catholic”) and eastern (Greek, or “Orthodox”) churches. Despite many efforts at compromise and reconciliation, and despite agreement on most doctrinal questions, the differences between the western and eastern churches would harden over the centuries and in 1054 they would split into two

distinct and hostile churches, amidst barrages of mutual recriminations and declarations of anathema.

Partisans of the Latin church, for whom high Roman culture and the Latin language remained exemplary, denounced Byzantium and its official Christian church not only as schismatic and deviant from true Christianity but also, from about the tenth century onward, as too “Greek” in a pejorative sense, paralleling older negative images of Asian corruption and decadence. Later scholars often implicitly or explicitly adopted the sharp distinction between Byzantium and the West, depicting the latter as the rightful heir of ancient Rome (and later of ancient Greek learning) while dismissing the former as essentially marginal to Western civilization or even denigrating it as oriental. Over time the West and Europe thus came to be associated with western, Latin Christendom and with the lands of the defunct western Roman empire and its successor states, as distinguished from the lands further to the east, even if they were (like Greece and the Balkans) actually located on the continent of Europe and also Christian (though the “wrong kind” of Christian).

This perspective also informed the work of some modern historians who sought to trace the origins of Europe, for example Henri Pirenne’s influential (if controversial) *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, first published in 1937. The noted Belgian historian criticized the traditional view which saw the Germanic invasions of the fifth century and the collapse of the western Roman empire as marking a sharp break between the end of antiquity and the beginning of the medieval era. Instead Pirenne sought to show that despite political fragmentation, the cultural and economic unity of the Mediterranean basin that characterized the late Roman period remained essentially intact through the fifth and sixth centuries and well into the seventh, though with a growing “Oriental” tone owing to the pre-eminence of Constantinople and its Greek culture. It was, Pirenne argued, the Muslim conquests of the seventh century that really destroyed the unity of the Mediterranean, separated East from West, and thus definitively brought the classical era to an end and marked the beginning of the Middle Ages. Commerce across the Mediterranean, now the boundary between Christendom and Islam rather than an economic and cultural conduit linking the Christian lands surrounding it, declined sharply, the influence of Constantinople waned, and (western) Europe was for the first time compelled to live on its own cultural and economic resources, opening the way for the emergence (with Charlemagne) of a new European civilization which was a unique synthesis of Roman and Germanic elements.

Though Pirenne was right to highlight the continuity between the late Roman and early medieval periods, he did so only by positing a new and

even more radical discontinuity, between the period before and the period after the Muslim conquests, which itself rested on the sharp dichotomization of Christianity and Islam. But for our purposes the accuracy of his arguments is less important than the way in which they manifest a vision of Europe (basically, Latin Christendom) as a distinct civilization and trace its origin to the crowning of Charlemagne as emperor in 800, while depicting Islam as a radically different civilization and blaming it for destroying the unity of the Roman world. This was, as Thierry Hentsch put it, a “founding myth” which had more to do with nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europeans’ sense of who they were and where they came from than with what actually happened in the seventh century or with how “Europeans” of Charlemagne’s time understood who they were and how they saw the world.⁶

Christian conceptions of the world

In the western European lands that had once been part of the Roman empire, the Latin church gradually suppressed both non-Christian “pagan” religions and other Christian churches and achieved hegemony, though a substantial Jewish minority endured and forms of Christianity deemed heretical by church authorities continued to surface. Early medieval church scholars – the only kind of Christian scholars there were – largely adopted the ancient Greek geographers’ division of the world into three parts and the dichotomization of East and West, but they embedded this system of categorization in a conception of the world and its peoples derived from a Christian understanding of the Bible. Christian thinkers, for example the great theologian Augustine (354–430), identified each of the three continents and the peoples who settled in them after the great flood described in the biblical book of Genesis with one of Noah’s sons: Japheth and his progeny with Europe, Shem (from whom the term “Semite” comes) with Asia, and Ham with Africa. But this conception also implied, for Christians, a conviction of European Christian superiority. As one scholar of European images of the world put it,

Europe was the land of Japheth, of the Gentiles, the Greeks and the Christians; Asia was the land of Semitic peoples, glorious in that they had produced the [ancient Hebrew] patriarchs and prophets, the chosen people [i.e. the Jews] and Christ himself; but – as the land of the circumcised adherents of older laws – condemned to an inferiority which was stated in the scriptures: “God shall enlarge Japheth and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem.” As for Africa, the lot of the unhappy descendants of Ham, the Hamitic subjection was equally clearly laid down: Canaan was to be the servant both of Shem and Japheth: “a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.”⁷

This hierarchical way of classifying the peoples and races of the world and fixing their place in the grand scheme of things, rooted in what Christians took to be the word of God as set forth in holy scripture, would much later be used to explain and justify the large-scale enslavement of Africans as well as European conquest and domination of non-European peoples. In secular, purportedly scientific garb it would persist well into the twentieth century and continue to influence (and legitimize) conceptions of how Europeans should treat the peoples over whom they ruled in Asia and Africa, and even how European Christians should relate to the Jewish minority living in their midst.

By the beginning of the seventh century, Christianity in its various forms had become dominant in most of the former Roman world around the Mediterranean and was slowly and unevenly spreading, by conversion or conquest, into adjacent territories in northern, eastern and southeastern Europe, Armenia, Arabia, eastern Africa and central Asia. Beyond the boundaries of Christendom, which was disunited politically but at least nominally shared the same faith, lay what Christians saw as the lands of the pagans, the idolators, by extension (drawing on Greek and Roman precedents) the barbarians. Little was known of the actual extent or contours of those lands, especially in Asia, or of the nature of those pagan peoples; myth and fantasy were freely mixed with what little had been salvaged from the writings of the geographers, historians and travelers of antiquity, and all had been recast in a biblical mold, with scholars linking various real or imagined pagan peoples to peoples mentioned in the Bible and fancifully tracing the lineages of Germanic tribal chieftains back to Japheth.⁸ Yet given the slow but nonetheless perceptible spread of Christianity in East and West, it was possible for Christians to imagine that eventually the whole world would be converted to what they were convinced was the one true faith.

The coming of Islam

The eruption of Islam onto the scene did not immediately disrupt that vision. For European Christians, raids and invasions by those they deemed pagans were a common (if much feared) occurrence, and the Muslims were for a long time understood to be just another pagan horde assaulting Christendom, not the bearers of a new monotheistic faith which was in many ways similar to Christianity and Judaism and therefore an ideological as well as a military-political challenge. Before discussing early European Christian views of Islam and Muslims, however, it may be worth recapitulating, very briefly and schematically, the early history of Islam.

The new faith emerged in the Hijaz region of western Arabia, in the towns of Mecca and nearby Medina (originally known as Yathrib), located on trade routes which linked the richer, more fertile and more densely settled Syrian lands to the north with today's Yemen to the south, as well as with Egypt, Ethiopia and other lands across the Red Sea, and eastward into the interior of the Arabian peninsula, largely desert and inhabited by nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes, known as Beduin ("the desert people"). Mecca was also the site of a religious sanctuary which housed shrines of some of the deities worshipped by many Arabs before the coming of Islam.

Arabia was relatively remote from the centers of power and high culture in the Mediterranean region and the adjacent Asian lands, but it was by no means isolated, politically, culturally or economically. Arab merchants traveled into the domains of both the Byzantines and their main rival for domination in western Asia, the Sasanians, who ruled a great empire based in Persia. The Arabs were in contact with, and influenced by, the Hellenistic and Aramaic cultures of the lands to their north, and there were significant numbers of Jews and Christians in parts of Arabia, especially among the townspeople and settled farmers in the fertile oases. Moreover, both the Sasanians and the Byzantines had Arab client-states on the fringes of Arabia, and their respective allies in southern Arabia fought bitterly for control of the lucrative trade routes to east Africa and India.

This was the world into which Muhammad, prophet of Islam, was born in Mecca around 571 CE, into a clan of the locally powerful tribe of Quraysh. His parents died while he was still young and he was raised by his uncle. When he was around twenty-five he married the somewhat older widow for whom he worked, a woman who had become wealthy from the caravan trade with Syria. But a happy marriage and prosperity did not bring Muhammad spiritual contentment. He began devoting time to meditation and prayer, often retreating to a cave in the hills near Mecca, and Muslims believe that it was on one such retreat, in about 610, that the archangel Gabriel spoke to Muhammad and began to convey to him, and through him to all humanity, God's message. That message, revealed to Muhammad in segments over many years, was eventually compiled into the Qur'an ("recitation"), believed by Muslims to be the literal word of God as transmitted by his prophet Muhammad.

The content of the revelation Muhammad received has a great deal in common with Judaism and Christianity, both of which Muhammad was at least somewhat familiar with and which Muslims would come to see as earlier, less complete and distorted versions of Islam. Muslims therefore venerate Abraham, Moses, Jesus and others as earlier prophets

or messengers chosen by God to convey his word to humanity, though for Muslims Muhammad enjoys special distinction as the last in the line of prophets sent by God to carry his message, and the Qur'an revealed through him is regarded as the most pure and most complete revelation, correcting and superseding the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Gospels.

Muhammad preached belief in the one true god, called Allah in Arabic – the very same all-powerful, all-knowing, omnipresent god worshipped by Jews and Christians and central to the Bible and the Gospels – and warned his fellow Meccans of God's judgment if they failed to repent of their idol-worship and immorality. Muhammad's following grew to the point where it threatened the Meccan elite, who began to harass and persecute Muhammad and his followers, who would come to call themselves Muslims, i.e. those who submit to God's will, and their faith Islam, submission to God's will. In 622 Muhammad and the Meccan Muslims left their home town for the nearby oasis town of Yathrib/Medina, where he also had followers, and this "emigration" (*hijra*) would be taken to mark the beginning of the Muslim era, the first year of the Muslim calendar. Muhammad now became the political as well as spiritual leader of a substantial and growing community of believers, and in the years that followed he became the ruler of an increasingly powerful state which defeated the neighboring Jewish tribes, compelled the Meccans to submit, and began to expand rapidly by mobilizing the Arabs of the towns, the oases and the desert who embraced the new faith into a highly effective fighting force. By the time Muhammad died, in 632, the Arabs bearing the new faith of Islam had already conquered a large part of western and central Arabia (see Map 1).

But the Muslim conquests were only beginning. After Muhammad's death leadership of the Muslim community passed to a series of caliphs (from the Arabic word *khalifa*, "successor" of God's messenger Muhammad), drawn first from the prophet's closest associates and family and then (after a civil war among the Muslims) from a leading Meccan family which established a hereditary dynasty. Within two decades of Muhammad's death the Muslim Arabs had created a vast new empire, defeating the Sasanian dynasty and conquering the empire it had ruled for centuries in Persia and adjacent lands while also conquering much of the territory which had long been part of the Roman and then Byzantine empires, including Syria, Mesopotamia and Egypt, as well as the rest of the Arabian peninsula. After these astonishingly rapid conquests the pace of expansion slowed somewhat, but it did not stop. In the west the Muslims gradually conquered the remainder of North Africa and in 711 a Muslim army landed in Spain; almost the entire Iberian peninsula was soon brought under Muslim control and Muslim forces began raiding

into southern France and Italy. In the east, Muslim forces reached all the way to what is today Pakistan by the mid-eighth century. Very gradually, over the following centuries, most of the Christian, Zoroastrian, Jewish and other inhabitants of the lands conquered by the Muslims adopted Islam, though significant non-Muslim minorities remained. At the same time, what began as very much an empire dominated by Arab Muslims gradually became less Arab and more cosmopolitan as non-Arab Muslim converts and their descendants (including Persians, and later Turks and many others) came to play important roles in the rich social, political and cultural life of the growing Muslim community.

The “age of ignorance”

The astonishingly rapid emergence and expansion of the Muslim empire might at first thought seem to have been an unmitigated disaster for all Christians everywhere. But here we must differentiate among Christians. For those eastern Christians who rejected the version of Christian belief and practice imposed by the Byzantine state – for example, the many Christians in Egypt and Syria who despite pressure from Byzantine governors and bishops held fast to their own forms of Christianity and their autonomous churches – the coming of the Muslims and the end of Byzantine rule may not have been such a terrible thing. The new Muslim rulers generally did not care what their Christian subjects believed as long as they were docile and paid their taxes, and as a result scholars have suggested that Christian communities in Egypt and Syria, which the Byzantine state and its official church had harassed as heretical, actually welcomed their Arab conquerors, or at least quickly accepted Muslim rule. As a ninth-century patriarch of the Jacobite church of Syria, whose understanding of the nature of Christ differed from that of the mainstream in both Constantinople and Rome, put it looking back two centuries to the Muslim conquest of Syria and Egypt: “If, as is true, we have suffered some harm . . . nonetheless it was no slight advantage for us to be delivered from the cruelty of the Romans [i.e. the Byzantines].”⁹

That the Muslim conquests were a catastrophe for the Byzantine empire, still the bulwark of mainstream Christianity, is more obvious: having already lost most of its possessions in western Europe to Germanic invaders, it now lost Syria and Egypt to the Arabs and was thus suddenly reduced to Anatolia, Greece and small parts of the Balkans and Italy, and had to live in fear of further Arab assaults. That Christians in western Europe – or at least that very small minority of rulers, officials and churchmen who in an age of almost universal illiteracy, poor communications and general ignorance of the world could form any more or less

accurate picture of what was going on – perceived these developments as disastrous is also clear. Palestine, the “holy land” in which Christianity had been born, had been lost, along with vast territories in Asia and Africa in which Christianity had long been the dominant faith; and with the Muslim invasion of Spain the threat reached western Europe itself, with the Pyrenees eventually marking the unstable border between Christian and Muslim domains and an apparently high likelihood of further Muslim advances into the heartlands of western Christendom.

In the formerly Christian lands now ruled by the Muslims, in the east and somewhat later in Spain, a few educated churchmen came to understand that these conquerors were not idolatrous or polytheistic pagans but had brought a new faith which bore considerable resemblance to Christianity and Judaism. Writing in Armenia (subject to indirect Arab rule) in the 660s, the bishop and chronicler Sebeos reportedly could explain that “there was an Ishmaelite [i.e. Arab] called Mahmet [i.e. Muhammad], a merchant; he presented himself to them as though at God’s command, as a preacher, as the way of truth, and taught them to know the God of Abraham, for he was very well informed and very well acquainted with the story of Moses. Since the command came from on high, they all came together, at a single order, in unity of religion, and, abandoning vain cults, returned to the living God who had revealed himself to their father Abraham.”¹⁰ Sebeos thus apparently understood that the Muslims were monotheists and adherents of an Abrahamic religion akin to Judaism and Christianity, rather than pagan idolators.

In the following century the theologian John of Damascus, who knew Arabic as well as Greek and who, like his father and grandfather before him, served as an official in the caliph’s administration, discussed Islam in some detail and with considerable accuracy in order to demonstrate to his fellow Christians that it was just one more heresy that had to be fought. Obviously, direct and prolonged interaction gave Christians living under Muslim rule the opportunity to gain a more accurate understanding of Islam, as well as a motive to do so: local church leaders needed to refute Islam and “prove” that Christianity was the true faith in order to keep their flock from converting to Islam. In fact, most of the Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians in the Muslim-ruled lands of western Asia and northern Africa did eventually convert to Islam, whether from religious conviction, to escape the disabilities to which non-Muslims were subject, or because of the material advantages and enhanced status which membership in the Muslim community brought.

In western Europe, contemporary chroniclers had very little access to accurate knowledge of the Muslim conquests or of the character of this new threat to Christendom. They had to rely largely, often exclusively, on

accounts of what was happening in the East (and even in nearby Spain) that were transmitted orally, relayed from person to person over long distances and across many cultural boundaries, and that often reached the West long after the events they related had taken place. The usual result was a great deal of distortion, misinformation and even fantasy mixed with accurate tidbits. But the very real difficulty in obtaining accurate knowledge was perhaps less important in shaping the early European understanding of Islam than the availability of conceptual categories, derived from antiquity and from the Bible, through which European Christians could filter and make a certain kind of sense of the appearance and rapid spread of Islam.

It is worth noting that despite this topic's obvious importance, it received little scholarly attention until the early 1960s, when two British scholars published studies that would help lay the groundwork for subsequent efforts to question and rethink the foundations of Orientalism – the term which, as we will see in Chapter 2, would much later come to denote the scholarly study of the Orient and Islam. In 1960 Norman Daniel (1919–92), who was trained at the universities of Oxford and Edinburgh and worked for many years with the British Council, a government agency whose mission it is to promote British culture abroad, published *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*. Two years later Richard W. Southern (1912–2001), a distinguished Oxford historian of medieval Europe, published *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*, which originated as a series of lectures delivered at Harvard University the previous year.¹¹

As Daniel, Southern and other scholars pointed out, early medieval European writers tended to see the Muslims in ethnic rather than religious terms and usually called them “Saracens,” from the Greek and Latin term for Arabs, derived from a Greek word for tent (i.e., the tent-dwellers). Late Roman and early medieval Christian observers had regarded the Saracens/Arabs as a particularly rapacious bunch of pagans even before the emergence of Islam, and what was happening now seemed to confirm that view. Thus Fredegar, a Frankish chronicler writing in the 650s, told of the Saracens, “a circumcised people who . . . had now grown so numerous that at last they took up arms and threw themselves upon the provinces of the [Byzantine] emperor Heraclius, who despatched an army to hold them . . . [After their victory over Heraclius] the Saracens proceeded, as was their habit, to lay waste the provinces of the empire that had fallen to them.”¹²

The Saracens were thus depicted as a plague upon Christendom, spreading devastation wherever they went, but in principle no different from the other pagan peoples whom God had sent to scourge and test his

faithful. As Southern put it, western chroniclers “knew virtually nothing of Islam as a religion. For them Islam was only one of a large number of enemies threatening Christendom from every direction, and they had no interest in distinguishing the primitive idolatries of Northmen, Slavs, and Magyars from the monotheism of Islam, or the Manichean heresy from that of Mahomet [which is how medieval Europeans usually rendered Muhammad’s name]. There is no sign that anyone in northern Europe had even heard the name of Mahomet.” Latin Christian scholars thus knew nothing of how the Muslim Arabs absorbed elements of the Persian, Hellenistic and Aramaic cultures of the peoples they had conquered and brought into being a new Islamic high culture, expressed mainly in the Arabic language. Nor did they have anything but the vaguest inkling that, especially during the heyday of the ‘Abbasid dynasty from the mid-eighth century into the tenth, the vast Islamic empire was experiencing a period of cultural and economic efflorescence whose magnificence is only heightened by comparison with the material and cultural impoverishment that characterized western Europe in what later historians would call “the dark ages.” Southern accurately summed up the state of western knowledge of Islam in the entire period from the seventh century until about 1100 as the “age of ignorance.”

But, Southern also pointed out, “despite their ignorance, Latin writers were not left entirely without a clue to the place of the Saracens in the general scheme of world history. This clue was provided by the Bible.”¹³ The Bible provided Latin Christians with a framework of interpretation within which Christians could make sense of the onslaught of the Saracens. Church scholars like the monk and Bible scholar Bede (673–735), writing in northern England, expressed the dominant view when he asserted that the Saracens were descendants of Hagar, one of Abraham’s wives and the mother of his son Ishmael, brother of Isaac who was the forefather of the Jews (and thus, spiritually, of the Christians). As a result the Arab Muslims were sometimes called Hagarenes or Ishmaelites, though Saracen seems to have been the most widely used term; rather illogically, some scholars claimed that “Saracen” came from Sarah, Abraham’s senior wife and mother of Isaac. The Muslims of North Africa and Spain were often called “Moors,” and many European observers did not quite grasp that the “Saracens” in the East and the “Moors” in Spain were all Muslims.

Early medieval European observers thus generally failed to see what was clear to many Christians in the east: that these “Saracens” adhered to a monotheistic religion related to (and obviously influenced by) Judaism and Christianity. Direct observation does not always seem to have helped: for example, Arculf, a bishop from western Europe who actually visited

Muslim-ruled Jerusalem and Damascus (at the time the capital of the Muslim empire) in the 670s and whose account was recorded not long after, learned almost nothing about what the “Saracens” in whose domain he traveled actually believed. For him as for most European Christians over the next few centuries, they were simply unbelievers, pagans, and therefore in religious terms not worthy of special or close attention.¹⁴ At the same time, all sorts of bizarre and derogatory myths about the Saracens circulated in Europe, among the educated as well as the masses, reflecting the fear and hostility which Christians felt toward this threatening enemy about whom they knew so little.

In Muslim-ruled Spain things were somewhat different. Sporadic warfare continued in the border zone along the Pyrenees, though Muslim efforts to expand into France were blocked. But in most of the Iberian peninsula Christians lived under Muslim rule for centuries, subordinated and isolated from their coreligionists elsewhere but (like the Jews) tolerated as a “people of the book,” i.e. a people who espoused an earlier version of the message God sent to humanity through Muhammad. But proximity did not necessarily lead to understanding: the writings of most Spanish Christian churchmen do not consistently demonstrate much more interest in, or accurate knowledge about, Islam than the writings of Christians elsewhere in Europe. Nonetheless the intermingling of Muslim, Christian and Jewish influences in Muslim-ruled Spain gave birth to a flourishing high culture unparalleled anywhere else in Europe, as well as a great deal of cultural mixing at the popular level. Writing in Cordoba in the mid-ninth century, Paul Alvarus lamented the powerful attraction which Arab culture exerted on his fellow Spanish Christians:

The Christians love to read the poems and romances of the Arabs; they study the Arab theologians and philosophers, not to refute them but to form a correct and elegant Arabic. Where is the layman who now reads the Latin commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, or who studies the Gospels, prophets or apostles? Alas! all talented young Christians read and study with enthusiasm the Arab books; they gather immense libraries at great expense; they despise the Christian literature as unworthy of attention. They have forgotten their language. For every one who can write a letter in Latin to a friend, there are a thousand who can express themselves in Arabic with elegance, and write better poems in this language than the Arabs themselves.¹⁵

Alvarus saw Muslim rule as portending the arrival of the Antichrist and the imminence of the Second Coming and hoped to arouse Spanish Christians to resist what he saw as the decline of their faith. But only a few responded, openly denigrated Islam and achieved the martyrdom

they sought; most Spanish Christians, churchmen and lay people alike, acquiesced in Muslim rule, and some were active participants (along with many Jews) in the cultural efflorescence that would later be characterized as Muslim-ruled Spain's "golden age."

The Crusades

As the French scholar of Islam Maxime Rodinson put it in his study of European views of Islam, "the Western image of the Muslim world came into sharper focus in the eleventh century."¹⁶ This was a period in which, though western Europe was politically fragmented, the papacy had succeeded in asserting its spiritual and even to some extent political primacy. A measure of security and stability returned as the pagan peoples who had repeatedly raided western and central Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries (the Normans, the Magyars and others) converted to Christianity and were integrated politically and culturally. Western Europe's population began to grow and there was a quickening of economic life and an expansion of local, regional and transregional trade. In Spain, the kings of the small Christian states in the north which had survived the Muslim conquest took advantage of the disintegration of Muslim-ruled Spain into numerous feuding principalities to launch the Reconquista, the gradual "reconquest" of Spain for Christianity. At around the same time a Norman adventurer began to conquer Sicily from the Muslims.

In the East, however, it was the Muslims who seemed to be on the offensive. In 1071 the Byzantines suffered a catastrophic defeat at the hands of the Muslim Seljuq Turks, who were carving out their own empire in western Asia, and lost almost all of Anatolia. The Muslims now seemed poised to capture Constantinople, extinguish the Byzantine empire and perhaps move on into southeastern Europe. The Seljuq seizure of Palestine from another Muslim state based in Egypt also disrupted Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Holy Land, long tolerated by Muslim rulers, as well as trade in the eastern Mediterranean.

These developments helped make western Christians more responsive when the desperate Byzantine emperor appealed for help, an appeal which Pope Urban II answered in 1095 with a call to Christians everywhere to unite, mobilize and attack the "enemies of God." Urban reportedly reminded a church council held at Clermont in France that the Saracens had centuries earlier seized (western) Asia, where Christianity had been born, as well as (northern) Africa which had also once been Christian; now they were stepping up their attacks on the "third continent," Europe.

You are a people sprung from the more temperate regions of the world, and you lack neither martial prowess nor discretion: you are a people both disciplined in camp and skilful in the field of battle. Thus endowed with wisdom and courage, you are embarking on a memorable enterprise. Your deeds will be sung down the ages if you rescue your brothers from this danger . . . May those who go forth as champions of Christendom mark their clothes with the sign of the Cross . . . Rid the sanctuary of God of the unbelievers, expel the thieves and lead back the faithful.¹⁷

Pope Urban's call elicited a strong response among western European Christians. Some joined the ensuing "crusade" (derived from the word "cross") because of religious fervor and the promise of salvation; others hoped for adventure or personal gain. The Crusade offered an outlet for knights who lacked land of their own and was backed by Italian mercantile city-states like Venice and Genoa who hoped to win control of the lucrative trade with the East. For the pope the Crusade was a way to enhance the political and spiritual power of the church he led. Whatever the motivations of the participants, within a year of Urban's call forces of crusading knights, mainly from France, began converging on Constantinople, not infrequently massacring the European Jewish communities they encountered along the way. By 1097 the Crusader armies were advancing into Seljuq-controlled territory, winning a series of victories over Turkish Muslim forces, and in 1099 the Crusaders captured Jerusalem and established several principalities ruled by Latin Christian noblemen in Syria and Palestine.

This First Crusade succeeded in large part owing to disunity and lack of preparedness among the Muslims. But eventually the Muslims recovered and launched their own campaign to expel those whom they perceived as alien invaders who had seized lands which had been under Muslim rule for centuries, especially Jerusalem and Palestine which Muslims (like Jews and Christians) regarded as sacred. In response to Muslim victories against one of the Crusader states in Syria, the Latin church called for a Second Crusade in 1145, but it was a military failure. The Muslims now took the offensive, and by 1187 Salah al-Din, known in the West as Saladin and sultan (ruler) of a state that stretched from Egypt to Iraq, had retaken Jerusalem and all but destroyed the Crusader kingdoms. This led the pope to call for yet another crusade, the Third, led by the kings of France and England and the "Holy Roman Emperor," who ruled the German lands and northern Italy. But though the Third Crusade did conquer a strip of territory along the coast of Syria and Palestine, it failed to regain Jerusalem for the Christians, and in its wake Saladin signed a treaty with King Richard of England allowing Christian pilgrims to visit Jerusalem.

The response in western Europe to papal calls for subsequent crusades grew increasingly feeble and the crusades themselves proved unsuccessful. During the Fourth Crusade (1202–04) the Latin Christian forces accomplished little against the Muslims but did seize and sack Constantinople, putting in place a Latin-dominated regime which lasted for some decades. In 1229 the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II actually won control of Jerusalem through negotiations with the Muslim ruler of Egypt and Syria, much to the anger of the pope who promptly excommunicated Frederick for being overly friendly with the Muslims, but by 1244 the city was again in Muslim hands. In 1291 the Mamluks, a military caste of freed Muslim slaves who now ruled Syria and Egypt, captured the last Crusader stronghold on the coast, and the Holy Land was to remain under Muslim rule until it was conquered by British forces in 1917.

From the eleventh century onward, then, through increased trade and pilgrimage, through the conquests which brought many Muslims under Christian rule in Spain and Sicily and renewed the links between Christians who had lived under Muslim rule and their Latin co-religionists, and then in the course of the Crusades, western European Christians began to develop better defined images of Islam. But better defined did not necessarily mean more accurate, for even as a handful of scholars began to try to acquire a less distorted understanding of Islam, other scholars, chroniclers, poets and story-tellers were generating and spreading the most bizarre notions about Islam and Muhammad, notions which would persist for centuries and which sometimes still surface in western popular culture today.

Knowing the enemy

The first efforts by western church scholars to acquire a more precise understanding of Islam were largely motivated by the kind of “know your enemy” attitude that often informed the field of Soviet studies in the United States during the Cold War: one had to understand the enemy’s ideology if one was to combat it effectively. Peter the Venerable (c. 1094–1156), abbot of the monastery of Cluny in central France, played a key role in this endeavor. Like some earlier church scholars, Peter saw Islam as a Christian heresy and argued that it could not be destroyed unless its errors were understood. He therefore set a team of translators to work in Spain rendering Arabic texts into Latin; this project’s high point was the first translation of the Qur’an into Latin, completed in 1143 by the Englishman Robert of Ketton.

Somewhat earlier a few individuals, like the Spanish Jewish convert to Christianity Pedro de Alfonso, had begun to publish the first more or

less accurate accounts of the life of Muhammad, the teachings of Islam and Arab history, and others were to follow. There thus developed, very slowly and unevenly, a small body of literature which offered those few who were interested a fuller and more serious understanding of Islam as a faith and of Islamic history. It thereby became possible, by the middle of the twelfth century, for the chronicler Otto of Freising to dismiss as fanciful the claim that an archbishop had been martyred in Cairo for smashing the Muslims' idols because, as Otto put it, "it is known that the whole body of Saracens worship one God and receive the Old Testament law and the rite of circumcision. Nor do they attack Christ or the Apostles. In this one thing alone they are far from salvation – in denying that Jesus Christ is God or the Son of God, and in venerating the seducer Mahomet as a great prophet of the supreme God."¹⁸

Through their study of translations of the Qur'an, of biographies of Muhammad and of other Arabic-language texts, European Christian scholars and theologians began to produce what would eventually be an extensive polemical literature designed to refute Islam as false, heretical and incompatible with Christian doctrine. They hoped that such works would prevent Christians in Muslim-ruled lands from converting to Islam while opening the way for the eventual conversion of the Muslims to Christianity. The effort to prove that the Qur'an was not an authentic revelation from God and that Muhammad could not have been an authentic prophet often involved, especially early on, a great deal of distortion of what Muslims actually believed and did. Over time some Christian scholars achieved a greater degree of accuracy, but nothing they said would have been likely to convince Muslims that their faith was invalid: their critique of Islam was thoroughly grounded in Christian theology and thus irrelevant to Muslims.

In his 1975 book *The Arabs and Medieval Europe*, Norman Daniel suggested that such polemics were in any case primarily directed not externally, against Muslims, but rather internally, against the threat of heresy among Christians. "Condemnations of Islam," Daniel argued, "are only an aspect of other condemnations, of the oriental [i.e. non-Catholic] churches, as well as of the great heresies which sprang up in, or invaded, Europe, and even of each individual intellectual eccentricity. It is in the context of [the] European thirst for orthodoxy that we must see the passion for identifying the heresies that Islam resembled (or might be supposed to derive from), and for specifying minutely each separate count on which Islam must be detested."¹⁹ In other words, the church's attacks on Islam were in part a way of enforcing ideological conformity among Christians – much as, during the Cold War, denunciations and hostile depictions of the capitalist West (the external enemy) facilitated

the efforts of the communist regimes in the Soviet Union and its client-states to suppress opposition and silence real and potential dissidents at home (the internal enemy), while in the United States vociferous right-wing forces used the threat allegedly posed by “international communism” and its nefarious secret agents to isolate, discredit and defeat their domestic enemies on the left.

Europe’s Arab-Muslim heritage

In addition to seeking, and in part achieving, a more accurate understanding of Islam, European scholars began in this period to grasp that the Muslim world (including its Jewish communities) possessed great intellectual riches from which their own comparatively impoverished culture might benefit. In Toledo, a great center of learning in Muslim Spain and since 1085 in Christian hands, as well as elsewhere in Spain, Christian scholars, aided by Spanish Muslims, Christians and Jews, began to translate, study and disseminate the voluminous Arabic-language writings on medicine, astronomy, mathematics and philosophy they found in the libraries of Spanish mosques and courts. This was a treasure-trove of knowledge, well in advance of anything available in Europe at the time. It was by this means that western Europeans first gained access to many works of Greek antiquity which had been lost in the west but were preserved in Arabic translations; but in the process they also encountered the Arabic-language writings of Muslim and Jewish thinkers who had absorbed the work of the Greeks but had gone well beyond them to blaze new paths in medicine, philosophy, the sciences, mathematics and literature.

Engagement with these texts had a profound impact on many arenas of western European intellectual life. Translated Arabic writings on medicine, mathematics, astronomy and other sciences were for centuries used as textbooks in medieval Europe, while the writings of Muslim philosophers like Ibn Sina’ (980–1037, known in the West as Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (1126–98, known as Averroes), and Jewish philosophers who wrote mainly in Arabic like Maimonides (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, 1135–1204), were eagerly read and discussed and influenced several generations of medieval Christian philosophers and theologians. Southern noted that “it would be difficult to exaggerate the extent to which these influences changed the outlook of learned Europeans in the half century after 1230. It is as if modern economists in the tradition of Alfred Marshall and Keynes were suddenly to start using the language of Karl Marx, or liberal statesmen to start expressing themselves in the idiom of Lenin.”²⁰ The powerful impact of Arabic learning is suggested by the

large number of scientific and mathematical terms in western languages which derive from Arabic terms or names, including *alchemy* (from which *chemistry* comes), *alcohol*, *algebra*, *algorithm* and *alkali*, as well as the names of many stars.

The Latin church would ultimately reject Avicenna's philosophical views and embrace the synthesis developed by Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), greatest of the medieval Catholic theologians; but Aquinas himself drew on concepts and language taken from Islamic philosophy, particularly Averroes, and he was strongly influenced by Maimonides. The English philosopher Roger Bacon (c. 1214–92) would go so far as to say that “philosophy was revived chiefly by Aristotle in Greek and then chiefly by Avicenna in Arabic,”²¹ while many of his educated contemporaries who vehemently rejected Islam as a religion nonetheless admired the Arabs as a people who had produced great philosophers and scientists from whose writings Christians could learn much.

Curiously, the one major Muslim figure who won widespread popular (as opposed to scholarly) admiration in western Europe was not a philosopher or a scientist but a military man, indeed the most effective foe of the Crusaders and the man who had driven them from Jerusalem in 1187. This was Saladin (1138–93), who came to be depicted in many popular stories and epic poems of the medieval period as chivalrous, humane, just and wise. Rodinson noted, however, that “surely such a perfect knight could not be excluded from the Christian experience,” and so fanciful stories circulated that his mother had actually been a Christian princess and that he had converted to Christianity on his deathbed.²² While in his *Inferno* the poet Dante (1265–1321) would place Muhammad in one of the worst circles of hell, subject to endless torment, Saladin was depicted as enjoying a relatively pleasant afterlife, along with Avicenna and Averroes among near-contemporaries and various other virtuous non-Christians of antiquity like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

The extent to which medieval Latin philosophy and science borrowed from Arab learning (which for our purposes also encompasses writings in the Arabic language by non-Muslims) has generally been recognized by scholars, but the Arab influence on medieval western European popular and high culture more broadly has been less fully explored or acknowledged. In Spain and Sicily, where Muslims, Christians and Jews lived side by side for centuries, and through contact between Europe (especially southern Europe) and the Muslim lands of western Asia and northern Africa by means of trade and pilgrimage, there was, despite the Crusades and continuing religious hostility, a great deal of cultural interaction and borrowing, especially around the Mediterranean basin. The extent to

which, at a crucial stage in its development, western Europe drew heavily on Arab-Muslim culture would be largely forgotten or obscured when, during the Renaissance and after, European thinkers and scholars began to denigrate medieval learning and culture and instead claimed a more or less unbroken cultural continuity between ancient Greece (now seen as the source of the quasi-secular humanism which many Renaissance thinkers espoused) and their own times. Yet as the author of a pioneering 1977 study on the influence of “Araby” on medieval English literature put it, “the migration of literary works, as well as concepts, images, themes, and motifs, was a natural by-product” of the process whereby “the Arabs did not only transmit and interpret the knowledge and ideas of classical antiquity, but became the teachers and inspirers of the West at the very heart of its cultural life: its attitude to reason and faith . . .” This literary material “brought Islamic modes of thought within the reach of a far wider circle of readers than the intellectual élite, for it was widely translated into the vernacular.”²³

A decade later Maria Rosa Menocal would develop this argument much further and advance it much more vigorously. In her 1987 book *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage*, which was clearly influenced by Edward W. Said’s 1978 book *Orientalism*, she argued that “Westerners – Europeans – have great difficulty in considering the possibility that they are in some way seriously indebted to the Arab world, or that the Arabs were central to the making of medieval Europe.” Broadening the argument, she pointed out that

The most general, and in many ways the most influential and pervasive, image or construct we have is that of ourselves and our culture, an entity we have dubbed “Western,” a clearly comparative title. Whether it is spoken or unspoken, named or unnamed, we are governed by the notion that there is a distinctive cultural history that can be characterized as Western, and that it is in distinctive, necessary, and fundamental opposition to non-Western culture and cultural history.

European literary scholarship, Menocal went on, “has an a priori view of, and set of assumptions about, its medieval past that is far from conducive to viewing its Semitic [i.e. Arab] components as formative and central.” How, she asked, would our interpretation of medieval European culture change if we included the *Thousand and One Nights* and the work of Spanish and Sicilian poets who wrote in Arabic in the canon of medieval European literature? Menocal argued that a fuller and more accurate understanding of Europe’s cultural past required a critical re-examination of what she termed the “myth of Westernness” which has informed most literary scholarship, as well as a readiness to investigate the West’s “mixed ancestry” with an open mind.²⁴

Images of Islam

The late eleventh and especially the twelfth centuries thus witnessed the first efforts by scholars to achieve a more accurate understanding of Islam, as well as western Europe's initial encounter with the great cultural and intellectual riches of the Muslim world. But this same period, the period of the Crusades, also witnessed the elaboration and diffusion of a great deal of "knowledge" about Islam, among literate and educated people but also among the largely illiterate masses, that was more sophisticated and detailed but also more distorted than anything that had come before. As R. W. Southern put it, "from about the year 1120 everyone in the West had some picture of what Islam meant, and who Mahomet was. The picture was brilliantly clear, but it was not knowledge, and its details were only accidentally true. Its authors luxuriated in the ignorance of triumphant imagination."²⁵

Alongside (and in spite of) the efforts of the handful of scholars who sought to acquire some accurate understanding of what Muslims actually believed and the origins of their faith, there simultaneously emerged a much more widespread and thoroughly inaccurate portrait of Islam and its founder Muhammad. This portrait derived from the work of church scholars who drew on distorted readings of the Qur'an in translation, biographies of Muhammad and dubious secondary sources, from the often fanciful writings of Muslim or Jewish converts to Christianity, from the fantastic tales told by returning Crusaders, merchants and travelers, and from the fertile (and sometimes feverish) imaginations of poets and story-tellers. Somehow, as Norman Daniel put it, the "Arabs" who were so admired as the source of great philosophical and scientific wisdom were completely disassociated from the "Saracens," i.e. the adherents of Islam, whose religious beliefs were depicted not as merely exotic but as bizarre, even monstrous, and of course utterly false and deluded. "That they represented one continuous culture," Daniel wrote, "would be incredible to someone who knew nothing at all of the subject, except through the medieval sources."²⁶

Christians could of course not accept that Muhammad had received an authentic revelation from God, and at both the scholarly and popular levels the man and his message therefore came in for a great deal of denigration. The form which that denigration took was often shaped by Christians' difficulty in perceiving Islam except as a distorted mirror image of their own faith. If Christians worshipped Jesus Christ as the son of God, the Muslims must worship Muhammad as a god; and so, in popular songs and poems of the time, and especially those which told of battles between Christians and Muslims in northern Spain and then in the

Holy Land during the First Crusade, the Saracens were often depicted as idolators who worshipped, in the most depraved manner imaginable, their pagan god “Mahomet.” Other accounts, popular as well as scholarly, insisted that the Saracens actually worshipped three idols, Mahomet, Apollo and Tervagant, an imitation of the Christian trinity; or else they prayed to these three plus a great many more.

But even those who understood that the Muslims were strict monotheists who vehemently rejected idolatry and regarded Muhammad as a man, albeit a man worthy of having been chosen by God to convey his final revelation to humanity, produced countless venomous stories about him. Muhammad was said to be a magician, a sorcerer who used his evil powers to produce fake miracles and thereby seduce men into embracing his false doctrines; he was a renegade Christian priest, perhaps even a cardinal, whose frustrated lust for power led him to seek revenge on the church by propagating his own pernicious teachings; he was sexually promiscuous, an adulterer, and promoted licentiousness in order to ensnare men into depravity; his death was as disgusting and shameful as his life, for he was devoured by dogs, or suffocated by pigs during an epileptic fit. These stories and many others, embellished with a wealth of utterly fantastic and lurid details, appeared in popular song, poetry and folklore but also in the writings of scholars. Nothing was so outrageous or so completely unsupported by evidence that it could not be said about Muhammad. As Guibert of Nogent (c. 1053–1124), author of one of the earliest biographies of the prophet outside Spain, explained, whether or not the awful things he relates about Muhammad are true “it is safe to speak evil of one whose malignity exceeds whatever ill can be spoken.”²⁷ Islam was depicted as a religion of violence, bloody and cruel, its adherents fanatics who offered those they conquered the grim choice of conversion or death.

It is thus not possible to trace the development of Latin Christian views of Islam as a simple progression from ignorance to knowledge. Instead, the profound ignorance and lack of interest that characterized the period before 1100 was followed by the production of a small body of more accurate knowledge about the tenets of Islam and the life of its prophet, largely for polemical or missionary purposes, but also by the emergence of a set of distorted and usually derogatory images and notions that were widespread at all levels of society. These different kinds of knowledge emerged and evolved side by side, often drawing on the same sources and interacting in complex ways, so that the same scholarly or popular medieval text might contain some accurate information about Islam or Muhammad alongside crude distortions and derogatory assertions. It is clear, however, that in terms of their social and cultural significance and diffusion, the negative images of Islam and Muslims generated in this

period far outweighed efforts to achieve a relatively nuanced and balanced understanding of Islam, one which could, despite a firm conviction of Christianity's superiority, nonetheless recognize how much Christianity and Islam had in common and accept at least the sincerity of Muslim belief.

It might be suggested that hostile and disparaging medieval European Christian attitudes toward Islam were simply one more manifestation of the unfortunate human propensity not only to perceive people who are deemed to belong to another group (clan, village, tribe, ethnicity, religion, race, nation, etc.) as essentially different from "us" but also to believe that "we" are superior to "them." Scholars have come to use the terms "self" and "other" to denote the distinction individuals and groups draw between those deemed basically like themselves and those deemed essentially different. From this perspective, there is nothing all that special about medieval Europeans' negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims.

It is certainly true that in this same period Europeans generated all sorts of bizarre images of, and "knowledge" about, China and India and many other exotic peoples and places; in fact one does not even have to go so far afield to see this process at work, for most medieval European Christians regarded the Jews who had for centuries been their neighbors as fundamentally alien, accepted as true all sorts of bizarre assertions about Jewish beliefs and practices, and often subjected Jews to hostility, discrimination, harassment and episodes of massacre. Moreover, Christians showed little hesitation about attacking and killing fellow Christians who were deemed to be heretics or who were defined as enemies for whatever reason.

Yet it can be argued that Islam occupied a unique (though never simple) place in the imaginations of western Europeans from at least the eleventh or twelfth century onward – that it was Europe's "other" in a special sense. The Jews were close at hand, but they were a subordinated and sometimes segregated minority; and though they were sometimes regarded as an ideological problem as a result of their steadfast refusal to accept that Jesus was the messiah and the son of God, they never constituted a political or military threat to the hegemony of Christianity in Europe. China and India and all those other strange peoples and places were very far away and also constituted no direct threat to Europeans; they could therefore for a long time simply be exotic objects of curiosity, wonderment and fantasizing.

In stark contrast, the domain of Islam bordered Christendom, and many Christians were in more or less direct contact with Muslims, whether in Spain or in Sicily, or in Palestine and Syria during the Crusades, or through trade and travel. Muslim states and societies were

medieval Christian western Europe's nearest non-Christian neighbors, and Islam constituted the closest cultural alternative to Latin Christendom. Moreover, Islam was a *powerful* political and cultural alternative, one with which European Christians were for centuries engaged in military and ideological conflict. Islam was perceived as the dangerous enemy right next door, the usurper which had seized the Holy Land as well as many other lands in which Christianity had once flourished, and which continued to constitute a serious threat to Christendom.

Islam was thus Europe's "other" in a way that China or India or (after 1492) the indigenous states of the New World could never be. Despite its geographic proximity – or perhaps because of it – Islam was generally perceived as more alien and certainly as more threatening. Islam usually evoked revulsion, fear and hostility; for a brief period there was admiration, not of Islam but of the wisdom of the Arabs, but soon that largely faded into indifference and routine denigration. Like other peoples throughout history, Europeans (and, much later, Americans) had and still have all sorts of images of other peoples, cultures and religions in their heads, not a few of them derogatory; but it is only the image of Islam which has historically evoked both a profound sense of cultural difference and a deep sense of threat, today associated with the image of the fanatical Muslim terrorist mindlessly attacking Westerners.²⁸

For centuries, though never in a simple or unconflicted way, Islam was a screen onto which Europeans could and did project their anxieties and conflicts about who and what they were or were not, a mirror in which Europeans could discern the traits that seemed to make them unique by highlighting how different, defective and inferior Islam was. As we will see in subsequent chapters, it was in part by differentiating themselves from Islam (and the various characteristics they saw as part of Islam's essential and unchanging nature) that European Christians, and later their nominally secular descendants, defined their own identity. These representations persisted for centuries in popular and high culture and in scholarship, and some of them continue to circulate today. In movies, in television programs, in newspaper and magazine articles and in books, in children's comic books, indeed across the popular imagination of western Europe and the United States, images of the Muslim as other, as profoundly different from ourselves, as fanatical, violent, lusty and threatening – images that as we have seen have very old roots – still have emotional resonance for many people and can be drawn on and deployed for political purposes.