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GLOBAL

How Islam Created Europe

In late antiquity, the religion split the Mediterranean world in two. Now it is remaking the Continent.

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Charles Auguste Steuben's painting of the Battle of the Poitiers in 732. The Frankish leader Charles Martel's victory over Muslim invaders is seen as a decisive moment in European history. WIKIMEDIA

EUROPE WAS ESSENTIALLY defined by Islam. And Islam is redefining it now. For centuries in early and middle antiquity, *Europe* meant the world surrounding the Mediterranean, or *Mare Nostrum* (“Our Sea”), as the Romans famously called it. It included North Africa. Indeed, early

in the fifth century A.D., when Saint Augustine lived in what is today Algeria, North Africa was as much a center of Christianity as Italy or Greece. But the swift advance of Islam across North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries virtually extinguished Christianity there, thus severing the Mediterranean region into two civilizational halves, with the “Middle Sea” a hard border between them rather than a unifying force. Since then, as the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset observed, “all European history has been a great emigration toward the North.”

After the breakup of the Roman empire, that northward migration saw the Germanic peoples (the Goths, Vandals, Franks, and Lombards) forge the rudiments of Western civilization, with the classical legacy of Greece and Rome to be rediscovered only much later. It would take many more centuries for the modern European state system to develop. Slowly, though, feudalism, whose consensual give-and-take worked in the direction of individualism and away from absolutism, gave way to early modern empires and, over time, to nationalism and democracy. Along the way, new freedoms allowed the Enlightenment to take hold. In sum, “the West” emerged in northern Europe (albeit in a very slow and tortuous manner) mainly after Islam had divided the Mediterranean world.

Islam did much more than geographically define Europe, however. Denys Hay, a British historian, explained in a brilliant though obscure book published in 1957, *Europe: The Emergence of an Idea*, that European unity began with the concept (exemplified by the Song of Roland) of a Christendom in “inevitable opposition” to Islam—a concept that culminated in the Crusades. The scholar Edward Said took this point further, writing in his book *Orientalism* in 1978 that Islam had defined Europe culturally, by showing Europe what it was against. Europe’s very identity, in other words, was built in significant measure on a sense of superiority to the Muslim Arab world on its periphery. Imperialism proved the ultimate expression of this evolution: Early modern Europe, starting with Napoleon, conquered the Middle East, then dispatched scholars and diplomats to study Islamic civilization, classifying it as something beautiful, fascinating, and—most crucial—inferior.

In the postcolonial era, Europe’s sense of cultural preeminence was buttressed by the new police states of North Africa and the Levant. With these dictatorships holding their peoples prisoner inside secure borders—borders artificially drawn by European colonial agents—Europeans could lecture Arabs about human rights without worrying about the possibility of messy democratic experiments that could lead to significant migration. Precisely because the Arabs lacked human rights, the Europeans felt at once superior to and secure from them.

ISLAM IS NOW helping to undo what it once helped to create. A classical geography is organically reasserting itself, as the forces of terrorism and human migration reunite the Mediterranean Basin, including North Africa and the Levant, with Europe. The Continent has absorbed other groups before, of course. In fact, Europe has been dramatically affected by demographic eruptions from the east: In the medieval centuries, vast numbers of Slavs and Magyars migrated into central and eastern Europe from deeper inside Eurasia. But those peoples adopted Christianity and later formed polities, from Poland in the north to Bulgaria in the south, that were able to fit, however bloodily, inside the evolving European state system. As for the Algerian guest workers who emigrated to France and the Turkish and Kurdish guest workers who emigrated to Germany during the Cold War, they represented a more containable forerunner to the current migration.

Today, hundreds of thousands of Muslims who have no desire to be Christian are filtering into economically stagnant European states, threatening to undermine the fragile social peace. Though Europe's elites have for decades used idealistic rhetoric to deny the forces of religion and ethnicity, those were the very forces that provided European states with their own internal cohesion.

Meanwhile, the new migration, driven by war and state collapse, is erasing the distinction between the imperial centers and their former colonies. Orientalism, through which one culture appropriated and dominated another, is slowly evaporating in a world of cosmopolitan interactions and comparative studies, as Said intuited it might. Europe has responded by artificially reconstructing national-cultural identities on the extreme right and left, to counter the threat from the civilization it once dominated.

Although the idea of an end to history—with all its ethnic and territorial disputes—turns out to have been a fantasy, this realization is no excuse for a retreat into nationalism. The cultural purity that Europe craves in the face of the Muslim-refugee influx is simply impossible in a world of increasing human interactions.

“The West,” if it does have a meaning beyond geography, manifests a spirit of ever more inclusive liberalism. Just as in the 19th century there was no going back to feudalism, there is no going back now to nationalism, not without courting disaster. As the great Russian intellectual Alexander Herzen observed, “History does not turn back ... All reinstatements, all restorations have always been masquerades.”

The question is thus posed: What, in a civilizational sense, will replace Rome? For while empire, as Said documented, certainly had its evils, its very ability to govern vast multiethnic spaces around the Mediterranean provided a solution of sorts that no longer exists.

Europe must now find some other way to dynamically incorporate the world of Islam without diluting its devotion to the rule-of-law-based system that arose in Europe's north, a system in which individual rights and agency are uppermost in a hierarchy of needs. If it cannot evolve in the direction of universal values, there will be only the dementia of ideologies and coarse nationalisms to fill the void. This would signal the end of “the West” in Europe.

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