

Christians and Muslims before the Mirror in the Modern Age: The Nature of Hostility and Admiration

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How did the stereotyped visions between East and West, which still persist in our time, emerge? The expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the Modern Age created the need to identify and differentiate the emerging ideological factions at a popular level. Here we will see how a stereotype is born, why, how it is spread and survives over time and even how, nevertheless, some chinks of light manage to pass through the thick wall of official truths.

The creation of the image of the “other” in the Mediterranean world has been one of the longest cultural processes in history which, however, has one of its most important milestones during the Modern Age. Although some may believe that the definition of the Muslim or Christian was generated in the medieval centuries or in the colonial era, times when the two religions were in direct violent contact, it was in fact in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries when the descriptive archetypes that persist in the present were created. Although the description of Africa and Asia, at least in the zones closer to the old continent, comes from the classical world, it is in the Modern Age, and as a consequence of the events that took place in the Mediterranean, when the Europeans rediscovered these two continents and their settlers. The introduction of Islam in history, the result of hundreds of treatises of controversies and theological disputes written throughout the Middle Ages, and the gradual moving away

of Christians and Muslims from the common ground to focus on creating national states that asserted intrinsic questions of their own culture, created the objective conditions for the men of the 16th century to feel again the need to embody all their understanding of the lands on the other side of the sea. The medieval travellers and pilgrims to the Holy Land were not overly concerned with the definition of the physical and human environment of the places they passed through, in the belief that the Greek and Latin geographers had already done this and that the Chroniclers and the men of religion had already established the nature of the adversary. It was taken for granted that the readers of the tales were quite familiar with the cultural elements generated by their forebears. The weight of tradition, together with the concept that they had enough and largely unquestionable information made a renewal of the ideas in use almost completely impossible.

In order to explain this rediscovery of the “other” in the 15th century one must turn to highly diverse ideas, although all of them coincide with the expansionist movements of a generation of men from the East and the need of Western Europeans to expand the markets. The start of this process should be located in the years when the Ottomans besieged the city of Constantinople, after having subjugated much of the Balkans and after the halt of their advance in 1402 by the arrival of another Eastern invasion led by Tamerlane. Ottoman expansionism affected both the Christian world and the Muslim: on the one hand, it aspired to control the whole Islamic world (as head of this religious confession, its governors granted themselves the title of emir and caliph of the believers), and, on the other, to subjugate the Christian world, seeing themselves as the heirs of Alexander the Great and bearers of the inheritance of the Roman world through their relations with the Byzantine emperors. In other words, it was a new generation of men, not described by the treatises of Antiquity although known through some tales of the crusaders when Saladin was confronted, which was changing the traditional rhythms of the Mediterranean world. The violent entrance of this generation in the history of the West was a convulsion that affected both Muslims and Christians, provoking the reaction of all of them before the new power that established itself on one extreme of the same sea. To refer to just one example to illustrate this statement, Venetian painting before Carpaccio, including the works of Gentile Bellini, shows Muslims with non-aggressive characteristics, simple people included in works of art to represent Eastern landscapes, whether Turkish and Mameluke or North African. However, around 1490, paintings began to reproduce Muslim figures with violent characteristics, showing their evilness and wicked intentions, which implied a clearly manifest intentionality. This change also hap-

pened in Spain in the last part of the reign of the Catholic Kings, when the Muslims that they had subjugated in the conquest of the Kingdom of Granada were gradually transformed into Ottomans, portraying them as enemies that had to be destroyed, including their images under the hooves of the horses of Santiago el Mayor or San Millán de la Cogolla.

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The rapid Ottoman expansion coincided with the moment when Europeans and Muslims, such as in the case of Juan León the African or Ibn Khaldun, realised the importance of having a geographical repertoire as complete as possible. The Ottomans and, in general, the Turks, occupied a series of countries that had belonged to the possessions of the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Caliphal Arabs, Mamelukes and different princes of Christian confessions in the Balkans, as well as in some parts of the Berber region. The description of the geographers meant introducing all these peoples into a physical space, while referring to their human characteristics. The big problem that the Renaissance men found was that the information they had in Europe about this new generation of men was quite scarce, so it was essential to write their history in order to be able to locate them in their cultural context, a situation that can also be traced in the Islamic geographical texts. They were sought in the geographical treatises written by Greeks and Romans, as well as in the medieval chronicles, without finding news of them, so diverse theories were established about their origin and nature. During the 16th century the importance of this subject meant that in Europe more books were



Muslim represented in peaceful pose. *Seated Scribe* by Gentile Bellini, in Gardner Museum, Boston (Miguel Ángel de Bunes).

published about the Ottomans than about the lands just discovered on the other side of the Atlantic, which is a good example of the level of interest awakened by this question. After this phase, which must be situated mainly in the first half of the century, curiosity about events on the other side of the sea diminished, which is why these kinds of printed works began to be more unusual.

The concern for geographical descriptions and the introduction of Christian elements within Islamic societies also meant that the lands of Islam began to be referred to in more detail than had been done until that century. The European territorial expansion had been

focused exclusively on the coastal world, so very little was known of the geographical features and the different peoples that existed throughout the Mediterranean space. The conquest of Ceuta and of the strongholds of the Moroccan Atlantic by the Portuguese (the Mediterranean Atlantic, as it has been defined by historiography), and, therefore, the start of an interventionist and expansionist policy in the Maghreb, as well as the emergence of the Ottomans as a sea and land empire, with an equally expansive and interventionist policy, overturned the existing panorama of the time. The description of Africa and Asia was essential for those who wanted to possess them, and also to know the new division of the territory and powers between the two great empires that, in their turn, coincided on specific religious creeds.

At the same time, the economic systems began their long process of globalisation, which meant that the main target of Europeans and Ottomans was the annexing of the raw material producing zones, ceasing to be the simple receivers or intermediaries of them. The economic motives (trade and manufacturing), military (wars of conquest, privateering) and the search for hegemony in this space are reasons that generated concern about the understanding of the reality that was emerging in that moment in a very old space that was now considered a new zone that had to be newly described and explored. In addition to these questions, we must point out the religious confrontation between Christians and Muslims, a confrontation that justifies any kind of action in this geographical framework. An in-depth analysis of most of the 16th and 17th century conflicts confirms the idea that the wars fought were inspired by other motives, although they were always justified by the maintenance of the pre-eminence of one religious faith over another. All these evaluations are clearly seen in the prologue of the *Descripción general de África* ("General Description of Africa") by

Luis de Mármol Carvajal (1573), when he states: “I affirm that the subject and matter of this work is very good and very necessary to be recorded in writing in Spain. For, as Africa is a region so close to Spain and such a great enemy, it is very important to have a good understanding of it; for peace and war, we will have the advantage of knowing the land and its particularities.”

Muslim and Christian characters began to appear frequently in the books, broadsheets, plays, artistic performances, advice literature, sheets known as *pliegos de cordel* and the other means of propaganda that existed in the Mediterranean world of the 16th and 17th centuries. Although there was no press, in the sense that there was in the 19th and 20th centuries, all these ways of referring to adversaries created an opinion, similar to the gazettes and illustrated magazines, which formed descriptive stereotypes that would be maintained until the present. Clearly we are entering the field of sociology, of the creation of images, as historians prefer to describe these processes, which had enormous success. In the Ottoman case, for example, a large number of rhyming poems were written to be read aloud in the coffee houses, works that relate the exploits of the great captains that fought against the Christians under the orders of the Sultan of Istanbul and which reflected the official vision of events. The information, which on many occasions consisted of spreading images of oneself and one’s opponents, began to generate a common ground that gradually developed within Mediterranean societies. The creation of descriptive stereotypes, a process that can be perfectly verified around the end of the 16th century, allows us to exemplify the importance of this propaganda, while it meant that the real knowledge of what was described lost detail and content until becoming a *topos* which impeded further curiosity. To cite a date to situate the reader in the events, the death of Suleiman

the Magnificent and the confrontation of the two great imperial armadas in the waters close to Lepanto would be the moments when the news of the two contenders were more reliable and richer. After those moments, the news received did not reach public opinion because of the lack of interest it showed in events in the Levant and the Mediterranean, a process in which the fact of having generated an image accepted by the majority of people also had a decisive influence.

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Muslims and Christians would use religion as the central element of the definition, which on many occasions was a simple discrediting of the adversary. The negative characteristics were directly associated with the religious forms, which concerned both the behaviour of individuals and the organisation of the states themselves. The non-acceptance of the truth of the mystic message defended by each of them was a demonstration of barbarism, typical of all those who, having the truth close at hand, reject it to take on ethical and moral principles which are branded as inferior and bestial by the authors of the texts. Logically, many of these descriptive premises came from theological disputes that began to be written in the first years of the birth of Islam, clearly influenced by the Byzantine and medieval controversies. The existence of an empire, like the Ottoman, which achieved a territorial and population expansion by waging a very rapid war of conquest, which at the same time was presented as the incarnation of Islam, meant rescuing all this literature now disseminated in broadsheets or presenting semi-grotesque characters in literary works so those attending the

open-air Spanish theatres known as *corrales de comedias* and theatres could mock them. The identification of abnormal events (bells that ring on their own, floods, raining of strange objects, and much more) with omens forecasting the good and evil of military actions or calamities, always applied to religious enemies, is another propaganda method that made possible the creation of descriptive archetypes that had huge success in the collective consciousness and subconsciousness. Both adversaries, although in a different way, acted with excessive arrogance towards the opponent, especially the Turkish world, which was considered the inheritor of very disparate traditions and had a much more centralised and exclusive political organisation than the Christian world, which formed the idea that these were societies with nothing in common.

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However, and although the negative elements are uppermost in this play of mirrors that we are very superficially outlining, the major ideas cannot conceal that elements of admiration gradually began to be generalised and were silenced before the official vision of absolute antagonism between the two cultures. Muslims and Christians appreciated the military qualities of their adversaries, in the Islamic case, owing to the technical superiority and the progression and evolution of the art of war of the Western Europeans and, in the case of the latter, because of the order and loyalty of the soldiers who gave their lives in defence of the Sultan. In addition to this aspect, characteristic of a society in continuous war, the sense of justice, the order of the cities and the luxury that emanated from the different courts was

valued. The trade in sumptuous objects from one side of the Mediterranean to the other was, in itself, a reflection of the unspoken esteem of the two societies. Clothes, silks, crystal, weapons, paintings, jewels, fabrics and other objects of great value filled the cargo holds of big galleys and ships that plied the waters of the Mediterranean. There was a process of seeking models of emulation that went from East to West, impregnating both worlds throughout these decades. Venice is a perfect example of this changing world in which they saw themselves. A small republic besieged by more enemies than desirable was carrying out this exchange of merchandise providing both parts of the Mediterranean with objects and manners, as well as allowing the city of canals to survive at a difficult economic time. In Spain, a country that presented itself to the other Christian states as the champion of the Catholic religion, artistic forms and lifestyles directly interwoven with its Islamic past were maintained, which ranged from simple wooden boxes with Moorish decoration to funeral tumuli that recalled Arab constructions. The perpetuation of these forms and customs, at a time when the purity of the nature of societies was being defended by the religious creed of their governors, is a demonstration of their assessment of the adversary, a subject which has never been sufficiently stressed because of the survival today of an image of the past, which owes much to the stereotype of exclusion also formed in those same decades.

In the centuries of the Modern Age the difficult coexistence because of the confrontation of two clearly expansionist political powers meant that Muslims and Christians had to directly coexist again. The survival of a great many individuals of religion and culture divergent from the official one of the state, both in the Hispanic monarchy and in the Ottoman Empire, meant that the creation of images was a clear reality. The description and creation of

ideas about them, elements that still survive to a great or small extent today, was always made from the vision of moral, political, religious and territorial superiority over the opponent. This meant that clearly descriptive discourses were articulated that ranged from ways of eating or dressing, sexual relations and the forms of government of the states. This image was not created on most occasions based on knowledge of what was portrayed but through the establishment of the concept of superiority and primacy of a society, which is at the same time religion, over another. This impedes in-depth knowledge of what was described, given that it was considered that the generic elements are sufficiently strong not to explore any deeper and understand reality. Many of these visions were not formulated out of curiosity for the “other” because they were inspired in the search for self-affirmation. The propagation of these ideas through the media of the time (works of art, printed gossip sheets, oral literature, *pliegos de*

cordel, pamphlets known as *hojas volanderas*...) managed to create a state of opinion similar to that of the press in later historical periods. The final result was societies that supposedly knew each other but were unaware of each other's deeper natures, generalising a lack of understanding which was overcome by the creation of stereotypes that perfectly defined the “other”, a situation that can be traced to all too recent times. There was mutual knowledge and appreciation of what people wanted to know and value, which meant that a perfectly identifiable image of the “other” was achieved. The more or less absolute establishment of these characteristics created a state of opinion that was perfectly acceptable in each of the societies, which would represent a burden in the Mediterranean world that had to be overcome by real knowledge of what is described, a process in which we are slowly eliminating the tangle of superimposed images, most of them negative, which persist into the present.