Islam, Europe, and the Near East

1. Introduction

Any cultural investigation into confluences, cohesions, or conflicts between so-called religious communities must take into consideration both historical and contemporary threads in an analysis of modern Europe. It seems prescient to look at certain of the meetings between Islam and Christianity in the 21st century to gain insight into some of the cultural understandings which comprise the notion of contemporary Europe.

This research begins by examining some theoretical models which have helped academicians and policy analysts make sense of notions of migration. It follows specific threads of Islam (Spain) and Christianity (Egypt) in order to explore ways in which Islam “knows” its Christian neighbours. There follows a brief look at particular flashpoints in current European culture, where the neighbourliness of Islam with secular Europe, more commonly understood as Christianity, has been said to be in crisis.

2. Some Theoretical Threads

Huntington\(^1\) points to contemporary international relations as “civilizational identities” which have shaped patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict since the end of the Cold War. The problem with such an analysis is that it falls into the mistake of homogenizing people of particular ethnic and religious identity, irrespective of
geographic origin or varied religious practice. A prime example is the handling of Islam in Europe.

Freeman\(^2\) sets out a broad migratory paradigm in his writings, laying out a four part development of the migratory process: first, an emphasis on source and flow of individuals and families from sender to receiver states; second, the characteristics of these migrants; third, policies of the receiving states; and fourth, interactions of the migrants with the receiving state’s indigenous populations. This is fairly useful, though it is important to add that the “comfort levels” of populations depend on treating particular migrants and their children as legal equivalents with that of the native population as a whole. The paradigm also assumes willingness on the part of the migrants to adopt new identity characteristics—and, of course, a labour market that alters the status of the migrant from social-services-dependent, towards and into a niche in the economy.\(^3\) Rex chooses a multicultural approach.\(^4\) He points out the importance of particular government philosophies and policies. We are told that these should embody assumptions about different cultural values as non-threatening; that communities existing between family and state levels need psychological and moral support; and that in order for there to be equality for new ethnic groups in the society, these groups need to use their own solidarity—as with ideas of class in previous times—as a resource to fight for rights.\(^5\)

Key issues generated from both past and present address the conditions of immigration, local attitudes to migrants, the variation of religious and secular values, and the melding
or bridging of community identity with surrounding populations. The nature of the economy as this relates to migrants is clearly crucial, in the past as in the present. Having established a critical context for the paper, I now turn to the specifics of pre-medieval Spain to show the profoundly historic nature of European meetings between Islam and Christendom.

3. Andalus, or Early Spain

The name “Andalus” is said to go back to the time of the deluge, when, according to the stories of pre-history, Yafeth and Nuh settled and bore a son called “Andalus.” Thus, in time, the land known as “Andalush” (Arabic for Vandals) became “Andalus” and was seen as a cultural safe haven for Jewish families fleeing the armies of Nebuchadnezzar around 586 BCE when Judah was invaded and destroyed, along with the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. Andalus, the name of early Spain thanks to this in-migration of Jews, became a recognized gateway for trade and commerce between Northern and Southern Europe and between Eastern and Western Europe. Just as the Middle East performed the role of cultural conduit, so too Andalus, or Spain, represented the commercial and cultural confluence of Western Europe.

Civilizing effects occurred with the migrant Greeks who fled persecution from the Persian armies. These ancient Greeks left signs of engineering and architecture which can be seen today in places where canals existed, irrigation systems developed, bridges and aqueducts built, and fortresses and castles established. The Greeks not only developed towns and cities, but were responsible for developing and cultivating and vineyards. A
stable culture and a burgeoning economy were thus part of the pre-Islamic bedrock of what was to become an Islamic peninsular of Southern Europe.

As a footnote to this discussion of Spain’s early development, it is interesting to see that the peacock, an ancient and iconic sign of civilization and beauty in the East, became an important image in the region: whence symbolically, Spain became the bird’s flourishing tail, while its head faced east. This flourish of avian imagery reiterated the centrality of Spain to global universes of travel and commerce.

While the Greeks, and then the Romans, had a commercial impact with the mining and trade of Iberian gold and silver, later, in what is now labelled the Dark Ages, waves of Celts, Goths, and Vandals, moved over these domains, each having a unique impact on the Iberian landscape. The Visigoths, in particular, assumed a certain leadership role. Even so, by the 7th century, Spain’s southern boundaries were being newly explored by Arabs and Berbers from North Africa.

Around the time of King Roderick, two significant landings of armies from North Africa took place (648 and 711 ACE), when Muslim armies lay claim over important territories of the peninsula. They took over and remained as rulers for another 800 years. The Islamic leaders made their chief base in Cordoba, under the famous Tariq ibn Ziyad. And they consolidated their rule, pushing up to France at one point. They were, however, subdued in 732 by Charles Martel, in a battle in the area of Tours and Poitiers, after
which the Pyrenees became the physical border that now separated the Trinitarian Christians of Southern Europe from the Unitarian Muslims of Andalus.

Interesting in all of this was the consolidation of rule assisted by the residing Jewish communities who had not been content in their relations with the Iberian Christians and showed themselves only too happy to help the Muslims in moderating and lessening the power of the Catholic Church. We notice also that during early Islamic rule, the Christians and Jews kept their churches, monasteries, and synagogues alive and flourishing. In addition, they were allowed autonomy in their own jurisdictions (so long as Muslim subjects were not involved)—a “live and let live” pragmatism.

At one stage, the local emir started to be called caliph, thus indicating a certain and definite cultural autonomy from the caliphate of Baghdad. The mosque during the period of Cordoba’s growth is said to have received one addition after another, as rulers achieved greater status and power. The countryside around the city boasted gardens, orchards, and beautiful palaces for the nobility. The landscape was said to mimic the famous gardens of the Mid-East.

As the new Islamic civilization developed, certain centres grew and flourished: Malaga was noted for its pottery; Murcia for its cloth; Almeria and Granada for silk; Toledo for its weapons; Cordoba for its leather goods and hangings. In other words, Islamic art and artefacts were refined and developed in the various regions. Thus, the religion and art played a systematic civilizing role in the development of Spanish culture as this grew in the 9th and 10th centuries.
Al-Andalus had been ruled by the Umayyads from 756, and Cordoba, the centre, reached a cultural peak in the mid 10th century. The city was famed for its great mosque, known far and wide. Some said the city had a million inhabitants and was half the size of Baghdad. Ibn Idhari, historian of the 13th century, claimed there were 300 baths and 3000 mosques! Cordoba also boasted libraries and varied centres of learning. These were all signs of a stable, sophisticated culture whose reputation was carried through Christendom and the Islamic Empire. In all of this there was a mixing and mingling of local communities, as Christians and Jews shared in the Islamic burgeoning of power and wealth, both materially and spiritually.6

Toledo, further north, was the old Visigothic heartland of Hispania in the second part of the 6th century. It moved from Catholic dominance to Islamic with the conquest of Banu Pasi in the mid 9th century. It then became the Christian capital with the re-conquest of 1085. It was a city over which Christians and Muslims fought for power. With the re-conquest of Christianity, the rate of reconversion of Muslim population to Christianity was faster here than in any other part of the Peninsula. In other words, locals were pragmatic in their outward allegiances as they switched from Christian to Muslim and then back to Christian.

Meanwhile, as Christianity burgeoned in Western Europe, there occurred a general split in the ranks of Christendom. This occurred in France and Spain in the late 8th century. Charlemagne took his Church towards a French renaissance, while the Hispanic Christians remained in protective ecclesiastical tradition. Indeed, the two sides of the
Pyrenees developed different Christological worlds, and in the process, none anticipated the impending religious controversy that resulted from the 711 invasion. In fact, the presence of Muslims in the Peninsula was defined by Christians as a *military act*, not a new religious threat. The Saracens were an army, and their spiritual component was not gauged for some time. The Church continued to be embroiled in and enveloped by its ongoing internal controversies. This was probably one of the reasons it did not seem ready to address new issues. And there was a certain antiquarianism of style in Toledo’s old Christians which complemented the (fake) Austrian Gothic revival: a moment when ecclesiastical dominance was consolidated by Urban II in 1088.

Significantly, in all of this, there was a mixing of Byzantine and Islamic history around the 740s, indicating a confluence of Byzantine-Syriac tradition. Contemporary scholars write about the ecclesiastical controversies, yet these scholars also address the rise and concomitant challenges of Islam in their Spanish midst. Delightfully, and in the same breath, they draw on common Byzantine and Islamic historical threads (as in the 740s), thus accelerating *confluence* of the Byzantine-Syriac tradition.

Religious and historical writings of around the 8th century crossed linguistic and sectarian lines. Some writers were multilingual (Greek, Syriac, and Arabic), and there is widespread use of Arabic vocabulary in the Syriac and Greek chronicles of the 9th century.7 Thus, the common literary and linguistic origins of Christianity with Islam underwent a certain cross-pollination, as religious texts during the 8th century were disseminated.
As centuries passed, the Catholic Church gained power and influence, and by the time of
the Spanish Inquisition, the oppression of other religious denominations became
omnipresent. Jews, in particular, became focus communities towards whom there
developed enormous intolerance. However, it is from the writings of the Inquisition that
find evidence of Judaism and Jewish cultural life across large tracts of Spain, as far apart
as Andalusia, Old Castile, Aragon, and Catalonia. Written evidence is found in “gifts to
Jewish charities, to rent seats and pay for lights in synagogues, to attend Hebrew and
Talmudic classes and have Hebrew taught to their children [through visits to] Jewish
butchers.” Further, such evidence refers to the buying of unleavened bread at Passover
and keeping the Sabbath and dietary laws at home. Not only did the Conversos reject
many doctrines of Christianity, they seem even to have rejected that for which the
Inquisition stood, fearful as this might be. How interesting that tens of thousands of the
Spanish citizenry were “double timing” in their religious adherences. It was as if the
original and perceived upstart sect of Christianity continued to include a measure of
insecurity or self doubt, standing as it did at the side of its more senior religious sibling,
Judaism. It is intriguing that “fraternal” conflict sprang from the growing ideological
distinctions made by Christian leaders, that is to say, heresy (the deviant choice) as
contrasted with orthodoxy, where the latter emanated from the hierarchical and self-
interested church bureaucracy. These “heretical” communities were made the scapegoat,
a general category into which were lumped homosexuals, lepers, and anyone else who
was not seen to conform to ongoing moral codes. As various of the Spanish strove to be
accepted through conversion during these troubled times, it is intriguing that those
Europeans north of the Pyrenees described their Spanish cousins as “false Christians” and
“Judaizing ‘Marranos.’” Spain was clearly perceived as a curious multicultural phenomenon.

Essentially, in this brief glimpse into religious and cultural heritage, we see that Spain epitomizes a type of cultural eclecticism throughout her history, where at various moments, tolerance or intolerance reign, yet in many instances, we can find economic and cultural evanescence, with rich spiritual threads. Indeed, even today, converts are moving from Christianity to Islam in the South, which speaks to new cultural meanings for the 21st century.

4. Christianity’s Near East

There is a certain irony in the notion that Christianity is in some way Western and by implication, European. This is a religion that originates in the Mid East and which, importantly, has continued a heritage among both Byzantine and Coptic (Egyptians), the latter from the earliest years through into the 21st century. Christianity started in Egypt under the Graeco-Roman Empire as a salvational alternative belief system, under whose growth, the mystic component—gnosticism—prospered.

There were Greek and Jewish clashes in Alexandria. The problematic Roman economic and cultural conditions of Egypt in the 1st century after Christ offered a somewhat uneasy cultural bedrock for the salvationalism which attracted, among others, secularized and assimilated Jews. Further, the Christian cultural continuance of monotheism in the region contributed to its acceptance. Because of economic and social discontent and the
disenfranchisement of members of the minorities (such as native Egyptians, local Greeks, and varied Semites), Christianity offered new hope. The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE most likely added to this motivation. There was a slow but sure institutionalization of this local Christianity, along with a perhaps inevitable sense of exclusivity. This latter quality fuelled (as it does today in religious communities) doctrine which became formalized and hierarchies which grew and multiplied. In Egypt, relations of class, community, and region (Upper and Lower Egypt) have been entrenched for centuries. In this early period of the millennium, however, economic change was occurring whereby old relations of the land were undergoing new strain. The irrigation system was in processes of disintegration, and by the 3rd century, Roman Egypt was suffering civil war and severe inflation. As noted above, Christianity offered new solace and hope. It continued to expand, moving from its urban base into the rural areas. As it entered the rural regions and moved into the desert, monasteries slowly and systematically began to appear.

The desert for all Egyptians, past and present, is highly symbolic. It has given sanctuary and space and closeness to a particular form of nature which stands in stark contrast to the watered fertility of the Nile. As home of the desert dog Anubis in the ancient myth of Horus, even now the desert remains in the mental eye of Egyptians as a place of the unknown, of wilderness, and of spirituality. For the early desert Copts, their holy men performed symbolic sacrifice and personal sufferance, as they ennobled cause and canonized “ethnic aspiration.” They were in communication with dark forces for the
sake of their people. In discussing the diffusion and development of religion, Durkheim\textsuperscript{16} speaks of “symbolic sacrifice” in the reinforcement of ethnic order.

The desert that the ancient monks had chosen made no room for flamboyance, self-promotion, or other aggrandizement. It was an aesthetic and ascetic medium which enriched prayer and monastic communion. Monasteries were based in remote parts of the desert, though necessarily where water was available. The Coptic monks continued a tradition through the centuries whereby an ideology of modesty, humility, and self-deprecation was their norm. Their Church was speedily isolated from its Roman and Byzantine roots. After the Arab invasion, it became largely estranged from European culture (which is perhaps why, to this day, Western Christians forget these early Eastern practitioners).

How intriguing that, like their Iberian brothers, the Copts did not identify the Muslim invaders as religious threat until the late 11\textsuperscript{th} century. In fact, the Nestoran Christians welcomed an end to what they saw as Byzantine persecution. From the time of the Council of Chalcedon (451 ACE), the Byzantines not only humiliated Copts but also tortured and killed them. It seemed to the Copts that Islam tolerated them as the Byzantines had not.

At the time of the Islamic invasion of Egypt, the Copts were not subjected to conversion or the sword.\textsuperscript{17} Rather, they became subjected to, or “protected” by (for they too were monotheists who adhered to a holy book), the invaders. Soon, however, they had to pay
special taxes (which amounted to a form of serfdom) and a poll tax, which excluded them from becoming fighters for the Islamic army. They were also required to wear a distinguishing dress which rendered them a visible and taxable minority. And slowly but surely, there was increasing pressure to convert to Islam. They thus experienced everything from tolerance, to assimilation, to forced conversion, and even death.

In the late 20th century and on into the 21st century, Muslim extremists targeting the Copts represented merely the most recent manifestations of increasing religious intolerance. The statistics of the Centre for Egyptian Human Rights state that there have been 561 incidents of violence against Copts during a period of about four years in the latter half of the 1990s. Commonly, the killings are the result of Islamic groups whose dream of an Islamic state is one that undermines the secular-based society developed since Egypt’s Nasser and continued by recent leaders such as Sadat and Mubarak.

Copts today recognize that so long as a moderate and relatively secular state survives, then persecution will be under wraps. Nevertheless, data show that they experience contemporary discrimination, particularly in education and employment. The ironies are intriguing. When Pope Shenouda was freed from house arrest in the 1980s, the city of Cairo’s celebration of his return included crowds of both Muslims and Copts. The Copts, along with their inexorable link to the Papal See of Alexandria, represented a link with the Pharaonic past: a glory close to the pride and hearts of most Egyptians.

Coptic minority status, despite its indigenous origin, has meant that they have needed to tread very carefully much of the time. The increase of radical Islam today is a harbinger
of increased intolerance. This has been ironically “rationalized” by the recent words of a Coptic priest, who stated: “Powerlessness has its own speech. Weakness has its own triumph. The world cannot be served from a place of power.”²¹ This utterance of the late 1970s continues to be true today. The words speak to a certain sense of acceptance of the status quo: some say this is religious and cultural tragedy.

5. Europe Today

When we look at the Islamic dimensions of European culture today, we note the significance of Muslim migration and settlement, especially since the 1960s: France, Germany, Italy, and Britain come to mind. When we examine the community relationships between Muslims and other populations in these same countries, we learn that when Muslim communities are clustered in areas where jobs and prosperity are scarce, marginalization, alienation, and clash of identity become resources for conflict, fear, and misunderstanding. It is clear that mere citizenship does not mean integration. Where social and political marginalization continues to occur, alienation, especially visible among youth, is a powerful source of frustration and anger.

Europe’s declining “working age” populations mean that importing foreign labour continues to be crucial for economic growth in the foreseeable future. (Some estimate that Europe needs to attract 1.8 million annually until 2050.) The statistics show that many such migrants are very likely to come from South Asia and the Middle East (where there are typically high Muslim populations). Integration, in light of these demographics, becomes a huge political and cultural issue. Indeed, if ethnic and cultural segregation
persist, there are serious threats to social and political stability, national security, and economic prosperity for Europe. And among Muslims, so long as inter-community differences fractionalize, then national origin and religious denomination seem to dominate over the general European policy issues, such as jobs and education. These are the urgent European dilemmas of this century.

Paris, Lyons, Lille, Berlin, Duisberg, and Frankfurt-am-Main, as well as London, Bradford, Birmingham, Manchester, and Glasgow contain glowing embers that represent discontent. Ethnically and culturally, for France, these are varied North Africans, for Germany the Turks, and for Britain, the Bangladeshi and Pakistani. Large numbers of these communities comprise the disenfranchised; often they are concentrated in low income housing on city edges, and they comprise families of high growth, compared with other Europeans—providing a further spark for the tinderbox. Yet it is intriguing to look at some of the cultural creativity which grows from these communities. Consider, for example, the new vibrancy in music and art which accesses cultural diversity in intricate ways. Take a closer look at radio broadcasting, music festivals, and the emerging combinations of contemporary and traditional sounds and images.

The seeds of Christianity and Islam in the Mid-East and Europe occurred during the ebbs and flows of varied ethnic migrations, economic and cultural conflicts. Islam is of Europe, as Christianity is of the Mid-East. There is a continuation of a range of possibilities, from cultural enrichment, tolerance, and cooperation, to discord, intolerance,
and even violence. All of these are realities that grow from the cultural seedbed that comprises Europe.

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7 Christys, *Christians*, 39.


18 Watson, *Copts*, 145.

19 Watson, *Copts*, 149.

20 Gruber, *Sacrifice*, 93.

21 As cited in Watson, *Copts*, 150.