

The Greeks, the Arabs and Us

Identities and Translations

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A Question

The question of the European "we" has recently been tied to several controversies over translation and the transmission of knowledges.

These debates at first seem learned, distant, specialised. It is a matter of knowing what part the translations of Arabic scientific and philosophical works have taken in the diffusion of these works within Mediaeval West. After a century of work on the subject, certain people wish to recalculate the size of this part and to diminish it. The Latin [supposedly] did not need the Arabic channel; the Arabs would never have been able to appropriate Greek knowledge. General considerations on the essence of religions and "civilisations" are linked together, a "Judaeo-Christianity" that is open and welcoming toward the Other versus a closed and aggressive Islam.

What has happened? The fear of the Arabs and of Islam has entered into science. One settles the score with Islam by saying that one has no 'debts'. The West is Christian, one proclaims, and as pure as possible.

The innovation is here: Islam has become the stake in controversies that are inseparably political and learned. Islamophobia has become scholarly.

The response to give should be both scholarly and political, the work of specialists obliged to enter into public debates, beginning with their domain of competence.

Historically, this book is a manifesto for the unity of the Arabo-Latin sphere of the Middle Ages. Politically it is a manifesto for composite identities. Here, what "Arab", "Greek", "Jew" mean in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, are evaluated using their true measure, the place of each in the transmission of science and philosophy in languages. We see how all of that is said or is not said, in the new Catholicism of Benedict XVI, by the historians of "civilisations", on the Internet, in teaching at colleges or at secondary school.

These are the themes treated in The Greeks, the Arabs and Us, a collective reflection on the constitution of the European "we" through the history of scholarly transmissions.

The Arabic Moment in Philosophy

One notices more and more clearly these days that knowledge of the "Arabic moment" is indispensable for a good overall view of the history of philosophy - and therefore leads to its transformation in depth. For a factual reason, first of all: a multitude of Greek texts are also conserved in Arabic, indeed only in Arabic. In mathematics, half of Diophantus, Apollonius, a major book by Pappius; in astronomy and in optics, the majority of the work of Ptolemy is only conserved in Arabic and/or in Latin translated from Arabic. In medicine, this is the case for a significant portion of the work of Galien, In philosophy, the crucial works of Alexander of Aphrodisius, the greatest Peripetician of Antiquity, of Themistius, Simplicius, Jean Philoponus - that is to say, in short, of everything that counts in the Aristotelian school beginning with the second century of our era. It thus seems very difficult today, to work on Hellenic mathematics or Imperial philosophy, without knowing Arabic. We didn't have to wait until recent years to that. The Arabic tradition has been exploited in an "archaeological" manner since the 17th century by European scholars. In Oxford at the end of the century, Halley - of comet fame - gave a Latin translation of the three final books of Conics by Apollonius, the summit of Greek mathematics, lost in the Greek, by turning to the Arabic.

The new element today is the increasingly acute conscience that it was necessary to understand better what happened in the lands of Islam to grasp the long course of history of certain traditions that one thought exclusively European. Let us insist on the fact that it is not a matter of coming to ask, with acrimony, for a record of service but of a natural dynamic of research itself. In two words: either one likes to retrace the doctrinal traditions and comes sooner or later to postulate, then to reconstitute, the Arabic portion or portions of the thread that one had [first] grasped from the Greek or classical end; or, more analytically, one likes "pure" conceptual problems and one finds ones happiness in a field where one is not preceded by an army of researchers. For example, one has dozens of Arabic treatises on the Liar paradox that more or less nobody has ever opened, whereas one can no longer count the number of studies consecrated to the three Greek allusions to this argument.

A Polemic

Like every book, this one has a context. The appearance, in Spring 2008, of a book by the historian. Sylvain Gouguenheim entitled Aristotle on Mont-Saint-Michel. The Greek Roots of Christian Europe enjoyed an unusual success for a book which offers itself as learned. Several newspapers gave it the headlines, relaying the [central] thesis of the book: "And what if Europe did not owe its knowledge to Islam?" (Le Monde des Livres, 4th April 2008). Rapidly, this thesis was to be connected with the discourse of Pope Benedict XVI at Ratisbon in September 2006 (Le Figaro littéraire 17 April 2008). Setting the blogosphere alight did the rest. The international community of historians of mediaeval thought reacted to the work of Sylvain Gouguenheim with several texts in protest, amongst which the principal ("Yes, the Christian West is indebted to the Islamic world") appeared on April 30th 2008 in the newspaper Libération.

We present here, with the generous permission of Fayard, extracts from the introduction to the book

A Restoration Knowledge

1811: the end of the revolutionaries of the Lumières. Chateaubriand writes the *Itinerary from Paris to Jerusalem* to "voyage in the Holy Land with the ideas, the aim and the sentiments of a pilgrim of old". He adds "if the subjects of Omar, having left Jerusalem, after having journeyed around Africa, fell on Sicily, Spain on France itself, where Charles Martel exterminated them, why would the subjects of Philip the 1st, having left France, not have journeyed around Asia so as to take their revenge on the descendants of Omar as far as Jerusalem?". The "pilgrim of old" is reborn to fight with the "subjects of Omar" and their descendants. The dislocation of Algeria begins twenty years later.

2008: the beginning of the Second Restoration. The creation of a "Museum of the History of France", the aim of which will be to "reinforce the identity of the country", "the soul of France" is announced. A historian of the Knights of the Teutonic Order, Sylvain Gouguenheim, publishes a book to show that the scientific knowledge of Ancient Greece only belatedly and minimally journeyed through the Arabo-Muslim world towards Latin Europe. He writes "[...] if Europe owes the Renaissance to Islam, it must be understood why the latter did not participate in this Renaissance in return. Thus one often belittles or devalues Europe's past, whilst one sings the praises of that of Islam. Shame and pride come face to face; there is nothing here from which to build a fruitful dialogue"¹.

In the absence of anything else, the author shares a singular adequacy to his epoch. In a striking manner, it seems that the Restoration in France must be accompanied by a confrontation with the Arabs.

One must be sensible to this phrase, dropped as if in passing: "shame and pride come face to face". The shame, of course, is that of the repentant Europeans. The pride that of a conceited and sinister Islam. A "shameful" West, an "arrogant" Islam. A crusade à la Chateaubriand? A caricature, rather. The caricature of a caricature.

And a taking back in hand. The revision of the history of Mediaeval Islam is explicitly presented as an accompanying measure in view of a rather more serious mobilisation, in the aftermath of 9-11. Sylvain Gouguenheim writes: "bizarrely, after the Western world became the target of an act of war, it becomes urgent to teach that those who committed it are the champions of a peaceful religion, and to recall that the West was violent. Who, then, is one seeking to dissuade?"².

His book contains other declarations of the same genre: the unsuitability of the Arabic language for philosophy; the predisposition of Islam to violent conversion; the beneficial effects of the consumption of pork across the Mediterranean Basin. In truth, all of that would have had little interest if this disgust was not accompanied by a new historical project, and if this new historical project hadn't sparked the enthusiasm of a number of opinion formers.

That is the point: *Aristotle at Mont-Saint-Michel* develops a vision of the world which fits very precisely into the Sarkozyist philosophy of history, at the meeting point of its three major axes: 1) An exaltation of an All-Christian France, that of the "long cloak of churches" covering our countryside; 2) a vindication of the "positive work" of colonisation – since science is, essentially, European; 3) the will to definitively "liquidate" May 1968. And one is confronted with this paradox, typical of our times, wherein the author most in sync with the *doxa* of official ideologies – one thinks of the person who, in the first days of the Restoration (26th July 2007) composed the unforgettable discourse of Dakar – is

described as a paragon of independence and courage by numerous media chatterboxes.

In the course of the last fifty years, France has experienced a remarkable flourishing of historical studies. From the *Annales* to micro-history, for a long time, theoretical creativity was found on that side too. What happened? It was taken for granted that there is no historical immediacy, no object already there, no essence pre-existing in an evident way the investigation of the historian; in other words, no "doctrines", no "civilisations", no "cultures" or "knowledges" ready made to be transported from one continent to another, from the "East" to the "West". If the "Islam" of today's essayists is as caricatural as the bad guy in a wrestling match, the criticism of it also participates in a parody of martial art. The procedure, nevertheless, is reproduced so obviously that when it encounters the human sciences it *also* becomes a provocation that it would be wrong not to take seriously.

One cannot do justice to Sylvain Gouguenheim's book if one limits oneself to producing a list of howlers. Whatever its misreading of its subject, its minimalism is a programme. This programme is that of a return to a simple bijection between essences and discourses, "civilisations" and their "cultures", places and religions. It is well known how difficult this rhetoric is to counter, how difficult it is to defend the thesis that no, a cat is decidedly not a cat, that a scholar of Islam is something other than a cultivated Islamist, and that in this instance, the transmission of knowledges is a composite phenomenon, where the history of philosophy and of the sciences, the history of techniques, of theology, of imperial propaganda, of teaching, of commercial exchange and still others meet. It is once these factors have been duly taken into account that that one will understand what can have happened between Europe and the Islamic world in the matter of science and philosophy. And not by preparing random lists of works translated and of scholars classified by the confessional pedigree.

[...]

The Scholarly Turn of Islamophobia

Aristotle at Mont-Saint-Michel offers up a new symptom. No-one had thought of it before the book's publication: why not entrust Islamophobia to the experts. Not the experts one might expect, skinheads or colonials in retirement; still less, of course, the "specialists" or the "erudite" reputed to be worshippers of Islam; but a new type of expert, scholars with diplomas. An Academy prize won't hurt the cause, and *Aristotle at Mont-Saint-Michel* won one. It endows Islamophobia with an unexpected prestige. Sylvain Gouguenheim, those who inspire and support him have given it its quintessential form: scholarly Islamophobia. Let us define some of its characteristics.

Scholarly Islamophobia thinks itself moderate. Nobody is saying that Europe "owes" nothing to the knowledges transmitted by the Arabs. Scholarly Islamophobia notes only that on this point there has been much exaggeration, and it asks itself why. *Aristotle at Mont-Saint-Michel* proposes a "re-balancing", evidently qualified as "scientific" (8). The fair play can go as far as noting that the contribution of the Arabic sciences has long remained undervalued. It is enough to add, immediately, that that is not a reason, right now, to overvalue it, except, of course, if one drifts into "self-hatred"³. Scholarly Islamophobia keeps a [sense of] balance. Raised voices are not its style.

Scholarly Islamophobia believes itself synthetic. Some think that one must be able to edit - or at least read - a page of Arabic more or less correctly in order to decide on the genius of Islam. Such qualms are misplaced. Although the editors of texts know how difficult it can be to interpret a simple particle, scholarly Islamophobia sums up, in a sententious phrase, whole collections of books and manuscripts.

Scholarly Islamophobia does not like gentiles. An orientalist tradition founded by Louis Massignon, is characterised by its belief in the reciprocal benefits of a dialogue between religions; by the idea that Christian spirituality can offer something to the Muslims and Muslim spirituality something to the Christians. Not only, in each case, a confirmation of its intrinsic superiority, but the discovery of a gap that renders each one richer. In the mouth of a Dominican this is acceptable (although...), but in that of a Muslim, here is something that is too nice to be honest, scholarly Islamophobia⁴ warns us. However, don't go suspecting that it reproaches the Other with not knowing how to enter into dialogue so not to have to *really* do so itself, that would be mean-spirited of you.

Scholarly Islamophobia appears selective. It doesn't denounce every "Golden Age" or "Great Century" as a historiographical myth but concentrates on Baghdad and Cordova. In European history, it often mentions Copernicus and rarely Galileo, often Saint Thomas and rarely the Inquisition, often the return of the Greek language and rarely the defenestration of Huguenots. Whoever embraces too much, grasps it badly, it is said.

Scholarly Islamophobia dreams that it is subtle. It likes to make distinctions. It teaches us to separate Greek and Arabic, and so us and Arabic, definitively. Moreover, it teaches that Islam is not the Islamic religion. It is a recurrent argument: certainly there has been transmission but it comes to us from what, in the Islamic religion, is civilisation, culture, and above all not religion⁵. The best proof of this is the Christian Arabs, excellent translators, for their part. It is enough to be a Muslim to not know how to transmit. Making distinctions finishes when the complexity begins.

Moderation, re-balancing, casuistry: there is a style to knowledge in the Restoration. That of an integrally *reactive* knowledge: reactive to what it itself defines as a *doxa* on the Arabic transmission of Greek knowledge in the Latin West. It has been a long time since knowledge, and with it, the *subject*

[...]

The Greeks, the Arabs and us

Let's explore the combinations. In the first place it gave: *the Greeks and us*, a century of Romantic and scholarly Germany, from Holderlin to Wilamowitz, between reverie and erudition. Then came *the Arabs and us*: a colonial, a postcolonial relation, again a century of discoveries and suspicions, from Loti to Said. *The Greeks and the Arabs* were first associated by the Mediaevalists through the representation of a "Greco-Arab" rationalism, opposed en bloc to the Latinate Middle Ages, its theology of the supernatural and of freedom: a Thomist a Neo-Thomist account, in its strong version that of Etienne Gilson. Today it is the Greeks *against* the Arabs, in the name of the *great Christian logos*. A Neo-Thomist account again, but in its weak version, that of Benedict XVI, of the Ratisbon discourse, and of the "de-hellenisation of Christianity".

The Greeks and us, the Arabs and us, the Greeks and the Arabs. It is the knowledge of the new Restoration: is it still knowledge? One effaces the Jews in passing, one forgets the Latins, "we other Latins", *nos Latini*, as the cleric or the scholar of the Middle Ages said. What is this so incomplete Middle Ages? What Europe - but even more, what world - is possible with such elisions? And what "we" is possible with so few things?

The Greeks, the Arabs and us. We do not separate. We historians and philosophers take everything together. The texts that follow do not compare anything to anyone, not Greeks to Arabs, nor Arabs to Latins, nor "Christians" to "Muslims", nor "East" to "West". They deliberately avoid the places of memory, Baghdad and Cordoba as much as Athens, Oxford or Mont-Saint-Michel. Instead they join the dots, fill in the gaps, retrace, as Gilson said, the "secret advances" proper to doctrinal matter⁶. In so doing they indeed defend a thesis: that of the unity of Arabo-Latin knowledge. But they simultaneously defend a method: that which affirms that this unity will not be demonstrated with "more" and "less" ("more" Greek here, "less" Arab there, or inversely) and that the "Let us not exaggerate" of the new Restoration is definitely off topic.

Such a programme is, as it is, a political programme. *The Greeks, the Arabs and Us*: will it be necessary to say that we are Greeks *and* Arabs? To formulate it in terms that continue to exasperate the Restorationists, appurtenances here are "wills to belong", identities "declarations of identity"⁷. This identity, Greek *and* Arab, Greek and Arab because Latin and because Jewish, is no less metaphorical, that is to say, no less chosen, than any other. Without doubt it is more complete, less truncated, and in this sense - in this sense *at least* - more true.

It remains to say *why* we choose it. *The Arabs are Arabs* says scholarly Islamophobia, for fear that they *too* might be Greeks, as we maintain. It is only said in the third person: "those Arabs", those who one points to from afar, from the banlieus to the universities, across the entire trajectory of scholarly Islamophobia. Who today can say "we Arabs" without attracting the worst suspicions? That is just one more reason, today, why we say it. *The Greeks, the Arabs. And us?* We Greeks, of course. We Arabs, no less. But we Latins as well, we Jews, we [are] all those absent from the new Restoration, we [are] all *the others*, we who do not fit into the "Helleno-Christian" or any other kind of synthesis, we the composite.

Notes

¹ Sylvain Gouguenheim, *Aristote au Mont-Saint-Michel. Les racines grecques de l'Europe chrétienne* (Paris, Seuil, 2008) p. 17.

² *Ibid.*, p. 261, n. 7.

³ Rémi Brague, 'Das islamische Volk ist das belogenste', interview in *Die Presse* (Vienna), 22nd April 2008.

⁴ S. Gouguenheim, 'Averroès était-il un gentil ?' in *Au Moyen du Moyen Âge. Philosophies médiévales en chrétienté, judaïsme et islam*, Revised edition (Paris, Flammarion 2008), p. 397-412.

⁵ S. Gouguenheim, 'En quoi la philosophie islamique est-elle islamique ?', in *ibid.*, p. 108-132.

[Trans: the authors distinguish Islam with an I, as having to do with culture and islam with an i as having to do with religion.]

⁶ Étienne Gilson, *La Philosophie au Moyen Âge*, 2nd ed. (revised) (Paris, Payot, 1944), p. 661.

⁷ Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen Âge* (Paris, Seuil - Points, 1996), p. 105.

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Notes
