



## The Influence of Islamic Civilization in the West

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MOST EUROPEANS have not accurately assessed the importance of the contributions that Islamic civilization has made to its own, nor have they understood the nature of their borrowings from this civilization in the past, some going so far as to disregard totally all that is connected with it. This is because the history they are taught makes a travesty of the facts and seems to have been altered intentionally on a great many points. Indeed, this history goes to extremes in flaunting the little respect it has for Islamic civilization, the merits of which it habitually disparages each time an occasion presents itself. It is important to point out that the teaching of history in European universities pays no heed to the influence in question. On the contrary, the truths which ought to be told on this subject, whether through teaching or writing, are systematically set aside, especially concerning the most important events.

For example, though it is generally known that Spain remained under Islamic rule for several centuries, it is never mentioned that the same was true in other countries such as Sicily or the southern part of present-day France. Some wish to attribute this silence of the historians to religious prejudice. But what can one say of current historians, most of whom are without any religion (if, indeed, they are not enemies of religion), when they confirm what their predecessors have said contrary to the truth?

We must therefore see this as a result of the pride and presumption of Westerners, which prevent them from recognizing the truth or the importance of their debts to the East.

Even stranger is that Europeans consider themselves the direct heirs of Hellenic civilization, whereas the facts belie this claim. The truth is that Greek science and philosophy were transmitted to Europeans through Muslim intermediaries, as history itself incontestably bears out; in other words, the intellectual patrimony of the Greeks reached the West only after it had been seriously studied in the Near East, and had it not been for Islamic scholars and philosophers, Europeans would have remained in total ignorance of these teachings for a very long time, if indeed they would ever have come to know them.

It is fitting to point out that here we are speaking of the influence of Islamic civilization and not specifically of Arabic civilization, as is sometimes wrongly said, for the majority of those who have exerted this influence in the West were not of the Arab race; and if their language happened to Arabic, it was so only as a consequence of their adoption of the religion of Islam.

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Since we have been led to speak of the Arabic language, we can see certain proof of the extent of this same Islamic influence in the West in the existence of a great many more words with Arabic roots than is generally acknowledged. These words have been incorporated in almost all European languages, and continue to be used to the present day, although many of the Europeans who employ them are ignorant of their true origin. As words are nothing less than vehicles for ideas and the means of exteriorizing thought, these facts clearly enough establish the transmission of Islamic ideas and concepts.

In fact, the influence of Islamic civilization has spread extensively and most perceptibly into all domains, including science, the arts, and philosophy. Spain was a very important factor in this regard and was the principal center of diffusion of this civilization. Our intention is not to treat each of these aspects in detail or to define the area of expansion of Islamic civilization, but only to indicate certain facts that we consider particularly important, no matter how few people in our day recognize that importance.

Regarding the sciences, we can make a distinction between the natural sciences and the mathematical sciences. Of the former, we know for a certainty that some were transmitted by Islamic civilization to Europe, which adopted them in full from Islam. Chemistry, for example, has always kept its Arabic name, a name which goes back to ancient Egypt moreover, and this despite the fact that the first and most profound meaning of this science had been completely lost to modern men.

To take another example, that of astronomy, the technical terms of this science used in all European languages are, for the most part, still of Arabic origin, and the names of many of the celestial bodies used by astronomers of all countries continue to be the original Arabic names. This is due to the fact that the works of Greek astronomers in antiquity, such as Ptolemy of Alexandria, were known to the West in their Arabic translations, as were those of their Muslim successors. Moreover, it would be easy to show that in general most geographic knowledge regarding the furthest reaches of Asia and Africa was for many years gained from Arab explorers who had visited numerous regions, and one could cite many other facts of this kind.

Regarding many inventions, which were no more than applications of the natural sciences, these have followed the same path of transmission, that is, Muslim mediation, and the story of the 'water clock' presented by Caliph Harun al-Rashid to the Emperor Charlemagne has not yet disappeared from memory.

The mathematical sciences call for special attention in this context, for in this vast domain it is not only Greek science that was transmitted to the West through the intermediary of Islamic civilization, but also that of the Hindus. The Greeks had also developed geometry, and for them even the science of numbers was always related to a consideration of the corresponding geometric figures. This pre-eminence accorded to geometry appears clearly, for example, in Plato. There is, however, another area of mathematics relating to the science of numbers which, unlike the others under Greek nomenclature in European languages, is not known because the Greeks were ignorant of it. This science is algebra, which came originally from India, and its Arabic name shows clearly enough how it was transmitted to the West.

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Something else worth pointing out despite its lesser importance again corroborates what we have been saying, and this is the fact that the numerals used by Europeans have always been called “Arabic numerals”, although their actual origin is Hindu, for the signs of numeration originally used by the Arabs were none other than the letters of the alphabet themselves.

If we now leave an examination of the sciences to look at the arts, we will see that in literature and poetry many of the ideas that originated with Muslim writers and poets have been used in European literature, and that some Western writers have even gone as far as pure and simple imitation of their works. Similarly, one can detect traces of Islamic influence in architecture, which resulted in a style wholly distinctive to the Middle Ages; thus, the ogival arch which had such a profound influence that it gave its name to an architectural style [ogival or gothic], incontestably had its origins in Islamic architecture; and although many fantastic theories have been invented to conceal this truth, they are contradicted by the existence of a tradition among the builders themselves, which constantly affirms the transmission of their knowledge from the Near East.

This knowledge assumed a secret character and gave a symbolic meaning to their art; it was closely related to the science of numbers, and its origins were always linked to the men who had built the Temple of Solomon. Whatever the distant source of this science, it could not possibly have been transmitted to medieval Europe by any intermediary other than the Muslim world; and in this connection it should be added that these builders, organized into guilds possessing special rites, considered themselves to be, and designated themselves as, “foreigners” in the West, even though they were born there, and this designation has endured to the present day, although these things may have become obscure and are now understood only by a few.

In this brief account, we must make a special mention of philosophy, where Islamic influence attained such considerable importance in the Middle Ages that even the most implacable adversaries of the East could not misconstrue its impact. One can truly say that Europe at that time had no other means at its disposal for acquiring knowledge of Greek philosophy. The Latin translations of Plato and Aristotle in use at the time had not been made directly from Greek originals, but from earlier Arabic translations, to which were joined commentaries by contemporary Muslim philosophers, such as Averroes, Avicenna, and others.

The philosophy of the period, known as scholasticism, is generally differentiated into Muslim, Jewish, or Christian. But it was Muslim learning that was the source of the other two, and more especially of Jewish philosophy which flourished in Spain through the vehicle of the Arabic language. This is evidenced in such important authors as Maimonides, who inspired later Jewish philosophers for several centuries even to Spinoza, in whose works some of his ideas are still quite recognizable.

But it is not necessary to continue this enumeration of facts known to everyone who has some notion of the history of ideas. It would be better to end with other facts of a very different order, totally unknown to most moderns, who, especially in Europe, have not even an inkling of them, whereas from our point of view these things are of considerably greater interest than all the outward knowledge of science and philosophy. We mean

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esoterism with all that relates to it, and the knowledge derived therefrom, constituting sciences completely different from those known to moderns.

The Europe of our day no longer has anything that might recall these sciences; beyond this, the West is ignorant of the true knowledge represented by esoterism and its related sciences, although in the Middle Ages it was completely otherwise; and in this sphere, too, Islamic influence appeared in a most luminous and evident way during that epoch. It is furthermore very easy to recover its traces in works of multiple meanings, where the real aim was something completely other than literary.

Some Europeans have themselves begun to discover something of this kind, notably through the study they have made of Dante's poems, though without achieving a perfect comprehension of their true nature. Several years ago a Spanish orientalist, Miguel Asin Palacios, wrote a work about Muslim influences in the work of Dante, demonstrating that many of the symbols and expressions used by the poet had been used before him by Muslim esoterists, and in particular by Muhyi 'd-Din ibn al-'Arabi. Unhappily, the remarks of this scholar did not show the importance of these symbols in the composition of the work. A recently deceased Italian writer, Luigi Valli, studied the work of Dante rather more profoundly and concluded that he was not alone in employing symbolic methods used in esoteric Persian and Arabic poetry; in Dante's own country and among his contemporaries, all these poets were members of a secret society known as the "Fedeli d'Amore", of which Dante himself was one of the leaders. But when Luigi Valli tried to penetrate the meaning of their 'secret language', it proved impossible for him to recognize the true character of this organization, or of others of the same nature established in Europe in the Middle Ages. The truth is that certain unknown personalities were behind these associations and inspired them; they were known under different names, of which the most important was "Brothers of the Rose-Cross". These persons, however, had no written rules and did not constitute a society; neither did they have fixed meetings, and all that one can say of them is that they attained a certain spiritual state which authorizes us to call them European "Sufis", or at least *mutasawwufin*, having arrived at a high degree in this hierarchy. One also hears that these "Brothers of the Rose-Cross" who served as a "cover" for the corporations of builders mentioned earlier, taught alchemy and other sciences identical to those then in full flower in the Islamic world. In truth, they formed a link in the chain connecting East to West and established a permanent contact with the Muslim Sufis, a contact symbolized by the journeys attributed to their legendary founder.

But facts such as these do not come within the purview of ordinary history, which does not push its investigations further than the outer aspect of facts, although one might say that it is there that one finds the true key which can open the door to so many enigmas that otherwise would remain forever obscure and undecipherable.