

The Role of the Arab-Islamic World in the Rise of the West: Implications for Contemporary Trans-Cultural Relations, edited by Nayef R. F. Al-Rodhan, Basingstoke, UK, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012 x + 241 pp., £57050 (hardback), ISBN 978-0230-3932-02

Scratch a Russian and you'll find a Tatar, goes the old proverb. What lies immediately beneath the rise of Western society over the past 500 years? Nayef Al-Rodhan addresses this conundrum with a collection of essays that demonstrate the interlocking features of a common transcultural Judeo-Christian-Islamic history that is not quite so inherently antithetical as often assumed inside Western societies. The central thesis is that the demarcation between "the West" and "the world of Islam" has never been particularly watertight. Neither the Renaissance nor the Reformation – so axiomatic to modern Western conceptualizations of the Self – evolved in some sort of Eurocentric utopian isolation from the Muslim societies of the Mediterranean and the Balkans.

This collection is divided into nine chapters starting and ending with entries by the editor himself: "Introduction: A Thousand Years of Amnesia" and the concluding "Way Forward: Implications for Contemporary Trans-cultural Relations", which provide clues as to the book's trajectory. Al-Rodhan suggests that prejudice and bias can and do affect the widespread popular intellectual myopia inside all cultures, including that of Western society, which prides itself on its alleged impartiality in all fields of study, information and knowledge. He dismisses the prevailing Western meta-narrative and historiographical social discourse that holds to the narrow *Weltanschauung* linking ancient Greece and the Roman Empire (the "classical world") directly and exclusively to modern Western capitalistic societies, although he certainly acknowledges serious methodological challenges in examining complex lines of causation in the disparate and poorly documented cultural exchanges of past centuries.

Overall, the book presents little that is startlingly new or revolutionary and there are many familiar themes here: the preservation and transmission of "the Classics" from ancient Greece to modern Europe, via Islamic libraries, is of course a well-known one. In Chapter 5, "Islamic Commerce and Finance in the Rise of the West", John M. Hobson observes that "after the seventh century ... the Mediterranean became in effect a Muslim Lake, and Western Europe a tiny promontory lying on the far tip of a vast Afro-Asian economy" (88). Less understood – and certainly less acknowledged – is the role of Muslim commentaries and exegetical summaries on Plato, Aristotle and others, that were diffused at the same time. Scholars of philosophy have, in recent years, observed striking similarities between the writing of al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) on the one hand and that of René Descartes (1596–1650) and David Hume (1711–76) on the other. In Chapter 3, "Reorienting the Reformation? Prolegomena to a History of the Reformation's Connection with the Islamic World", Frédérique Guerin discusses at length just one example – the authoritative and influential *summa* "An Apology for True Christian Divinity" authored by the Scottish Quaker Robert Barclay (1648–90). Although it was clearly influenced by the book *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* by Ibn Ṭufayl (1105–85) from Andalusia, explicit references to the Arab in Barclay's Introduction were nevertheless deleted in reproductions after the eighteenth century. Ironically, *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* became *Philosophus Autodidactus* in the West and had an impact on generations of Western writers, philosophers and scientists. Such systematic expunction of Muslim contributions is fairly Orwellian and has obvious implications for contemporary readers and historians who, understandably, assume a degree of intellectual aridity in Islamic lands.

In his conclusion, Al-Rodhan remarks sagely:

Rather than assuming the end of history in Fukuyama's terms (the triumph of Western liberal democracy), which itself can be counter-productive to harmonious relations between peoples of different cultures, we should aim for a sustainable history. Sustainable history does not presuppose that Western liberal democracy is the end towards which all peoples are working. (227)

The influence of Islam and Muslims on the evolution and development of “the West” and contemporary Western identity certainly merits further and more thorough investigation. This publication not only increases the reader's comprehension of these issues, but also goes a long way to pinpointing areas for future study and research. It makes for persuasive reading. It will appeal primarily to academics and university graduates, although anyone serious about increasing their personal understanding of Islam and the role this faith has played in the growth of Western society will find it both accessible and invaluable.

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