

A Critique of Islamophobia – in Defence of European Culture

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The fear of refugees and migrants that has flooded Europe in the last few years emphasises the threat posed to contemporary European culture by the supposedly radically different Islamic culture. However, the roots of European Islamophobia reach far beyond that, all the way back to the Crusades; while Central and parts of Eastern Europe have mostly been feeding these roots with memories of Ottoman invasions. After inspecting these roots, this article sheds light on the irrefutable Christian sources of European culture, but also exposes other influences without which the culture would not exist today – especially the antecedent Greco-Roman antiquity, and the subsequent Renaissance, Humanism and Enlightenment. This outlines modern European and Western culture, characterised mainly by secularity, which is the precondition for religious freedom of non-Christian, alternative, and ‘non-native’ religions as well. This article emphasises that it would be difficult to include Islam amongst these latter religions since it has been an important contribution to the shaping of European culture for centuries. The old antagonisms between European and Islamic cultures therefore do not stem from their irreconcilable differences but from their resemblances – in other words: in the West, we are not afraid of Muslims because they are so radically different but because they are strikingly similar. The real threat to European and Western culture is therefore not Muslim migrants but a demagogic fuelling of the fears of the supposed Islamic threat.

Introduction

We live in times of anxieties: the masses are afraid of refugees and migrants. As the majority of these people are Muslim, this is a supposed threat to ‘our’ way of life and ‘their’ so-called radically different culture is corroding the Christian foundations of Europe. More and more political parties and other establishments are openly using the politics of fear, which require relatively minimal input and result in great political profit. As a consequence, the culture of fear of Islam has spread all across Europe

and the entire Western world.¹ According to a survey conducted in 2017 (Pew Research Center 2017), explicitly intolerant views on Muslims are shared by 43% of Italians, 36% of Britons, 34% of Austrians, and one third of Germans.² It seems that the fear and the hatred produced have become the most powerful driving forces of our politics.

The modern-day refugee wave, to use the natural metaphor often employed by the mass media, has a very clear unnatural source, namely, the military invasion of Iraq by the American-led Western coalition in 2003 (Šterbenc 2018), directly supported by a majority of European countries. Nevertheless, this article does not tackle the global political and geostrategic contexts of contemporary Western fears of Islam. Instead of this albeit legitimate and in many ways urgent ambition (which we are forced to leave for another occasion owing to space and other limitations), we analyse the historical sources of these fears, deconstruct the seemingly self-evident conflation of European identity and Christianity, and draw the more complex outlines of contemporary European and Western cultures that have all been influenced by Islam. In doing so, we hope to bring a small contribution to the fight for ‘European culture’ and ‘our way of life’, which we simply cannot lead effectively until we grasp what constitutes and what threatens them.

Islam as a Fearful Phantasm of the West

Ever since its beginnings, Europe has not only been constituted on the grounds of common cultural, political and other elements, but in at least equal amounts also in opposition to the Other. In most cases, the counterpart in creating its identity *per negationem*, i.e. by defining who and what we are not, was Islam. The roots of contemporary anti-Islamic sentiment therefore reach back almost a millennium, all the way to the Crusades, while Central and parts of Eastern Europe have to this day mostly been feeding these roots with the memories of Ottoman invasions.

Since its founding in the first half of the seventh century, Islam spread rapidly, also through the use of violence. Yet reducing its astonishing success to its military element overlooks the numerous appealing traits of the then new and, up to now, extremely vital religion, which managed to efficiently attract masses all across the lands that it reached. The Muslim community initially remained relatively small for quite some time. Hence, it could not have achieved such a rapid proliferation and, even more importantly, it could not have maintained control over the converted territories and societies by exclusively using its military instrument.

1. See, for example, the European islamophobia report: <https://www.islamophobiaeurope.com>.

2. The survey, carried out on a sample of 24,599 adult inhabitants of 15 countries in Western Europe, also exposes a negative correlation between the expressed intolerance and the education and personal experience (the respondents with a higher level of education and those who personally know a Muslim are less intolerant), and a positive correlation with religious activities (people who frequent religious services more often express discernibly more intolerant views on Muslims, migrations and religious minorities).

The first Christians ever to come into contact with Muslims were Eastern Christians, while the West heard the first news about Islam from the pilgrims who returned from the 'Holy Land'. Their testimonies were not especially scary: they told about a more or less fruitful or at least tolerable coexistence of 'People of the Book', i.e. the members of the three Abrahamic monotheistic religions, who were even frequently seen performing their religious rites in the same places.

The more conflictual relationship between Western Christians and Muslims began in the early eighth century, when Tariq ibn Ziyad (following the invitation of one of the local Christian rulers hoping to dominate others) led a successful military conquest from North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula and soon started to periodically invade Frankish territories across the Pyrenees. In the Western perception of that time, the Moors or the Saracens, as they named them, were only one kind of non-believers that threatened the Christian world, but no more so than other pagans and barbarians. Some western Christian monarchs showed no restraint in making alliances with Muslims, who were not always unified themselves.

The origins of the explicitly hateful attitude towards Muslims and Islam as the main opponent, evil personified, can be traced to the late ninth century. At that time, Pope John VIII began establishing the doctrine of Christians as a community, as a unified social and mystical body, and at the same time demonising Muslims, calling upon the entire Christian world to declare war against them. This represents the beginning of complex processes of homogenising Christianity and establishing it as a unified social community (with transcendental justifications), at the core of which lies the antagonism against Muslims (Mastnak 2002).

These processes, however, took time: two centuries had to pass before the Western consciousness transformed Muslims from one of the many diverse groups of non-believers into the main enemy of the Christian world, and their religion into a demonic one, explicitly connected to the Antichrist. At the end of eleventh century, these processes culminated into the First Crusade – the first ever war to be directly connected with religious motives, and especially with transcendental arguments.³

Thus, in the circumstances culminating in the Crusades, the conditions were met for the birth of Europe as a political community, which in its essence was founded on antagonism or even explicit hatred of Muslims. The last stage of these processes was completed *de facto* in the middle of fifteenth century when the Ottomans, led by Mehmed the Conqueror, occupied Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire and the centre of Eastern Christianity, in 1453. This united the Christian world that had been radically split into Latin and Eastern or Orthodox churches for centuries, while the part of the antagonist Other – in western imagination previously played by the Moor/Saracen – was taken over by the Turk. As mobilisations

3. It is true that God had helped Christian soldiers in their endeavours before, yet it was during the Crusades that he suddenly began acting directly through them. War violence also not only stopped being a sin – it became a virtue that helped redeem other sins. In 1095, Pope Urban II therefore had no great difficulty in recruiting simple Christian masses for the first in the series of crusades, which differed from other looting sprees not so much by their mode of operation or the spoils but by the rallying cry that led them: *Deus vult*, God wills it!

against Turkish threats to Europe began, the latter had become a space of a common identity in the minds of its heterogeneous peoples for the first time.

The memory of Ottoman invasions, against which our ancestors lit bonfires that warned others to take shelter behind reinforced church walls, is alive to this day in numerous cultures of Central and Eastern Europe: from folk songs of virgins kidnapped and taken to harems and of Janissaries to primary school textbooks. A curricular introduction into this part of folk heritage would of course not present any difficulties in itself. In the absence of additional contextual reflexions, however, it mostly serves to uncritically renew the old stereotypes of the barbarically unholy, ruthlessly cruel Turk who unscrupulously threatens the Christian world.⁴

The stereotypes that are formed and maintained through the (unconscious) complex cultural processes of constructing otherness, as explained by the theories of othering (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 2012), flatten the multi-layered identity of ‘a Turk’ into a Manichean black-and-white image in which we are obviously on the good side and threatened by this evil incarnate. But, first and foremost, they reduce this complex identity to religion, as Aleš Debeljak vividly explained using a Slovenian example: ‘In Slovenian collective imagery, the ethnic mark of a “Turk” is nothing else but a metaphorical summary of the stereotypes revolving around the religion that made the hearts across the entire medieval Europe race in fear: Islam!’ (Debeljak 2009a, 55).

Such processes of othering are of course far from being limited only to Slovenia; they constructed the image of Muslims everywhere in the Western world and continue to do so today. J.G. Shaheen (2003), for example, analysed over 900 films to demonstrate how ever since its beginnings (in 1896), with rare exceptions, American Hollywood cinema has been stereotyping Muslims and Arabs as brutal, uncivilised, irrational religious fanatics, unintelligent, greedy, degenerate women oppressors, but most of all as radically different from Westerners. (The analysis also points out that Hollywood predominately equates Arabs with Muslims.) Similarly, on the basis of a discourse analysis of 607 *New York Times* articles from 1969 to 2014, D.M.D. Silva (2017) convincingly demonstrates, how ‘news media employ strategic discursive strategies that contribute to conceptual distinctions that are used to construct Muslims as an “alien other” to the West.’

However, the cultural processes of constructing Muslims that can be seen on the border territories that are the spaces of direct contact and confrontation between East and West are specific in that they are generally based on frontier orientalism (Gingrich 1998). This version differs from (post)colonial otherings of ‘Orient’ as

4. There are two major sources for these stereotypes: on the one hand, they are rooted in sixteenth century pamphlets in which the Habsburgs used an (exaggerated) emphasis of the Turkish threat in order to reinforce their legitimacy and power in their empire as well as against their enemies, the French and the Protestants (see Jezernik 2010); and on the other hand, they are the fruit of simultaneous conscious efforts of the Ottoman sultan himself and his court, whose the conquering tactics deliberately built on a (similarly exaggerated) emphasis of (a) violence, (b) arrogance with a regimented, pompous, conceited, offensive, and provocative rhetoric, and (c) splendour in the diplomatic, military, and social spheres, whereby they often effectively put psychological pressure on their opponents and enemies (Kumrular 2010).

defined by Edward Said (1978) in his classical work by their direct and most often conflictual confrontation with the Other, i.e. the ‘Turk’ or the ‘Muslim’.⁵ In Central and parts of Eastern Europe, these othering processes are therefore based on the medieval myth of *antemurale christianitatis* (Srodecki 2014), the antemural or bulwark of Christendom, that has managed to survive to this day. For example, during the wars surrounding the dissolution of Yugoslavia, primarily Serbian nationalists successfully presented themselves to the Western public as the last bulwark of Christianity standing against the supposedly threatening Bosnian Islam, and Bosniaks were often labelled as ‘Turks’. Surprisingly, vital elements of this medieval myth can still be seen today, when politicians, bishops, various public figures, but also simple folk explicitly compare the masses of refugees and migrants to Ottoman invasions and speculate on conspiracies of a deliberate organisation of the last refugee crisis, consciously aimed at the core of Christian Europe.

At first sight, the stubborn persistency of the *antemurale christianitatis* medieval myth convincingly leads to the conclusion that European culture (and our identity with it) is inseparably connected to the fear and hatred of Muslims. Nevertheless, agreeing with this daring hypothesis too quickly would be to surrender too soon: it is only valid insofar as we equal European values solely with Christianity. As true as this was in the Middle Ages, the European identity has become much more ambiguous since the Enlightenment.

Exclusively Christian versus Pluralistically Secular Europe

The fact that European culture and identity are associated with Christianity is, of course, obvious and almost self-evident. Not only do the historical beginnings of Europe as an explicitly Christian community testify to it, but also there is the remarkable role that the monasteries played as centres of knowledge and education, the key influence of, primarily, Jesuits on the development of education, as well as Protestant influences on the development of national languages and national identities, etc. This also persists to the modern day, in which the majority of Europeans continue to, at least nominally, declare themselves Christian, be it Catholic, Orthodox or any of the Protestant denominations.

What is more: it is simply impossible to understand modern Western secular societies without the often-fateful influence that the Christian ideas and concepts had on their emergence and development (see Stark 2005). With the birth of the Son of God, a linear conception of time trumps the cyclical one, making space for the modern idea of historical progress. Through the theological idea that man

5. While the classic (i.e. Said’s) orientalism draws mainly from the elite culture, frontier orientalism is composed also of folk myths, which metaphorically demarcate the key encounters of the Christian and the Muslim world. If the subject of classic orientalism is remote, primitive and inferior, either male or female – the latter potentially carrying also an erotic fascination – the frontier Oriental is always male (in this version of orientalism, women appear only in the roles of powerless victims requiring protection against Muslims), primarily a soldier and a direct rival (Gingrich 1998).

was created in the image of God, Christianity transformed a human into a person. Together with the dogma of Jesus' sacrifice for humanity and the possibility of individual redemption, this has an amazing influence on the development of numerous fundamental concepts for the creation of our modern world: equality, democracy, tolerance, solidarity, human dignity, human rights, individualism, etc. In (Western) Christian theology, reason has played an enormously important role in the creation of rationalism and the development of modern science. Christianity was decisive in the creation of capitalism (without which it is simply impossible to imagine the modern world, although its criticisms are more than just), as Max Weber (1930) convincingly demonstrated in his classical work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The signing of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 at the end of the Thirty Years' War (almost a century after the Peace of Augsburg that allowed Lutheranism) and the enforcement of the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, his religion), gave rise to international law founded on legal personalities of individual national entities and their sovereign right not to have others meddle in their internal affairs. Even the modern secular political order based on the separation of value spheres, in particular the political and the religious ones, has clear roots in the biblical 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's'.

At the same time, however, it is imperative to understand a few things about these concepts: (a) despite their origins (also) in Christianity, they continued to develop gradually; (b) during their development, which was influenced by various other traditions, they were not even close to being understood unambiguously (for example the idea of human dignity was, for a long time, limited only to the members of the symbolic, i.e. Christian community – this is why even the early modern period featured debates on whether non-Christians, e.g. the New World Indians, even have a soul); and (c) nowadays, they are extremely different from their sources centuries and millennia ago.⁶ Numerous modern concepts with roots in Christian ideas have developed alongside and despite the explicit and often decidedly active opposition of the Church. They are not a fruit of self-evident evolution but were gained with great difficulty, not reaching their final form in the lines of democracy, freedom of speech, human rights, equality, etc., before the period of Enlightenment.

It is also worth remembering that the part of the world nowadays known under the name of Europe has not forever and 'by its very nature' been Christian. The origin of this largest world religion is not, as common sense would have it, European but Middle Eastern – just like the origin of the other two Abrahamic relatives, the older Judaism and the younger Islam. The Christianisation of Europe took place through a series of complex, oftentimes violent, and – over a millennium – long processes (generally, it was the nobility who converted first; it took generations before the common folk very slowly converted to Christianity as well). These processes began in 381, when

6. Fervent proponents of an exclusively Christian nature of the West should take into consideration that the church fathers would most probably be appalled by the contemporary 'Western values' that are supposed to be predominately Christian.

Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire, and ended in the fifteenth century, when Lithuania officially adopted the Christian faith and when Spain and Portugal accomplished the *Reconquista*, in 1492 – the very same year that Christopher Columbus ‘discovered’ America and humanity entered a new, modern era.⁷

Thus began the first, imperialist, globalisation, although the West was soon shaken by the Reformation. Martin Luther wrestled God’s authority from Roman hands; Protestantism brought the individualisation of divine revelation and suggested the later turn from God to man. This was the end of the medieval unified Latin world. Gutenberg’s revolutionary invention of the printing press enabled the Bible to be more easily available in local translations and at the same time helped spread various ideas: in the growing number of new books (the majority of them soon in languages other than Latin), the central place previously reserved for God was gradually taken over by man. With the start of modernity in Europe, the religious criterion slowly gave way to the ethnic one, while modern tolerance based on the individual rather than on the community was developed step by step. Renaissance and Humanism were born. A new type of rationality based on observation, empiricism, and rational judgement, which brought about the scientific revolution and Enlightenment, gradually replaced the transcendently grounded system of rationality, which defines truth in accordance with the religious dogma. Only this fall of the unified, dogmatic Christian Europe gave rise to the world domination of the West, based primarily on the modern concept of separating value spheres and allowing various sectors of social and private life to break the steel shackles of the Church (Debeljak 2009b). Secularisation, one of the key determinants of the modern world, began.

When thinking of Christian Europe, we therefore cannot dismiss other origins that constitute its existence, especially the antecedent sources in classical antiquity, and the subsequent ones in Renaissance and Humanism, as well as multiple others.

7. In the fourth century, Constantine I issues the Edict of Milan, ordering followers to treat Christians benevolently; in 381, Christianity became the official state religion of Roman Empire (and Theodosius I banned the so-called ‘pagan’ rituals). In the fifth century, individual Germanic people (e.g. the Goths) were slowly being converted. At the end of fifth century, Clovis I, the king of the Franks, converted to Catholicism, while the Frankish peoples took until the late seventh century to convert. At the end of the sixth century, his religion gradually became the religion of the Anglo-Saxons on the British Isles: St Patrick Christianised Celtic Ireland and a part of Scotland. The Slavic Great Moravia was Christianised by the Franks and the Byzantine missionaries from South Italy and Dalmatia at the beginning of the ninth century; soon after, the Byzantine missionaries Cyril and Methodius devised the first Slavic script (the Glagolic alphabet), translated the Bible into Old Church Slavonic, and introduced Christianity as a state religion in Serbia and Bulgaria. The Christianisation of Alpine Slavs in Carantania began in the mid-eighth century, although they came into contact with the first Christians coming from Aquileia a good century earlier. In 966, Mieszko I, the first ruler of the Poles and the creator of the Polish state, accepted baptism, yet it took another three centuries before Catholicism became the major religion in Poland. West Germanic tribes did not accept Christianity until the twelfth century; the Christianisation of Scandinavia progressed even more slowly – it began in the eighth century but did not end until the twelfth century, while the old Norse religion persisted alongside it. After that, the Catholic kings of Denmark and Sweden launched the Northern or Baltic Crusades to Christianise the Baltic peoples; an undertaking that did not see complete success before the early fifteenth century (see Fletcher 1997).

The idea of Europe as a purely Christian civilisation is fiction; no civilisation exists on its own, separated from others. Civilisations are always in contact, in communication, sometimes also in conflict; but mostly they mutually benefit from each other – ensuring their proper vitality and long-term survival (Debeljak 2009b).

It therefore comes as no great surprise that the considerable controversies regarding the inscription of Christian heritage in the preamble of the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe a decade and a half ago did not end favourably for Pope John Paul II, despite his *Ecclesia in Europa* in 2003, which contended that it was key in ‘shap[ing] the culture of the Continent’. Nor did lawmakers follow the wishes of European Jews and Muslims to mention God (see Milton 2016). The former would exclude the other two Abrahamic religions from the symbolic foundations of Europe, whereas the second would (at least implicitly) deny the achievements of European Enlightenment. The final version of the preamble to the Treaty therefore features a compromise: the text only generally mentions ‘the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe’ and, within it, ‘the central role of the human person and his or her inviolable and inalienable rights.’⁸

Modern European culture is therefore undisputedly defined by Christianity but also by the precursory Greco-Roman antiquity and by the subsequent Renaissance, Humanism and Enlightenment. Owing to the unique mixture of these sources, the core of today’s European and Western values mainly lies in pluralism, which is guaranteed by the equality of various religious and non-religious world views. European secularity, drawing also from Christian tradition, is the necessary precondition for the modern concept of religious freedom that not only includes the dominant European and world religion (in its various forms) but also the non-Christian, alternative and ‘non-native’ religions. Yet it would be difficult to include Islam amongst these latter religions since it has been an important contribution to the shaping of European culture for centuries.

Muslim Contributions to European Culture

Beyond the obvious fact that, ever since medieval times, Islam has been occupying the place of the radical Other, only alongside of which can we really define ourselves as Westerns, a slightly deeper look reveals that Islam is actually not as radically different from the Judeo-Christian tradition with which we tend to connect our identity. Quite the opposite: it is inseparably tied to this tradition because it stems from it. From a chronological perspective, Islam is namely the third of the Abrahamic monotheistic religions that – despite numerous evidently different theological interpretations – share the same God and have common prophets.⁹ While Judaism, Christianity and Islam share spiritual roots, the centuries-long disputes among them build not so much on

8. The Treaty was then not ratified as a result of two “no” votes in referendums in France and the Netherlands in May 2005; yet a general mention of religion found its place in unchanged form in the preamble of the Treaty of Lisbon, adopted in December 2007.

9. Ibrahim, Musa and Isa are Arab names for Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

their differences as on their similarities, which provide the grounds for sharp disagreements.

For example, when Christian monks of the famous Cluny monastery translated the Quran to Latin in the twelfth century, they had no difficulties in finding equivalents for numerous key concepts in Arabic – unlike the translators into Turkish, Farsi and Urdu. This is indicative of the various spiritual and cultural convergences, especially between Universalist Christianity and Islam.¹⁰

Christians and Muslims know very well what they mean by obstinately calling each other ‘non-believer’, i.e. someone who should learn the ultimate truth but either consciously refuses to do so or lives in blind ignorance. Try uttering the insult of ‘non-believer’ to someone from the Buddhist, Confucianist or Hindu world and see how surprised they look. They simply have no spiritual or conceptual tools to understand one truth, one criterion, one dogma. In other words: it is because Islam and Christianity share their spiritual foundations that they can begin competing for the supremacy in controlling the souls, the territory, and wealth. (Debeljak 2009a, 58, translated by the author)

The origins of the old antagonisms between European and Islamic cultures are therefore not to be sought so much in their supposedly irreconcilable differences as in their similarities: in the West, we do not fear Muslims because of their radically alien culture but because they bear a striking resemblance to us. This similarity, however, is not merely the result of the common sources of the main religious traditions but also the outcome of numerous direct Muslim contributions to European culture.

In 711, Berber Muslims (truth be told, violently) overpowered the recently Christianised Visigoths from the Iberian Peninsula, which resulted in the flourishing of the *Al-Andalus* civilisation. The conglomerate of Muslim kingdoms with its strong military protection and extremely effective administration enabled a cultural and scientific diversity that was unmatched in the territories later referred to collectively as Europe. Andalusia was one of the centres in which the ‘Islamic Golden Age’ began blossoming in late eighth century, when the Abbasid Caliph *Harun Al-Rashid* established the *House of Wisdom* in Baghdad, where books from all around the world were collected, studied, translated, and taught. Following Persian and ancient Indian sources, the Abbasid scholars were particularly interested in ancient Greek thought. The Christian world, which – motivated almost exclusively by the knowledge of God and life after death – leaned heavily on Plato during the first centuries CE and only discovered Aristotle, who was more empiricist and forgotten in the Middle Ages, in the thirteenth century via Arabic translations that came with elaborate commentaries.

However, this rich rationalist tradition in Islamic thought that was once eloquently illustrated by the famous phrase, *Ex oriente lux* (out of the East, light) remains almost completely overlooked in today’s Western Manichean perception; outside intellectual subcultures there is seldom anyone who has heard of its great

10. As opposed to the ethnically exclusivist Judaism.

names.¹¹ Between the eighth and thirteenth centuries (by some interpretations, even up to the fifteenth century), the Islamic ‘Golden Age’ established significant foundations for European Renaissance and modern scientific revolution (see Lombard 2009 and Lyons 2010). ‘Neither happened in the Muslim world. But without the Muslim world, it is possible that neither may have happened in Europe, at least in the fashion that they did’ (Malik 2014). But instead of acknowledging and consciously drawing from this incredible heritage of Islamic civilisation blooming on the Iberian Peninsula for almost eight centuries (711–1492), we also systematically forget about the continuous history of Muslims in Bosnia that lasted for more than six centuries, and about Lithuania, where in 1397 – at a time when Lithuanians were only being Christianised – the Grand Duke Vytautas (or Witold) explicitly granted special rights to Muslims, enabling their existence up to today.

European Muslims are quite obviously not only the modern-day refugees coming from the destroyed Middle East, nor are they only the second or third generation of immigrants from former European colonies: for centuries, Europe has been feeling their continuous, creative and fruitful presence. Nevertheless, we still perceive them as radical and threatening aliens.

Taking into consideration all these historical facts, it should not be too difficult to understand Mustafa Cerić (2008), the former Grand Mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who is relentless in claiming that Islam in Europe is not an immigrant religion, supporting his statements with the example of native Bosnian Islam (see also Velikonja 2003 and Zalta 2018). Also legitimate in this light is the proposal encouraging the replacement of the aforementioned general formulations of fundamental European documents with an explicit one: ‘Inspired by the heritage constituted by the Greek and Roman civilizations, by the Jewish and Christian religious traditions, in fertile dialogue with the Muslim tradition, by the philosophical currents of the age of the Enlightenment.’ (Ferrari 2003). In practice, however, this seems not to be possible – to a significant extent due to the antagonisms between modern Christianity on the one hand and (a) Islam, and (b) secularism on the other.

11. *Ali al-Hasan Ibn al-Haitham* (965, Basra–1040, Kairo), in the Latin world known as *Alhazen*, was the father of optics; centuries before the Western Renaissance, he established the scientific method by proposing hypotheses and systematically testing them through experiments and mathematical models. The Persian *Ibn Sina* (980–1037) or *Avicenna*, who spent the larger part of his life working in Isfahan, was the founder of modern medical science – together with Hippocrates and Galen who were his explicit inspiration. His comprehensive encyclopaedia of the medical knowledge of the medieval world (not only Arab but also Greek, Roman, Persian and Indian) entitled *Canon Medicinae* was used as a textbook for centuries after his death, also in the West. The most well-known such figure is probably *Ibn Rushd* (1126, Cordoba–1198, Marrakesh) or *Averroes*, the greatest Muslim commentator of Aristotle, who had an amazing impact on Christian philosophers, including Thomas Aquinas (as we know, scholasticism is greatly influenced by Aristotle’s logic). *Ibn Khaldun* (1332–1406) is hardly less important, although virtually unknown in the West: he was the Andalusian historian, proto-sociologist and proto-demographer who developed the basic concept of social cohesion, while writing extensively and in-depth on social conflicts, the cyclical development of civilisations, political economy, theory of money, and – five centuries before Darwin – even on evolution.

Conclusion: Secularity as the Lever of Modern Western Supremacy and the Guarantee for Contemporary Religious Freedom

So far, we have analysed the processes of othering Islam and Muslims that conceal the similarities with Western culture and create the phantasm of radical otherness. We have also pointed out how important Islam has been in influencing the development of modern Western culture, which is undoubtedly – but not exclusively – Christian. Taking this a step further, we must explicitly emphasise the plurality not only of European cultures but also of the Islamic ones, which makes the simplified opposition of Islam and the West extremely problematic even on an analytical level. Much like any other, Islamic history is full of variety and complexity – the Muslim world has always been heterogeneous and remains so to this day despite its recent homogenisation due to the problematic political, economic, and especially military interventions of the West. An entire diapason of diverse understandings of God, human being, society, culture and politics can be found in Muslim countries in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, as well as among European Muslims. In the last decades, we have seen a clear development of ‘various European Islams, individual and communal, emerg[ing] as Muslims of different ethnicities and classes in fact integrate into European nations at different speeds’(Moe 2017).

This is why the modern encounters of ‘Islams’ and ‘Wests’ are so much more complex than the reduced Manichean perception of clashes between the backward, barbaric, radically patriarchal and inherently violent religious tradition on the one hand, and the enlightened, plural, freedom-loving, and democratic culture on the other. The fact that reality is incomparably more intricate than this flat, oftentimes demagogic image is perhaps most vividly demonstrated by the relatively recent example of Sadiq Khan, who proposed a distinctly left-wing programme and expressed explicitly liberal views on gay rights, and was elected Mayor of London in the May 2016 election, securing a majority even with the ‘by nature’ manifestly conservative Muslims (Shterin 2017). Yet at the same time, we can see a frightening resemblance between so many Western traditionalists with their unmovably conservative world views and the Islamists.

The second important issue deals with European secularity, which is supposedly hostile towards religion and seemingly a threat to European Christian identity due to its lack of values and its relativism. The explicit rejection of connecting the political system to religion entails the Enlightenment break, after which religion can still present an inspiration for political choices (as expressed, for example, in the long tradition of European Christian democrats) but cannot be their sole foundation. Defending the prohibition of abortion or same-sex marriage with the argument of breaking God’s laws is not enough, for instance; modern political legitimacy requires more universal rational arguments. It is not difficult to grasp that the enlightened separation of value spheres is not always welcomed by the Christian churches; however, a deep antagonism between Christianity and secularism is unnecessary – even more, it is outright misguided. Europe, and with it the entire West, are namely ‘secular exactly because they are Christian’ (Ferrari 2003), since political secularism is based on the idea of

natural law, which – even though it stems from the Greco-Roman culture – is inherent to Christianity (Thomistic theology developed the idea of a common human nature requiring equal human rights; if Enlightenment later denies that the source of it is in transcendental God, the basic idea remains the same). What is more, it becomes the grounds for another specifically European/Western concept, mostly foreign to other civilisations: universal human rights.

The conceptual foundation of the separation between politics and religion is therefore of Greco-Roman-Christian origin (although, in practice, the separation happened against the will and against the active opposition of the Church). It is also worth mentioning that this Enlightenment principle is not hostile towards religion. Quite the opposite: it is the principle of separating state and religion that enables the modern concept of religious freedom – which must, of course, not merely be the freedom for the largest religion or the one that is ‘native’ to a territory, but a freedom for all world views, however minoritarian and unusual, even perceived as strange by the majority, whether it be religious or non-religious. At the same time, we must repeat that the secularity that developed during the Enlightenment from the emancipation of social and cultural activities that break free from the religious dogma is the main reason for the modern domination of the West and the creation of the contemporary global ‘Westernistic’ civilisation.¹²

As we have shown, modern Europe is a unique ‘melting pot’ of the long rational and secular tradition, Christianity, as well as Islamic influences. Its complex culture is definitely worth defending – also against Islamists who undoubtedly represent a threat by attacking Western multiculturalism with its supposed sinfulness directly, with all the means at their disposal, and in the name of the one true way of life. Yet we must not forget that the fundamentalist defenders of a pure Christian Europe do exactly the same thing by demagogically fuelling the fears of the supposed Islamic threat, which endangers the fundamental European values much more than do the Muslim refugees:

... because that alarmism [about the decline of Christianity] is itself undermining the very values – tolerance, equal treatment, universal rights – for the defence of which we supposedly need a Christian Europe. The erosion of Christianity will not necessarily lead to the erosion of such values. The crass defence of ‘Christian Europe’ against the supposed barbarian hordes may well do. (Malik 2014)

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12. ‘In much the same way as classical Greece cannot be equated with Hellenic civilization, the modern West is not the same as westernistic civilization. ... The Hellenistic civilization of Alexander the Great emanated from classical Greek heritage, but territorially it stretched across the entire world then known to man, reaching to Egypt and India, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. In the same way, the westernistic civilization that has arisen from modern western heritage comprises the entire known world today’ (Debeljak 2009b).

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