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Haaretz

History Europe and the 'Barbarians'

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Sep 18, 2007

Creating East and West - Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks, by Nancy Bisaha, University of Pennsylvania Press, 309 pages, $60 (cloth), $22.50 (paper)

n 1461, Pope Pius II (who was the humanist Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini before being elected to his holy office) wrote a letter to the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II, the conqueror of Constantinople (who reigned 1451-1481). It is doubtful whether the appeal to the sultan to convert and embrace the "true faith" was genuine, and the address to him was probably not the main objective of the letter. Rather, the pope's intention was primarily meant to encourage the West to unite against a common enemy, the new foe of Christianity.




Although Pius knew how internally divided and conflicted the Christian world was, he chose apparently for the first time to use the adjective "European" as a collective definition for the peoples of the Christian West. The enemy at the gates is what prompted him and other humanists to formulate a new opposition: "Turks" versus "Europeans." This replaced the old opposition of Christianity versus Islam.

In "Creating East and West: Renaissance Humanists and the Ottoman Turks," Nancy Bisaha, an associate professor of history at Vassar College, explores the distance the term "Europe" has traveled in the last six hundred years. In Greek-Hellenist geographical writing, Europe primarily denoted Greece, whereas in the Middle Ages, the Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire became, from a Western perspective, the "Eastern empire" (imperium orientale). The Catholic, Latin-speaking West (imperium occidentale) became Europe, and Charlemagne was crowned "the father of Europe."

But the Pope did not stop at noting the supremacy of the Christian church. As a humanist, he also presented the West as superior and preferable to the East in scholarship, research and culture. In other words, the humanists of the 14th and 15th centuries added secular, ethnographic and cultural elements to the medieval contrast between the West and the Muslim East, thus launching a new internal secular discourse about "the world out there."

Who were the Turkish Ottomans to the Renaissance humanists? How able were these scholars to shake off prejudice, whether against Islam or the new Muslim entity that threatened the eastern Mediterranean basin and ruled over Greece and the Christian peoples of the Balkans? It is interesting to read Bisaha's book at the present moment, as Turkey, a republic governed by an Islamic party, seeks admittance into the European Union and encounters objections at every turn.

"Creating East and West" examines some of the responses in the West to the emergence of the new Muslim empire in the East and at Europe's gates, in order to determine what kind of legacy the Renaissance bequeathed to modern-day Europe.

Did Europe consider the Ottomans a new incarnation of the Muslim East, a barbaric Asian empire, or perhaps a descendant of Troy and the Byzantine Empire? Did the humanist scholars have the perspicacity to note the uniqueness of the Ottoman Empire, rather than see it only through the prism of classical literature and medieval anti-Muslim literature, or as part of an apocalyptic scheme?

The answer is that these traditions shaped the perspective within which the Ottomans were perceived as a total enemy of the West, and even the accumulation of knowledge about the Ottoman Empire did not change this opinion very much (although it did add some new elements to it).

The Turks' negative image emerged after horror stories circulated about Turkish cruelty in the wake of the conquest of Constantinople, in 1453, the conquest of Athens, in 1460, and the Turkish invasion of southern Italy, in 1480. Another factor was sorrow at the loss of numerous books in the course of these same invasions (the precise number is uncertain; some cited the exaggerated figure of 120,000 volumes), a loss that the humanist pope described as a "second death for Homer and a second destruction of Plato."

There was profound anxiety about the threat the Turks posed to the Christian world, a threat coming not from Spain, but from the East. The struggle with the Ottomans did not resemble the Crusade-era war for control of the Holy Land, but proceeded from the fact that the West was weak and splintered. No wonder the Turks were portrayed as the "new barbarians" threatening to sweep across Europe and destroy its civilization; this was an enemy that in the battle of Nicopolis in Hungary (1396?) had overcome a united European army and revealed itself to be an effective and victorious military machine.

At the same time, however, the secular outlook of the humanists contributed to the emergence of a relativist attitude, which supposedly did not judge other cultures by its own standards. Thus, for example, some called the Turks "noble savages," praised their simple lifestyle and the discipline of their army, and described with admiration the efficiency and organization of their government.

The humanist scholars were interested in the origin of the Turks, ascribing to them an illustrious past: Some claimed they descended from the Trojans, while others traced their lineage back to the Scythians. Thus, for example, in a letter to the sultan, the pope wrote that he believed the Turks to be descended from the Scythians; therefore, he claimed, they could not be compared to the Arabs, and it was a cause for wonder that the latter had ever become their allies. In general, however, the attitude toward Turkey and the Turks was negative. They were described as satanic, an ultimate other that played a central role both in the emergence of the European worldview and in

More 'European' than Europe?

During the last generation, some have claimed that Europe is gradually losing its "Westernness" and entering a post-Western era; one can only assume that this fear has, among other things, nourished the objection to Turkey's entrance into the European Union. At the same time, the tension between Turkey's secular and religious facets is a central facet of the republic's internal history, which became closely joined to the desire of both its secular and religious sectors to become part of Europe. Finally, was Turkey under the Sultans indeed, as is claimed by some, much more European than is commonly believed? (This claim considers the attribution of European traits to be a positive phenomenon.)

Sultan Mehmed II was not a "barbarian" but an educated ruler, versed in Greek and Latin literature, a patron of scientific and religious education as well as of new construction. His admiration for European portraiture led him to invite the Venetian painter Gentile Bellini to his palace. But Mehmed was far from being a Renaissance ruler, and he kept no poets, historians or scientists in his court.

The borrowing of Western technology was intended to give his empire efficient tools for confronting the West on the battlefield and for organizing the great empire itself. But the more limited cultural borrowings did not express a desire for "Europeanization" (the first Turkish translations of classical literature, it should be noted, did not appear until the 1880s). Pierre Loti's novel "Les Desenchantees" ?(1906?) describes the tragic consequences that reading European, and especially French, literature has on a number of young women from a harem, who believe that their Parisian garb has elevated them to a higher level of civilization.

Returning to Bisaha's book, "Europe" found itself to be at once a threatened entity and a conqueror as it faced the need to define a long series of "others" - from a Eurocentric perspective, of course - and this challenge has made its history distinctive. The fact that the humanists had their prejudices should not come as any surprise since, in s[illegible]uent generations, liberals and

other human collectives. The book makes a fascinating contribution to our understanding of the ways in which "Europe" tried to comprehend and imagine, first Islam, and then the Ottomans.

The prejudices of the humanists should not come as a surprise. The intellectual legacy that Renaissance humanism bequeathed to the West also included a cultural relativism, free of perceptions governed by a religious worldview. However, the contemporary fear of "the barbarians within," that is, of the Muslims in Europe - a fear that has bred quite a few prophecies about "the last days of Europe" (the title of a recent book by Walter Laqueur) - is entirely anchored in fear of the religious aspect and is not part of a secular discourse regarding the alleged essence of "Turkishness" or "Arabness."

Claims that Europe is gradually losing its "Westernness" and entering a "post-Western" era nourish the fear that matters are indeed headed in that direction, and the fact that both secular and religious Turks wish to be part of Europe does not allay this anxiety.

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