

# **Memory and Erasure in the Story of the West: Or, Where have All the Muslims Gone?**

**Glen M. Cooper, Ph.D.**

[glenmcooper@gmail.com](mailto:glenmcooper@gmail.com)

**(Formerly, Visiting Assistant Professor of History  
and Late Antique / Medieval Studies at Claremont McKenna College)**

**David M. Kennedy Center International Lecture Series**

**[This is the latest text version. Recorded November 13, 2018. YouTube:**

**<https://youtu.be/gCCFSAIStLc> ]**

## **Introduction**

I'd like to share with you some insights about Western cultural and intellectual history that are drawn from a current book project about memory and forgetting in the construction of the Western identity, that brings together several strands of my research in Islamic, Byzantine, and Medieval European history. As I hope you'll see, although on the surface these remarks concern the distant past, there is an urgent need to discuss them in the present. [I'd like to thank the Kennedy Center for featuring me in this lecture series.]

I'm going to talk about identity, history, and memory. Identity—whether white, black, Asian, European, Muslim, Jewish, or Mormon—not only colors our perceptions and determines what we notice—i.e. what stands out for us—from the mass of stimuli in the world, but it also shapes what we remember of the past, and how we remember the past, from both our own experiences and the experiences of others, which we call history. One of the goals of education, we hope, is that you will learn how to step out of the narrow concerns of your own identity, and learn how to practice empathy—to try to see things from others' points of view. To see others as more than just non-belongers to your group, who do not share your identity. The Western identity is my main concern, that group to which most if not all of us here present claim membership.

The story the West tells itself about its origins is fundamentally flawed, I claim. How often have we been told how the glorious, classical West fell into the Dark Ages, when the medieval Church controlled the hearts and minds of the people, until the heroic Humanists of the Renaissance recovered our Greco-Roman heritage, liberating us from superstition so that progress could continue, making the modern enlightened world possible? Or, how the Founding

Fathers based our American government on Greek and Roman institutions and classical history? Our civic buildings recall that story: classical columns and arches evoke republican Rome (although sometimes it feels more like the Roman Empire). These are powerful stories: Aren't they obviously true?

They aren't completely wrong, but they omit a great deal in their eagerness to claim the classical heritage as the exclusive heritage of the West. In the latter case, what about the Germanic traditions of democratic councils? The parliamentary system? Trial by jury? These and other elements of our political system had no precedents in the classical world. In the former case, what about the vast influx of ideas and technology from the Islamic world, that began in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, and continued through the Middle Ages? The legacy of the Islamic World to the West is the main topic of my presentation today, which is still largely unknown or misunderstood. There are ghostly reminders of this mostly forgotten legacy in everyday things: from the Arabic numerals (which are actually from India: let's talk about forgotten legacies!) to the algorithms that have made the computerized world possible (from the Latin form of the name of the 9<sup>th</sup> C. Muslim mathematician, al-Khwarizmi, who introduced both the numerals and the powerful tool called *algebra*—there's another ghostly word—as well as the systematic procedures, or *algorithms*, required to solve equations. I hope I didn't alienate any of you, whose memories of algebra may be unpleasant). There are a host of other Arabic words in chemistry, astronomy, and other disciplines. **{Show PPT slide of words}**

The problem becomes clear when we consider that 500 years ago the names of Avicenna, Averroes, Rhazes, Algorismi, Albumasar, Alhazen and many others were known to every educated person in the West. And they were discussed along with Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy, Galen and the rest of the Greco-Romans. Why is it that today one needs to take specialized college courses or do graduate work to know who these people were and what they contributed to global, let alone to Western civilization? We are content with the simple, mythologized account of Western civilization as being a continuous entity extending directly from Athens and Rome to the present. How did this erasure and distortion happen, and why is it significant for us today?

In answering this question, I adopt a two-fold approach. First, I shall briefly recount some of the ideas and inventions that Western civilization derived from the Islamic world, so that you can appreciate the magnitude of this debt. Then, I shall explain how this has been forgotten. The key to this problem is Western identity and how it developed historically. I shall consider Western encounters with three civilizations, and show how each encounter shaped Western self-conception. They are: Judaism, the Byzantine Empire, and the Islamic World. The first two will be briefly covered, to show how identity shaped memory, as preparation to consider the main problem of where have all the Muslims gone from Western intellectual history. In brief, Islamic

civilization was written out of the story during the Renaissance, because a Greco-Roman heritage was a more appealing story than one that acknowledged any debts to Islam, which at the time was a religious, political, and ideological rival to the West. And that may be why this debt is hard for many to accept today, because Islam is once again held to be diametrically opposed to all of our enlightened Western values: reason, liberalism, freedom, etc.

I shall then conclude by considering the ethical implications of Western identity and the cost of holding on to a distorted history. Noting how identity is a moral and ethical issue that concerns how we treat others, I shall call for an honest re-assessment of the non-Western origins of our modern Western civilization, and show how a genuine acceptance and gratitude for the diverse roots of modern society might contribute to a more peaceful and cooperative world. Wildly romantic, you say? Just wait.

### **Contributions from Islam**

#### **Conditions favoring Science In Islam**

To begin with, I know of no other civilization that acquired the sciences as quickly and produced such brilliant work of its own in so short a time—within a mere few centuries of its founding. The fact that Islam was a religious society makes this all the more surprising (at least to moderns).

Some of the factors that made this possible were: The zeal and vigor of a new and comprehensive religious vision; A rational faith, with intellectual curiosity and systematic investigation of nature enshrined as a core ethic; A sense of competition with earlier civilizations, especially with its chief rival, Christian Byzantium; A vast surplus of wealth, to be spent on translations, research and development, and technology for prestige. Furthermore, there was the **religious need** for specific sciences: cartography for determining the direction of prayer (mosque orientation), which also drove the invention of spherical trigonometry; **{show picture of prayer}** and the determining of prayer times, encouraged astronomical investigation. Additionally, there were many practical needs of a rapidly growing empire: mathematics for accounting, geometry for surveying; engineering for building bridges and roads; hydrology for irrigation projects, etc.

All of these factors converged in the Caliphate at Baghdad, beginning in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, and lasting several centuries. Wealthy bureaucrats sponsored the translations of Greek works, which gave them an edge at court and helped them with their own research. After some time required to assimilate Greek thought, original works in Arabic began to flow. All of these Arabic works used the tools of the Greek legacy, to master, critique, and extend that very legacy.

Islamic civilization also produced the first true scientific community. **{\*\*Show map of Islamic conquests\*\*}** The Islamic world extended from Spain to India, with Arabic as the language of scholarship, which enabled thinkers to share their ideas over a vast space. Not since the Hellenistic world after the death of Alexander the Great, when Greek was the language of culture in this region, had such a condition existed, which united the Mediterranean with the Central Asian and Indian worlds. Islam actually created a much more stable and longer lasting empire than had the heirs of Alexander. This stability over generations enabled thinkers to build upon their predecessors' achievements, one of the essential features of a scientific culture. Additionally, Islamic law encouraged the wealthy to make bequests in the form of pious endowments, which supported mosques, hospitals, libraries, or observatories.

### **Medicine**

**{show PIC of Islamic hospital}** Medicine especially flourished. Improving upon the Christian institution of the hospital, which had been more like a hospice than a modern hospital, Muslim rulers created an institution of healing that more resembled its modern descendant. There, medical research and education took place in addition to healing, and medicine advanced beyond Hippocrates and Galen. Avicenna, a 10<sup>th</sup> C. polymath, and one of the brightest thinkers of all time, published a systematic approach to medical theory and practice, the *Canon of Medicine*. This work was so useful that it became the main medical textbook in Western universities for about six centuries—a publishing success story if there ever was one. Another thinker, the 13<sup>th</sup> C. Ibn al-Nafis, discovered the pulmonary circulation centuries before William Harvey described the general circulation of the blood.

### **Education {pic of al-Azhar}**

Colleges (madrasas) also took shape across the Caliphate, which supported faculty and students, and promoted standard curricula. These institutions resembled the somewhat later colleges of medieval Europe, to such a degree that I suspect there was some connection.

### **Observatories**

Lastly, astronomical observatories were established, whose primary purpose was to determine the behavior of the planets through observation, in order to improve the mathematical models used to calculate planetary positions. This knowledge was needed for both astrology and medicine. The models required numerical parameters derived from observation. Once all of these parameters had been determined for each planet, the observatory became obsolete. A larger facility with the capacity to make more precise observations, and improved mathematical models

were the only way to improve practical astronomy.

The most important of these observatories was established in 1259 at Maragha in NW Iran, **{\*\*SHOW PIC of Maragha and Samarkand\*\*}** under the sponsorship of a grandson of the fearsome conqueror Genghiz Khan. There, a team of scientists and mathematicians, some even from China, labored to improve both observations and models. Islamic astronomers had realized that Ptolemy's models, though accurate for predicting, were physically impossible. A model should accurately describe and conform to reality in every way. **{\*\*Show pics of epicycles\*\*}**

### **Technology and Other Tools**

The technologies and other tools developed in Islam and appropriated by the West are too many to enumerate. But they include: water wheels for mechanized labor; astronomical observatories; navigational technology; improved aqueducts and underground irrigation channels; a monetary economy—coins, rather than barter and exchange; advanced clocks and timekeeping; mechanical devices; the decimal number system, including decimal fractions; algebra, mathematics, and trigonometry. The decimal system is much more convenient than Roman numerals or other alphabet based number systems, such as the Greeks used.

But perhaps the most important contribution to the West from Islam was not one thing or a single idea. Rather, Muslim and Jewish thinkers had already sifted through the relics of Greek learning and created a new kind of science that was compatible with the monotheistic worldview of the Abrahamic faiths. All that groundwork had been already accomplished (I.e. The conflicts and obstacles had been removed, or reconciled) before medieval Christians began to study the Greco-Arabic tradition. Muslims had assembled fragments of Greek thought into a powerful tool for investigating nature—improving on Aristotle, Ptolemy, and Galen.

### **Identity**

I hope I've given you a sense of the volume of intellectual activity going on in the Islamic world, when Europe was struggling to define itself. And so, it's that self-definition, or identity, that I'd like to address next.

Humans define themselves as members of groups by adopting a group's identity, and being accepted by the group—both are necessary. One of the basic binary distinctions humans make is “Us vs. Them”, or “My Group vs. The Others”, and this goes back to the earliest of human times. Now we have “The West and the Rest”. All people have multiple overlapping identities and groups to which they correspond. Group identity is often determined by blood

relations, but what made civilizations possible was the capacity of humans to adopt identities that were much more inclusive, based on imagined rather than biological connections. The great empires or the modern nation states would not have been possible without most of their citizens feeling that they belonged to some pan tribal identity, such as the Roman Empire, or the Islamic Caliphate, or Christendom, or the American republic—or, for the present company, the Church of Jesus Christ of LDS, which has brought people from every ethnic origin together into a “family” of God’s children.

One of the most important features of identity is the use of stories to explain who the group is and where they came from. These are usually mythologized—not false, but simplified, for easy teaching, memorizing, or even re-enacting. They are based in truth, just a highly selective truth. For example, the simplified version of the American Revolution, with the virtuous, freedom-loving Yankees pitted against the evil, decadent, and oppressive British Empire. Or, the tale of the Pilgrim Fathers founding the first American colony at Plymouth [rather than Jamestown, which was founded several years earlier, or the Spanish and Portuguese who had been here much longer: but the latter were Catholic, and so they didn’t count in our *Protestant* story], or the myth of the Greco-Roman origins of Western Civilization, which concerns us here.

Such stories help to define one’s identity. What does it mean to belong to Group X, and to be a part of its history? And how does Group X see others, the non-X-ers? If the group feels threatened, the others are characterized or even demonized as evil and dangerous. Some examples are: The Roman “barbarians at the gate”, Aryan Germans vs. Jewish pestilence in need of eradication in early 20<sup>th</sup> C. Nazism, and the West vs. Islam in our day.

So, the Muslims were erased and forgotten from the story of the West, because an origin story that described Greece and Rome as the cultural ancestors of Western Europe was more politically correct at that time.

### **Western Identity**

Identity is tied to specific times, peoples, and places, and must be examined historically within those contexts. To claim that our Western identity has been a continuity that originated in the ancient Greek world and has persisted since then, is flawed. Some authors see the supposedly fundamental East/West division that exists today as having originated during the Greco-Persian Wars, as described by Herodotus. The freedom-loving, virtuous Greeks were victorious against an evil, grasping, corrupt, and despotic Persian Empire. Rather, Western identity is useful to us today for reasons that are very much a product of our own time. Yes, we may trace the origins of this identity, and claim Greece and Rome as contributors to it, but if we do that then we must

also acknowledge Islam and all the other sources of our culture, or at least admit to why we would choose to exclude them from our story—which would be itself part of that story: “We don’t want Muslims in our intellectual genealogy, because they’re not how we see ourselves”. Or, “their civilization is religiously fundamentalist, anti-reason, the breeding grounds for terrorism, etc., so they have nothing to do with us.” Perhaps you can see the anachronism here: using our present dislike of Muslims or Islam and projecting backwards, as if Islam were some static unchanging essence. In reality, medieval Islam was perhaps the most rational and literate society on earth during its heyday. The great English historian of the fall of Rome, Edward Gibbon, even though as a typical Enlightenment thinker he disliked religion as superstitious and dangerous—he blamed the fall of the Roman Empire on Christianity, after all—still, he respected Islam for its rationality. Please note that Gibbon dated the fall of the Roman Empire to 1453, when Constantinople fell, and not 476, when Rome fell.

### **Excluding the Jews**

One major distinction between groups that served to define the evolving Western identity was to exclude the Jews. A major change occurred to the classical form of the Western identity when the Empire became Christian in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, with the conversion of Constantine. Now, to be a Roman was to be a Christian. To be a Christian meant to be a non-Jew, in the sense that Jews had failed to accept Jesus as Messiah, but remained stubborn in their ways.

However, many Christians did not accept the official policy of separation from Jews, with whom they lived and did business. There are medieval reports of Christians hiring Jews to bless their crops, or of Christians attending Jewish services and festivals, because of their beauty, and of intermarriage. And, there was the ever present danger of Christians being seduced by Jews, and converting to Judaism, leaving the “truth” behind. Back then, apostasy was considered treason against the state, punishable by death, because one’s religious and political identities were so closely linked. Justinian’s 5th Century Code of Law prescribed death to Judaizing Christians, for example. Today we think that capital punishment in Islam for apostasy is barbaric, but we ought to know that Christendom followed a similar practice for much of our history.

For the Church, the Jews should be converted like everyone else, but if they refuse, they must be forced to remain in a state of squalor, as a reminder of the consequences of rejecting Jesus. And, they must be separated from Christians, in order to prevent mixing of peoples, and thus confusing identities. This led to the ghettos. One of the main reasons for the tragic expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, as stated in the Alhambra Decree, was the fear that Jews were seducing good Christians away from the truth to indulge in Jewish practices.

So, Jews were a part of the West's narrative, and necessary for the West's self-definition, in a negative way: they are what we are not, what we have rejected or superseded.

### **Excluding the Byzantines**

Now let's consider another parting of the ways in the course of the developing Western identity: the Byzantines. These people were the continuation of the Roman Empire in the East, in unbroken succession from Augustus down to 1204, when the empire was conquered by Venetians and crusaders, with a coda from 1261 to 1461. Why then do we not refer to them as "Romans" as they did themselves? No Byzantine would have recognized the term "Byzantine" applied to them. It would seem that, if the West is so keen to claim Rome as its ancestor, then the Eastern Roman Empire should be held in high regard, and yet, we don't even use its proper name. The problem is that the Byzantines were rejected because their form of Christianity was considered to be heretical, their people too "Eastern", and they didn't follow the Pope in Rome. The term "Byzantine", which is also a negative term for a complex and devious bureaucracy, was promoted by French scholars three centuries ago, who thought that the subjects of their study were too foreign, having deviated from classical Rome. However, the Byzantines were just what the West had been: a Christianized heir of the classical Roman Empire. But, in terms of Western identity, they were what we are not.

In the Middle Ages, the rift between West and East grew greater, with the Crusades spelling the end of Byzantium. The Byzantines were too sophisticated to be trusted by barely literate, provincial Westerners. They were demonized and abandoned to the Turks by the West. Yet, Renaissance Humanists profited from their Greek manuscripts, and the fact that there had always been a living tradition of Greek scholarship in the Byzantine world. The West needed the Byzantines to teach them Greek, and so Western attitudes toward the Byzantines were a paradoxical mixture of hatred and envy.

This rift between East and West has had important implications for our day. The Russian Empire was the self-proclaimed heir of Orthodox Byzantium—Moscow as the Third Rome. Much of the mutual antagonism and distrust that began in the Middle Ages still persists, and was manifested in the Cold War, and in the present. This in spite of Pope St. John Paul II's good-hearted efforts to apologize for the destruction of Constantinople and the Eastern Empire at the hands of the Christian Crusaders in 1204.

### **Enter the Muslims**

The previous two cases have concerned the religious dimensions of the Western identity. The West has thought of itself as representing the only true form of Christianity, and the only



true heir of the Hebrew prophets and patriarchs, as well as the heir of Greece and Rome. Likewise, the clash with Islam and its effects on the Western identity concerned religious legitimacy. As in the Jewish case, both Christendom and Islam competed to be the legitimate heir of the Abrahamic prophetic and monotheistic tradition. However, Islam presented a far more serious threat than Judaism ever could, involving vast armies, conquest, and superior culture.

When Islam first appeared on the scene in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, Christian observers could not grasp it, and some of them considered the Prophet Muhammad to be a Christian heretic and schismatic—even Dante in the 14<sup>th</sup> C. held the latter view. When the Islamic conquests were in full sway, Christian armies facing the seemingly invincible Muslims wondered why God was favoring these infidels who had perverted the truth. Some concluded that God had sent Muslims to punish Christians for their lack of faithfulness to the Church, or, as in the case of the Byzantines, for their veneration of icons, condemned as idolatry by many.

The rapid conquest and the subjugation of millions of Christians from lands formerly under Roman Christian control created great fear. In the East, the Byzantines were largely the cultural equal of Islam. In the lands of the Catholic West, however, much of the Roman civilization had been lost: no access to Greek literature and philosophy, loss of Roman technology, and the descent into the chaos of the early middle ages, when survival against new barbarian foes, like the Vikings and the Magyars, as well as poverty resulted in a comparatively low level of civilization. To them, Islamic civilization must have seemed almost superhuman. We now understand, of course, that Islamic civilization was a cultural and technological beneficiary of the Roman Empire, and that much of its technology was inherited from Rome, and improved, i.e. that Islam was also a rival for the Classical Legacy, which included political rule. This may be seen in the Ottoman Turkish Sultan, Mehmet II's, assumption of the title "Emperor of Rome" on his capture of Constantinople.

### **Comparative backwardness**

Having earlier recounted the high level of Islamic civilization, you may now appreciate how, comparatively speaking, 10<sup>th</sup> Century Europe was vastly inferior to it on nearly all counts, but especially where science and technology were concerned. By then, the Islamic Caliphate was in decline, however. What had been a vast empire stretching from the Atlantic to India, was fragmenting. Islamic identity and institutions still prevailed in these territories, but the centrality of Baghdad was mostly ceremonial. In spite of that, however, science and technology still flourished in the regions governed by Islam and Arabic literary culture.

### **Pope Sylvester**

**{SHOW PIC of Pope Sylvester \*\*}** By the late 10<sup>th</sup> Century, fantastic reports reached Europe of libraries with books of math, astronomy, and other sciences in the lands of Islam. Arabic astrolabes began to make their appearance in the West, but no one knew how to use them. The young Frenchman Gerbert d’ Aurillac, who later became Pope Sylvester II, was sent by his ecclesiastical superior into a part of Spain that had been until recently under Muslim control, in order to get the mathematical and astronomical knowledge that could help the Church refine the calculation of Easter, since the liturgical calendar depended on that anchor date. What he found exceeded the fabulous reports. Books on every branch of the sciences, both translations of Greek authors, but also more recent original works by Arabic authors. Gerbert brought back some translations and knowledge, but more importantly he inspired a movement of European scholars to travel to Spain and searched through captured Muslim libraries (especially in Toledo) for whatever science they could find. Eventually this grew into organized translation efforts, in Toledo and later in Palermo, Sicily.

When Gerbert returned home, however, his vast knowledge was so far above his benighted contemporaries that rumors spread to the effect that he was in league with demons, since how could any mortal person have acquired such knowledge? After his death, there were reports of ghostly and demonic sounds near his tomb.

### **Efforts to get the fruits of Islam**

As more Arabic texts became known, European thinkers were increasingly aware of the intellectual poverty of their own culture, while simultaneously coveting the intellectual wealth of their Muslim rivals. The “abundance of the Arabs”<sup>1</sup> compared with the “poverty of the Latins”<sup>2</sup> is a recurrent theme in the prefaces to their translations.<sup>3</sup> Several 12<sup>th</sup> C. Latin thinkers expressed their views on this issue. Plato of Tivoli (d. 1146) stated that the Arabs have all the great authors, both Ancient Greeks, but also their own thinkers. Moreover, not only do we Christians not have a single author to match these Arabs, but instead of books, we have nonsense, foolish dreams, and old wives tales. In astronomy, Petrus Alfonsi (d. 1130), a Jewish convert, urged his fellow Christians to abandon the old Latin astronomy,<sup>4</sup> and welcome the new doctrines from the East, which were based on fresh observations. The Englishman Adelard of Bath (d.c. 1152), who traveled to the East in search of Arabic knowledge, wrote that it was the new logic and the emphasis on personal observation that made Arabic authors superior.<sup>5</sup> He compared the rational and progressive Muslim culture to his own, which he says is led by authority like dumb beasts

---

<sup>1</sup> “overflowing (intellectual wealth) of the Arabs”

<sup>2</sup> “lack” / “ignorance” / “(intellectual) poverty” of the Latins

<sup>3</sup> Gázquez, 12.

<sup>4</sup> **\*\*describe the primitive character of Macrobius. Much worse than Ptolemy, the Almagest being completely unknown in Europe.**

<sup>5</sup> G, 41-42.

wearing a halter.<sup>6</sup>

Gradually, however, Latin thinkers gained confidence, and were able to engage with and critique the Arabic authors, even as they employed their ideas in their own projects. **{\*\*PIC of Peter the Venerable}** This confidence was aided by Peter the Venerable's sponsoring translations of the *Qur'an* and other essential Muslim religious literature, for the purpose of engaging with Muslims intellectually on their own terms, in order to refute their arguments and convert them to Christianity, as well as to discourage potential renegade Christians, by showing the superiority of the Christian faith. **{\*\*PIC of Peter}**

Eventually Aristotle, and then Galen became available in Latin, and this revolutionized higher learning in Europe—although Avicenna's compendium of Greek medicine in his *Canon* was much easier to use. I hasten to point out that the reception of these authors was mediated by Islamic authors, whose commentaries were crucial for the understanding of their complex ideas. We note here the connections between the famous 12<sup>th</sup> Century Renaissance and the influx of translations from Arabic. A strong case can be made that the more famous Italian renaissance of the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries would have been very different in character, if it had ever occurred at all, without the foundation of learning built on translations from Arabic.

### Renaissance Humanism

Arabic authors were very much being read at the beginning of the Italian Renaissance. Along with these Greek authors, Arabic thinkers were also translated and some became even more popular than the Greeks. Three fields in which Arabic authors were especially popular, were astronomy/astrology, medicine, and philosophy, and these were avidly studied in the Renaissance.

**{\*\*PIC OF COPERNICUS\*\*}** Nicholas Copernicus you probably know as the thinker whose Sun-centered planetary system destroyed the ancient cosmos and inaugurated the Scientific Revolution. To some, he has been almost a secular prophet of Western rationalism against the darkness of tradition. Mainly true, but a bit more complicated. To those who claim that the move from an earth to a sun centered system simplified Greek astronomy, getting rid of the complicated epicycles and eccentrics—circles on circles, nothing could be further from the truth. Copernicus was the first to present a detailed working out of a Sun-centered system, but he used all the mathematical models of Ptolemy, and introduced a few more. These additional models were developed by Muslim astronomers working at the Maragha Observatory in NW Iran in the mid 13<sup>th</sup> Century, mentioned earlier. So, just as with the general thesis of this

---

<sup>6</sup> G, 43.

presentation that much has been left out of the story of the heritage of the West, which can be traced to Islam, so it is also with the contributions of Copernicus. And, just as this restored genealogy of ideas does not detract one bit from the achievements either of the West or of Copernicus, it does present a more honest, and ethical view of the Western intellectual heritage. Without this and the other Arabic contributions to astronomy and the practice of astrology, there might have been no Kepler nor Galileo, both of whom, as mathematicians, were obliged to cast horoscopes for their patrons. I find arrogance and a superior attitude among some of my co-Westerners/ An honest acknowledgement of debts and gratitude are excellent antidotes to such arrogance.

It was my learning of this very hole in Western intellectual history that completely changed my career focus as a student, and shaped my professional career. I knew that recovery of this obscured, forgotten, or erased history was something really important, with potentially huge implications for Western self-understanding, and for our relations with the Islamic world.

### **Renaissance Attitudes toward Arabic Authors**

The special conditions of the Renaissance, especially printing, made it possible to study the received intellectual tradition like never before. Attitudes toward Arabic authors in the Renaissance were varied.

There gradually developed two camps regarding the large body of Arabic texts. One group recognized the value of Arabic authors, and consulted them for their discoveries and insights, to advance knowledge beyond the Greeks and Romans. The Frenchman Guillaume Postel, **{\*\*show PIC}** for example, knew the value of the Arabic tradition, and traveled widely in the Islamic world in search of the latest astronomical knowledge from Arabic authors. He wrote: “What you can see lucidly and clearly explained in Avicenna on only one or two pages, Galen in his Asiatic manner hardly manages to comprise in five or six major volumes”. Another group of philosophers read Arabic works, seeking solutions to philosophical problems, such as those about the soul that were left unresolved by Aristotle, but about which the Muslim Averroes had intriguing insights, even though the Church later condemned those views.

The other group, generally identified with the Humanists, sought to get back to the pure Greek sources of the three disciplines mentioned earlier. One of them, Leonhart Fuchs (1535), expressed his opinion of “the Arabs”: “One cannot find anything in the Greeks which is not pure and learned, which is not refined and created with the highest perspicacity, but one will encounter almost nothing in the Arabs which is not rancid and foul”. **{\*\*PIC OF Leoniceno\*\*\*}** Another, Niccolo Leoniceno sought to purify the medical tradition of Arabic corruption, which meant discarding the Latin translations of the Arabic translations of the

Greek—which he dismissed as utterly corrupt, as well as the Arabic commentaries, and reading the unmediated Greek instead. [Ironically, most educated people couldn’t read Greek, so the Greek editions prepared by the Humanists had to be translated into Latin for them anyway]. All of these layers of translation would seem to have a high chance of muddying the waters. However, in the course of transmission, new insights and discoveries were made—those which the first group avidly sought after—which the Humanists wanted to discard as junk, and thus throw away nearly a millennium of potentially useful scientific insights. Additionally, the Humanists promoted the story that Western civilization has its true roots in the Classical world, and that the backwardness of the previous Middle Ages—by which they meant mainly the Scholasticism of thinkers like St. Thomas Aquinas (who asked “trivial” questions like “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”)—was caused by uncritical reliance on corrupt translations and misguided Arabic commentators.

By that point, Islam was mostly represented in the Christian experience by the Ottoman Empire, which had conquered the remnants of the Byzantine Empire with alarming rapidity, establishing its imperial capital at Constantinople after conquering it in 1453, an event within the memory of early Humanists. Once again, Islam was regarded with fear in the West, but not this time with envy of its technology and science. For one thing, the Ottomans had very little of cutting edge science and technology, unlike earlier Muslims, and they, like the Romans before them, were a practical people, outstanding in legislation and administration. The West, enjoying a booming economy, widespread education, and literacy, etc. had the self-confidence to dismiss Islam as a serious intellectual rival, while feeling the need to defend itself militarily. Identity again: We Westerners are the people of progress, Islam is backward and has produced the despotism and arbitrariness of Ottoman rule.

## **Conclusion**

I’ve made a case that our modern Western identity is flawed because of major holes in its origin story. So, what? I can almost hear some say. What does that matter, isn’t the Western story, even if mythologized, a more productive one for our world, because it promotes progress, control of the environment, capitalism and profit, etc.?

My answer is that adopting and living an identity is an ethical matter, because identities tend to divide people rather than bring them together. There is nothing inherently wrong with identity per se, which seems to be a necessary part of human existence. But we should wear our identities responsibly, because they profoundly affect the way we treat other people. In fact, I think that the only way that we can have our Western identity and still reach out to others, or be a part of a larger world community, is if we don’t take that identity too seriously. I mean, we must allow ourselves to be at least slightly vulnerable, to admit that we owe to others some of the

greatness of our cultural and intellectual traditions. Remember, identity is not something we're born with, and it has no biological basis, but is a product of time, place, society, and even political concerns.

Let me consider a case close to home for many here today. How should members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints view non-members, i.e. those without the Latter-day Saint identity? If we look at nonmembers as potential converts and see nothing else, then we miss the richness of their lives, and fail to become true friends with other people. There is something manipulative about the former view. I suppose that everyone is a potential convert in a trivial sense. But people are so much more than members of any particular religious sect.

One important step would be to educate people without omitting the Muslims from our story. We Westerners would be healthier and more robust if we accepted the full and diverse history of our origins. Many psychotherapy approaches encourage patients to discover and accept the truth about themselves, whatever they may have done or had done to them. The greatest Therapist of them all said "you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free". That is the surest step toward a free, responsible, and mature approach to living. To hide the truth or not to confront it squarely leads to unresolved issues, and unhealthy relationships.

### **Edward Said and *Orientalism***

**{\*\*PIC OF SAID\*\*}** The recognition of a problem with the Western narratives about the Islamic East is not new. A generation ago, Edward Said in his ultra-influential, *Orientalism* (1978), presented a case that the West has systematically understood the East in distorted and manipulative ways, for its own pleasure and profit, which he called "orientalism", from the time of the Greco-Persian Wars, and extending into modern colonialism and even current policies toward Islamic countries. However, it is difficult to see how Greeks fighting for their freedom against Persian invaders in the 5th Century BCE has anything to do with 20th Century European colonial rulers administering Palestine or India. The work has come under severe criticism for making sweeping generalizations, and missing important historical data that disproves his grand theory. Whatever one may think of Said the literary critic who played fast and loose with historical facts, he *did* open a serious discussion, which invites us to consider the people of the East on their own terms, and invites us to re-assess our own identity commitments, insofar as they are connected with our conception of the East.

### **1001 Inventions?**

**{\*\*PIC OF 1001 INVENTIONS\*\*}** A more recent attempt to educate the public about Muslim contributions to world science is the traveling exhibition, called *1001 Inventions*.

{\*\*Show pic} This show presents visitors with a host of inventors, scientists, inventions, and discoveries in a very user-friendly environment. Much or all of what they see there is new to most people. While this effort is laudable, some have criticized it for its superficial discussion and treatment of history and for exaggerating Muslim contributions, as well as pleading its case too loudly. (I am an advisor to this project, based in Manchester, UK). However, *1001 Inventions* has responded to constructive criticism, and remains a useful way to inform the Western public about this part of their heritage. It may be the best way to reach a public, most of whom may never read a book about Islam, let alone about the transfer of Islamic knowledge to the West in the Middle Ages.

I've introduced you to a part of our Western heritage that you may not have known much about, and I hope I've been persuasive about how urgent it is for us today to understand it honestly. What you will do with this knowledge now is up to you.

Thank you.