

THE ALWALEED CENTRE EVENT AT THE EDINBURGH INTERNATIONAL BOOK FESTIVAL 2013

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ISLAM AND THE WEST: MORE COMPLEX THAN YOU MIGHT THINK

(Monday 19 August, 2.00 pm, chaired by Ruth Wishart)

In discussing his recent book *Europe and the Islamic World: a History*, edited jointly with the late Gilles Veinstein and Henry Laurens, both based at the Collège de France, (Princeton University Press, 2013), Professor Tolan outlined four vignettes from the medieval period in Europe, each of which challenges the simplistic notion of the 'clash of civilisations' which, following the work of the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, has been so dominant in western discussion of the relations between the World of Islam and the West.

- 1) *An Italian dying in Toledo* (1187): the eleventh century in Europe saw the beginnings of a movement to translate Arabic medical texts into Latin, originally in southern Italy, where one of Europe's earliest medical schools, that of Salerno, was established. By the twelfth century, however, the main centre in which translations were being made had moved to Toledo in Spain, and it was to that city that Gerard of Cremona moved in 1145. In that cosmopolitan city, over the next forty years, Gerard made translations of some 73 works, probably in association with others, but it was his translations which were highly regarded for their quality as well as their quantity. He was particularly interested in Ptolemy's *Almagest*, a fundamental astronomical text, but having learnt Arabic he translated ten medical texts by Galen and a further ten by Arab medical authorities, thus opening up to his contemporaries both the ancient Greek foundations of the subject and its medieval Islamic elaborations. When he died in 1187, therefore, Gerard had made available to the major intellectual centres of Europe the most significant texts of Greco-Arab thought, including those of Aristotle.
- 2) *A shipwrecked pilgrim* (1184): just a few years earlier a Muslim traveller from Andalucia (southern Spain), Ibn Jubair, had passed through Norman-controlled Sicily on his way to Mecca on *hajj* (pilgrimage). He had in fact been shipwrecked off the coast in December of that year, sailing on a Genoese ship to Alexandria, and he remained there until March 1185. Having been rescued by the king, William II, Ibn Jubair painted a very vivid picture of the circumstances in which the Muslims of William's kingdom found themselves. This included attending the Christmas mass in

the Church of the Martorana in Palermo, where he was dazzled by the beauty of the light coming in through the stained-glass windows, as well as the beauty of the Christian women. He was thus encouraged by the survival, piety, and influence of the Muslims in William's kingdom, but also worried by their vulnerability, particularly when children threatened their parents with conversion to Christianity if they were harshly treated.

- 3) *Globalisation in the 13th century*: globalisation, often presented as being a modern development, was in fact very much existent in the medieval period too, with merchant ships, mercenaries and missionaries all crossing the Mediterranean, alongside their more religiously motivated Crusading contemporaries. The products which were transported included silk and glass from the Islamic World, together with spices and what must have appeared exotic fruit such as oranges and bananas, and then wheat, wood, and wool from the West into the Islamic World. Slaves and weapons were also transported in this direction, despite the condemnation of the religious authorities, and the Italian cities, particularly Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, engaged in vigorous competition for this trade. Then, as now, trade was therefore something of a mixed blessing.
- 4) *A weeping sultan* (1221): by the thirteenth century much Crusading activity had shifted from the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, leading to Jerusalem, to Egypt, with the Fifth Crusade in particular seeing a notable success in the capture of Damietta, near the mouth of the eastern branch of the Nile, in November 1219. Arguments among the Crusaders, however, as well as disease and difficulties with securing supplies and reinforcements, made their position vulnerable, and in the summer of 1221 an ill-judged advance from the city resulted in their forces being first cut off and then inundated when the Sultan, Al-Malik al-Kamil, ordered the opening of the Nile sluices. The Crusaders therefore sued for peace, and the sultan's terms were firm: the surrender of Damietta, a truce, and an exchange of prisoners. Hostages were exchanged until Damietta was handed over, with the Crusader king, John, among them, and at a lavish feast at his honour the sultan is recorded as weeping at his own victory, in solidarity with the crusading king. Al-Malik al-Kamil thus appears in later literature alongside Saladin (d. 1193), as a model of chivalry.

These four vignettes together thus illustrate very clearly the multiple dimensions of the relationship between Europe and the World of Islam in the medieval period, and rather than a 'clash of civilisations', a better phrase to describe the relationship is perhaps a 'web of cultures'.