

Transcript: Expressions, An intellectual flowering

Damascus became the focal point for the first systematic encounters between Islam and Greek thought. It was here too that Islamic scholars first began to discuss Islam in terms that could be understood by people of other religious traditions. Christians, influenced by Greek thought, entered into discussions and even contributed to the development of Islamic religious thinking. The scholars of the two faiths helped one another more closely to define and refine their respective doctrines. Islamic theology was thus born in Damascus, in the north, and Basra and Kufa in Iraq. Later Baghdad was to become important.

Intellectual and scientific advances

By the time of the rise of Islam, the Western Roman Empire had already disappeared and the Eastern Roman Empire was centred on Byzantium - modern day Istanbul. Its strongholds were the lands around the Eastern Mediterranean - modern Turkey and Greece, the coastal Arab lands including Syria and North Africa. It was in this Byzantine Empire that the ancient wisdom of Greece and Rome, which had been lost in Western Europe, survived in the Greek language.

Baghdad

In Damascus, the process of translating this ancient wisdom from Greek into Syriac had already begun before the rise of the Islamic Empire. With the coming of the Abbasids, a new Islamic dynasty in 750, this process was accelerated. The Caliph al-Mansur established Baghdad as the seat of the Islamic Empire in 762. Part of the great wealth now available to the Abbasids was used to establish the Bayt al-Hikma, or House of Wisdom, in Baghdad from 832.

In Baghdad especially, but also in other parts of the Empire, under the sponsorship of many Abbasid notables, everything that was necessary was provided for the translation and copying of manuscripts - hugely boosted by the importation of paper production into the area by the end of the 8th century. Translation now went from Greek and Syriac into Arabic, the rising scholarly language of the Islamic Empire. All the wisdom of ancient Greece and Rome became accessible – the works of the most outstanding intellects - Aristotle, Euclid, Pythagoras, Galen, Ptolemy and many others.

This acted as a springboard for a great flowering of philosophical, scientific and medical thought. Scholars were attracted to Baghdad by the facilities and the patronage of the Caliphs, who ensured that there was money available. The scholars who came to work in Baghdad were Christians and Jews, who passed on their knowledge to the new generation of Muslim scholars.

Arabic itself became the language of scholarship throughout the Islamic Empire, in which manuscripts circulated to promote a flowering of intellectual activity.

Cairo

Cairo was a major beneficiary of this movement. Under the Isma'ili Fatimid dynasty (909 to 1171), scholarship flourished. The great mosque and university of al-Azhar was founded in 978 where many different disciplines were taught alongside one another in the same institution. This was the first university to be created in history - 250 years before the first of the great universities of northern Europe: in Paris (1215), Oxford (1220) and Bologna (1220). Under the Ayyubid dynasty in Cairo (1169-1250), al-Azhar became a centre of Sunni learning and remains to this day perhaps the greatest single centre of Sunni scholarship in the world.

Spain

In 711, a Muslim general called Tariq, led his soldiers from Morocco across what we now call the Straits of Gibraltar and landed in Spain. He gave his name to the mountain on which they landed, *Jabal al-Tariq*, from where we get Gibraltar. The Islamic Empire spread northwards until, by 756, all but a few pockets of north-west Spain came under their rule. There was even a small Muslim presence beyond the Pyrenees in southern France in the 8th century.

Cordoba was established as the capital of Islamic Spain and it's there that one of the glories of Islamic architecture, the Great Mosque, was built. Cordoba became one of the greatest centres of learning in the world. In its heyday, it had a library of some 400,000 works. Christians, like the future Pope Sylvester II (d. 1003), came there to study. This was the period of the building of the first Alhambra Palace in Granada. The Golden Age of Islamic Spain, or *al-Andalus*, coincided in the 9th to 13th centuries with great advances in many areas of learning in the Muslim world.

Ibn Rushd made big advances in Aristotelean philosophy, as did al-Farabi with Neoplatonic thought.

Ibn Sina developed the Greek medical works of Galen to such an extent that his medical writings were in use throughout Europe until the dawn of the modern period of medicine. This was the time when people researched the pulmonary circulation of the blood, the structure of the eye and anaesthetics.

Work on optics led to the invention of a rudimentary camera and binoculars.

There were equally significant advances in mathematics:

The concept of zero was developed.

Our present day system of numerals, which originated in India, was developed by Arabs – that's why we call them Arabic numbers.

Algebra was developed to deal with the complexities of the Islamic laws of inheritance.

Trigonometry was refined to ensure that the buildings designed by Muslim architects would be stable.

In geography the circumference of the earth was calculated, as was the distance from the earth to many stars and planets. Attempts were made to locate precisely the North Pole.

This was an age of great interest in astronomy and astrology. The first observatories were developed in the Muslim lands. Maps of the night skies were produced and these, together with the astrolabe, allowed sailors to locate their position on earth when out of sight of land. Without this, European explorers such as Christopher Columbus would never have been able to make their voyages of discovery.

Jews, Christians and Muslims working together

The Muslims ruled Spain according to Islamic principles. Even so, the majority of the people remained Christian, with a significant Jewish minority. Followers of these two faiths were allowed freedom of religious practice, could access education and were generally given the right to live their lives freely - as long as they did nothing to threaten the Muslim government. As the People of the Book, they were given the status of *dhimmi* or 'protected people'.

Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars worked side by side. In Damascus, Baghdad and Spain, the scholars from these three religions engaged in discussion in a common language and philosophical system; therefore there was no room for misunderstanding. This is not to say that they agreed with one another in points of theology, but they each understood what the other was trying to say. All too often, the scholars of these three religions have failed to understand one another because they have not clarified the meaning of the terms and concepts being used.

Professor Michot discusses this period of Muslim Spain:

2009 will mark the 400th anniversary of the Great Expulsion of Muslims from Spain in 1609. Muslims prefer to remember earlier periods of their presence in Spain: the eleventh, twelfth centuries, when Muslims, Jews and Christians were collaborating in Spain to develop some of the highest forms of intellectual and cultural endeavour, which led, for example, to the translations of Arabic philosophy into Latin. Jews, Christians and Muslims were involved in those translations and they were the source of the philosophical renaissance in Europe and in various other fields: scientific, ideological, cultural fields, we had this co-operation of different communities. Because Islam in Spain was, in the best moment of the Muslim presence there, able to accommodate great diversity: ethnic, religious, linguistic. And from this point of view Andalucía remains for Muslims a paradigm, a model, just as Athens can be a paradigm for Europe.

Islamic Spain became the major route for transmitting learning northwards into Western Europe via the vast network of monasteries and Christian religious foundations. Perhaps the most influential of these was the great Benedictine monastery of Cluny in France. This was the centre of a chain of monasteries that spread throughout Northern and Western Europe. There was also a Cluniac monastery in Toledo, Spain, where Peter the Venerable (d. 1156), one of the Abbots of Cluny, and the Archbishop of Toledo, established a translation bureau. Here Jewish and Muslim scholars worked with Christians translating the ancient wisdom of Greece and Rome, along with the developments that had taken place during the 400 years of Arabic progress, into Latin. These were copied and distributed through the monasteries and the new universities of Northern Europe.

These translations fuelled the Christian scholarly revival – for example, the work of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) a member of the newly-founded Dominican Order, which played a major role in establishing the first universities in Christian Europe.

Professor Michot considers Spain as a golden age in Muslim history:

The idea of a Golden Age in Islamic civilization can be discussed because we can see various periods that could be considered as a Golden Age: Baghdad in the ninth century, but even after the Mongol invasion, the Ilkhanid period in Iran, or also the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century; so we have different possibilities for a Golden Age, not to speak of the Prophetic age itself. But from a cultural, from a civilisational point of view, we have seen at those points in history: we have the Muslims developing fantastic forms of cultural or intellectual endeavour. We have seen them opening to Greek philosophy and sciences. We have seen them integrating in their own scientific development the discoveries of China in medicine or different other civilisations. Today as well, we see them opening to the West. And so what I think is essential to realise is that there is absolutely no incompatibility between Islam and opening to other civilisations and also cooperation with other non-Muslim communities to develop debates of the highest level and to contribute to the scientific development of mankind. And it's not just in past history; it is still remaining the situation that we have today.

The break-up of Muslim Spain and dispersal of Muslims and Jews

From 1031 the united Islamic Empire in Spain began to break up. There then followed four centuries of gradual decline as the Christian Reconquista took Spain for the Christian nobility. The history of this period reveals a dark side. Christians forced Spanish Jews and Muslims to convert on pain of expulsion or death. Many only outwardly accepted baptism. The Spanish Inquisition (1479-1808) was set up to deal with this. They used torture, imprisonment and execution to encourage people to convert in their hearts. As a consequence many Jews and Muslims were forced to flee Spain, for example in the Great Expulsion of 1609-1610 when an estimated 350,000

were exiled. Both communities settled throughout North Africa and around the Eastern Mediterranean in Muslim lands.

These Jewish communities were taken in and given a new start around the Islamic Empire, in modern Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and across North Africa. Too often we get the false idea that Jewish-Muslim relations have always been as tense as they are today. This is not the case. Jews were given *dhimmi* status in many parts of the Islamic Empire when they were persecuted by Christians in Europe. It is only the situation of Palestine in the 20th century that has brought about the present deep tensions. When Jews started to go to Palestine in the late 19th century, escaping persecution in northern Europe, they were welcomed and settled by the Palestinians, both Muslims and Christians. Tensions arose once the numbers of Jewish settlers became too large. Even so, it was not until the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, with the expulsion of Palestinians and the wars that followed, that the present hatred between Jewish Zionists and especially Arab Muslims (and Christians) developed.