

Universalism vs. Orientalism

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Edward Said wrote at the end of his critique of media discourse on Islam, *Covering Islam* (p. 169):

My thesis in this book has been that the canonical, orthodox coverage of Islam that we find in the academy, in the government, and in the media is all interrelated and has been *more* diffused, has seemed *more* persuasive and influential, in the West than any other "coverage" or interpretation. The success of this coverage can be attributed to the political influence of those people and institutions producing it rather than necessarily to truth or accuracy. I have also argued that this coverage has served purposes only tangentially related to actual knowledge of Islam itself. The result has been the triumph not just of a particular *knowledge* of Islam but rather of a particular *interpretation* which, however, has neither been unchallenged nor impervious to the kinds of questions asked by unorthodox, inquiring minds.

My aim, today, is twofold. First, I'll try to show that such an operation was made possible by the marginalization of Arabic sciences and philosophy in the phantasmatic constitution of a "chemically pure" European identity labelled, for that purpose, "Judeo-Christian". This construction is still dependent, as I'll show, of colonial knowledge and its view on Islam. Second, I'll address the way in which this ideology has become an important element of the repressive apparatus in Western universities today.

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Let's start with the way Jean-Etienne Montucla, in his *Histoire des mathématiques* dating to the very end of the 18th century (Paris, an VII = 1798/9), presents Arab mathematics (t. I, p. 352): "The Arabs, of whom we commonly have such an unfavorable idea, were not always insensitive to the charms of science and letters. They had, like all other peoples, their times of barbarism and coarseness; but then they polished themselves so much, that few nations can boast as much light and as much zeal for fine knowledge, as they showed for several centuries. While the sciences fell into oblivion among the Greeks, and survived almost exclusively in libraries, the Arabs drew them to their own shores, and gave them an honorable home. In the end, they were the only repositories of these sciences for quite a long time; and it is to the relations we had with them that we owe the first glimpses of light, which interrupt the obscurity of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries".

I.

LES Arabes dont nous avons communément une idée si désavantageuse, ne furent point toujours insensibles aux charmes des sciences et des lettres. Ils eurent, comme tous les autres peuples, leurs temps de barbarie et de grossièreté; mais ensuite ils se polirent tellement, que peu de nations peuvent faire gloire d'autant de lumière et d'autant de zèle pour les belles connoissances, qu'ils en montrèrent pendant plusieurs siècles. Tandis que les sciences touboient dans l'oubli chez les Grecs, et ne subsistoient presque plus que dans les bibliothèques, les Arabes les attiroient chez eux, et leur donnoient un asyle honorable. Ils en furent enfin les seuls dépositaires pendant assez long-temps; et c'est au commerce que nous eûmes avec eux que nous devons les premiers traits de lumière, qui viennent interrompre l'obscurité des onzième, douzième et treizième siècles.

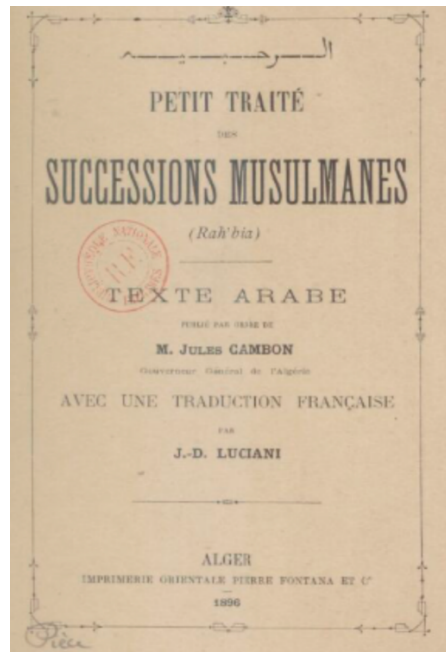
Such a history of mathematics is remarkable in that it does not yet essentialize peoples in their relationship to science or abstraction. It does not yet function with categories such as "European", "Semitic", "Western", "Eastern", etc. Its guiding presupposition is that of human progress, universal and undifferentiated. Every people can, if historical circumstances are favorable, develop and cultivate the most refined arts and sciences. It can also, after a period of prosperity, fall into decline. This is the historical principle that Montucla applies to Arab civilization. Initially ignorant of the theoretical sciences, it then experienced its golden age, before sinking into intellectual lethargy.

The European author is not yet in a position of overhang or denigration, implicit or explicit. He describes a world lagging behind his own in terms of scientific and technical development, but he does not see it as inferior by virtue of an essentialist determinism. Historical, and therefore objective, criteria prevail. This is Enlightenment at its best.

Everything changed with colonization. It came as a shock to the Arab world, but it was also – as is less often noted – a shock to Europe, which was regressing on its own Enlightenment ideals. For a historian of Arabic sciences and philosophy, colonial historiography is basically empty. While hundreds of thousands of Europeans lived in Arab lands for a century and a half, they hardly ever mention a philosophical or mathematical treatise written by an Arab author, never discuss an idea put forward by one of them, never express any complex or simply intelligent thoughts about Arab culture. The colonists, of all social classes, are content with a few clichés about what they call "Islamism" – essentially banalities about Islam as a religion and the supposed psychology of the Muslim. This colonial orientalism is excessively narrow-minded. It is the work of colonial civil servants who have served in the local army (and therefore have often native blood on their hands) and who have acquired a certain linguistic and

ethnographic knowledge of the Arabs. Take, for example, one of the most competent, Jean-Dominique Luciani (1851-1932), a Corsican from a family of colonial administrators. Luciani had a law degree from Aix-en-Provence and a diploma in Arabic and Kabyle. He joined the Algerian riflemen in 1870, who put down the Algerian revolt in 1870-1871. He had no training in philosophy, science or theology. His only talent was the linguistic skill he had acquired in metropolitan France and then in the field. This gives his approach a characteristic orientalist style, made up of translations from Arabic, without doctrinal or theoretical analysis, without historical hindsight, without any attempt to open up the fields. More embarrassing, the topics envisaged are always linked in some way to the needs of the colonial administration.

Consider for a moment his work on the rules of succession in Muslim law.



When a serious historian takes an interest in this question, he or she is aware, in principle, that the arithmetic of inheritance plays an important role in the way al-Khwārizmī, the founder of algebra around 830, understands the new discipline. Here are a few lines from the preface to this fundamental work. He was asked by the caliph al-Ma'mūn, he says,

Al-Khwārizmī, The Beginnings of Algebra

edited, with translation and commentary by Roshdi Rashed, London, 2009, p. 94

... to compose a concise book on the form of calculation in algebra and *al-muqābala*; I wanted it to include what is subtle in calculation and what is most noble in it, and what people have real need of in matters of their inheritances, their legacies, their sharing out, their judgments, their commercial transactions, and in all they dealt with, one with another, in the matter of mensuration and other things to do with calculation and its varieties.

This is the very point, it seems to me, that separates the orientalist (or colonialist) view from the universalist approach. The colonial researcher, unaware of the deep link between inheritance calculus and algebra, explores the question of rules of inheritance because it is of interest to the colonial administration, which tries to accommodate local traditions. If we look at the title page of Luciani's translation, we see that the work was “published by order of Mr. Jules Cambon, General Governor of Algeria”. When we then read the preface, it betrays no sociological or anthropological – let alone epistemological – interest. The sole purpose of the book is to inform the colonizer of the basic rules governing indigenous heritage.

More than a century later, anti-colonial awareness has progressed. A universalist perspective is now possible. Historical information is finer, but above all, we are in a position, thanks to a better understanding of the history of Arabic mathematics, to understand the scientific context of this type of thinking. We now understand that the emergence of advanced reflection on the arithmetic of inheritance is incomprehensible without reconstructing the algebraic project of al-Khwārizmī, which it also nourishes. The project of the *Art of Algebra* does not boil down to saying that arithmetic can be applied to any countable object, which would be trivial. Rather, in a very formal way, it's a question of insisting on the fact that the conditions of validity of a science can be detached from what Aristotle called its "genus", i.e. the particular ontology of its objects – numbers for arithmetic and magnitudes for geometry, in particular. The subtlety of al-Khwārizmī's project consists in extending this formal neutralization of algebra beyond the ancient perimeter of mathematical objects, to also blur the boundary between the abstract ideal and its concrete applications. It is by virtue of this *second* kind of extension that the calculus of inheritance belongs to al-Khwārizmī's algebra. Algebra thus introduces a new formality unknown to Greek mathematical science. Contrary to the Aristotelian position that prevailed for more than a millenium, a science can now be perfectly rigorous and determined, while at the same time being able to apply to different objects, i.e. while remaining ontologically neutral or, if you prefer, formal.

This example seems to me to illustrate better than a long speech a constant feature of colonial knowledge. Colonial knowledge, even when it speaks of something other than mint tea, religious sects and polygamy (which is rare), is intrinsically devoid of epistemological interest. It describes, with varying degrees of erudition and linguistic skill, objects from the past whose isolated description, infatuated with detail and blind to any kind of overall perspective, prolongs, as Edward Said so aptly put it, war through discourse. The study I call "universalist" aims to combine precise historical knowledge – necessarily circumscribed as all serious

academic knowledge must be – with the ability to understand what is at stake for humanity as a whole. The only possible look at al-Khwārizmī, for example, consists in understanding the precise conditions, including anthropological and sociological ones, of the emergence of algebra in Baghdad around 830, but also in placing this emergence in a long-term history of mathematics, taking into consideration the Euclidean tradition in particular.

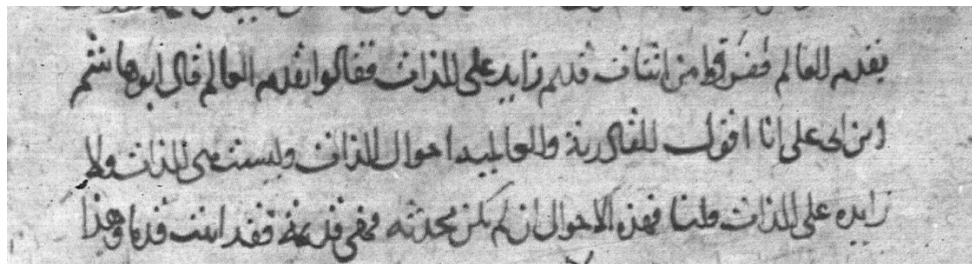
A second example, borrowed this time not from mathematics but from philosophy. Luciani has produced a critical edition and a French translation of a major work from the Arabic tradition, the *Guide to Conclusive Proofs for the Principles of Belief* (كتاب الإرشاد إلى قواطع الأدلة (في أصول الاعتقاد) by Imām al-Haramayn al-Ġuwaynī (1028-1085), one of the most profound thinkers of the Islamic tradition. Significantly in itself, Luciani does not translate this title correctly, but slides its purely theoretical connotation into something more religious: *Le livre du Tawhid, traité sur l'unicité selon le sunnisme* ("The Book of Tawhid, Treatise on Oneness according to Sunnism"). With this fancy title, Luciani removes the idea of rational method constitutive of al-Ġuwaynī's project and adds the orientalist notion of a specifically "Sunni" dogma, which it would of course be important to make accessible to Westerners in order to better understand the religious beliefs of the local folk. Here too, scholarly orientalism is fond of ethnography, and the philosophical content of al-Ġuwaynī's reflections disappears.

What is thus overlooked and missed is the fact that al-Ġuwaynī was the first to introduce into classical Islamic thought the notion of mode (حال) invented by the great 10^e century Mu'tazilite thinker Abū Hāshim al-Ġubbā'ī. Just as al-Khwārizmī's algebra inaugurates a new age for mathematical ontology, the introduction of the notion of mode testifies to an extension of the Greek domain of metaphysics, in particular Aristotelian ontology, in a more formal direction. The notion of mode replaces Aristotle's strict opposition of subject (substance) vs. property (attribute) with a more formal approach to reality: the notion of mode allows us to take substance as coinciding with its formal determinations, without, unlike Aristotle and his commentators, addressing the issue of the ontological structure of the "compound". In this unprecedented configuration, substance becomes a sort of algebraic entity X, of which we know only what we can prove analytically. The mode and the algebraic unknown – the "thing", as al-Khwārizmī calls it –, in this sense, are but two aspects of the same modernity.

I'll go even further: the notion of mode invented by Abū Hāshim, and taken up by al-Juwayni, is incomprehensible without taking into account the recent invention of algebra. This is because the mode takes over from algebra the idea that valid inferences can be made, in a purely analytical way, independently of any knowledge of the ontological substratum of the determinations involved in the proof.

The modal determination of substance is so formal that it even leads to a kind of suspension of the logical law, vindicated by Plato in the *Parmenides* and by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* Γ 7, of the excluded-middle. Here, for example, is how the mode is characterized by al-Kiyā' al-Harrāsī, one of al-Ġuwaynī's students, in his own work of rational theology (ms. Cairo, 'ilm al-kalām 290, fol. 105v): “Abū Hāshim the son of Abū 'Alī said: ‘As for me, I say that being powerful and being knowledgeable are modes of the essence, which are neither the essence nor added to the essence’” (قال أبو هاشم ابن أبي علي: أنا أقول: القادرية والعالمية أحوال الذات وليست (هي الذات ولا زائدة على الذات).

Al-Kiyā' al-Harrāsī, ms. Cairo, 'ilm al-kalām 290, fol. 105v



Greek ontologies – whether Platonic, Aristotelian or Stoic (the situation is slightly more complex with Epicureanism) – are not familiar with the notion of mode. On the other hand, modern European philosophy makes extensive use of it. Mode becomes a crucial notion in Descartes, and is central to Spinoza's philosophy. To date, there has been no history of such an important notion of modern ontology. However, it would be of great interest to understand its evolution, from its appearance in Baghdad in the 10th century to its widespread use in Modern Europe.

All these questions, once again, are not only not asked, but not even suspected by orientalist science, which, as Luciani illustrates, sees texts, including the most refined, only through an ethnographic and religious prism.

The first crack in the European ideological edifice was caused by the colonized world, which, during the 19th and the 20th century, took its own heritage into its own hands. In Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, until the recent destruction of these countries by Israel and the West, the Arabic heritage of philosophy and science was studied, manuscripts were published and, in short, a previously unknown library was made available. Hundreds of works of the highest scientific, philosophical and literary level were produced. Moreover, Western science was opening up to researchers with a progressive ideology (non-, even anti-colonial), who questioned the univocal nature of the filiation between Ancient Greece and Europe. Nor

should we overlook the complex role played by the Soviet Union, whose colonialism in Central Asia differed from that of the European powers in Africa and the Mediterranean.

The situation of the 20th century is, however, fragile, and in the 21st century is ending in a kind of failure, the reasons for which are multiple but convergent.

The first, and I won't go into it again, is the systematic destruction of Arab countries, not only militarily, but also economically and even socially. In recent decades, Arabic scientific heritage has become a legacy without heirs.

The second is that, with very few exceptions, we have been unable, in the West, to exfiltrate Arabic studies from orientalist departments, and in particular from Arabic studies departments, which in Western universities are a kind of ghetto where the wind of the spirit rarely blows. By its very nature, this isolation prevents the integration of Arabic scholarship into a universal history, other than in the unsatisfactory mode of comparative studies.

The third reason is somewhat ironic: scholars of the 20th century first succeeded in mapping the Arabic cultural continent at a time when Europe, under the pressure of apparently progressive thinking, was turning away from genealogical questions, which it now considered reactionary and outdated. Justified criticism of the naïve search for predecessors and the tracing of influences runs the risk of ending up being a charge against history itself, when it turns into a procedure – especially an illiterate one. In other words, knowledge of the Arab legacy has arrived on the academic market at a time when traditional history, the target of all kinds of questioning, no longer really finds takers – at a time, in particular, when Greece itself, the founding myth of all founding myths, no longer appeals. Under the influence of Derridean deconstruction, Foucault's criticism of academic discourse, identity claims of all kinds, the idea of a genealogy of European scholarship is now viewed with suspicion by the progressive camp (note: I'm not criticizing Foucault and Derrida, let alone post-colonial ideology, with which I'm of course totally sympathetic, but only hinting at an unhappy consequence of some of the uses made of them). Arabic studies thus fall into a kind of abyss: they are of no interest to progressives, who no doubt find them too elitist, but they are of no interest to the reactionary camp, which has no taste for either Arabs or Islam.

Thus, despite the harvest of results of recent decades – the hundreds of texts published and translated – Arabic studies remain marginal, both because they have no central, stable academic place from which to speak, and because the progressive forces of Western universities neither understand them, nor see their usefulness. It's striking, for example, that despite a frantic quest to dignify so-called subaltern cultures, university campuses at the cutting edge of progress have never thought to summon Arabic mathematics, Arabic philosophy, in order to

problematize the apparent hegemony of the European man. It's as if the progressive camp had been won over by a kind of hatred towards overly complex historiographical content. Let me put it bluntly: the left must resume the cultural offensive in this field, or risk being relegated to the role of useful idiot by the forces of reaction and neo-colonialism.

In this unique world, inseparably Arabic and European (among others), Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages also played an important role. In Spain and southern France, they were instrumental in transmitting Arabic knowledge to Latin universities. In the massive movement of translations from Arabic to Latin, Christian Latin translators, such as Gerard of Cremona (12th century), were helped by Jewish interpreters who mastered all three languages – Hebrew, Arabic and a European vernacular. Hence, although barely visible, Jewish communities played an important role in the transition of Arabic science to the Latin world.

From this perspective, we should also mention Maimonides, arguably the greatest Jewish philosopher of the medieval period. Trained in Andalusia in the 12th century, he later emigrated to Egypt, where he stayed for the rest of his life. There, he wrote, in Arabic, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, a philosophical sum in which he integrated whole sections of Islamic rational theology (the *kalam*), a discipline, as we have just seen, that was philosophical through and through, but which, because it was anti-Aristotelian and atomistic in principle, did not attract the attention of medieval Latin translators. During Maimonides' lifetime, the *Guide* was translated into Hebrew, and the Hebrew version was in turn translated into Latin as early as the 13th century. Through Maimonides' intermediary, the thought of the *kalam* permeated the thinking of Latin philosophers and theologians from the 13th century onwards, like Thomas Aquinas.

Maimonides' reception reflects the real history of the three communities, their creative interweaving, everything that today's Zionist ideologists are trying to repress. Widely commented on in Hebrew, Maimonides was also read by Muslim philosophers. Let's recall, for instance, the commentary written by the 13th century Muslim philosopher Abū 'Abdallah Muḥammad from Tabrīz, in Iran. Al-Tabrīzī begins his work as follows:

قال أبو عبدالله محمد بن أبي بكر بن محمد التبريزي: هذا هو الجزء الذي رتبته الشيخ الرئيس العالم الأورحد، الفاضل الكامل، أبو عمران موسى بن عبيد الله الإسرائيلي، القرطبي، من الكتاب الذي نحن في شرحه وإيضاحه، وهو الكتاب الموسوم بدلالة الحائرين ...

Abū 'Abdallah Muḥammad Ibn Abī Bakr Ibn Muḥammad al-Tabrīzī said: here is the part arranged by the supreme master, the unique scholar, the perfect virtuous, Abū 'Imrān Mūsā Ibn 'Ubayd Allah the Israelite from Cordoba, from his book that we comment on and elucidate, namely his book entitled *Guide to the Perplexed* ...

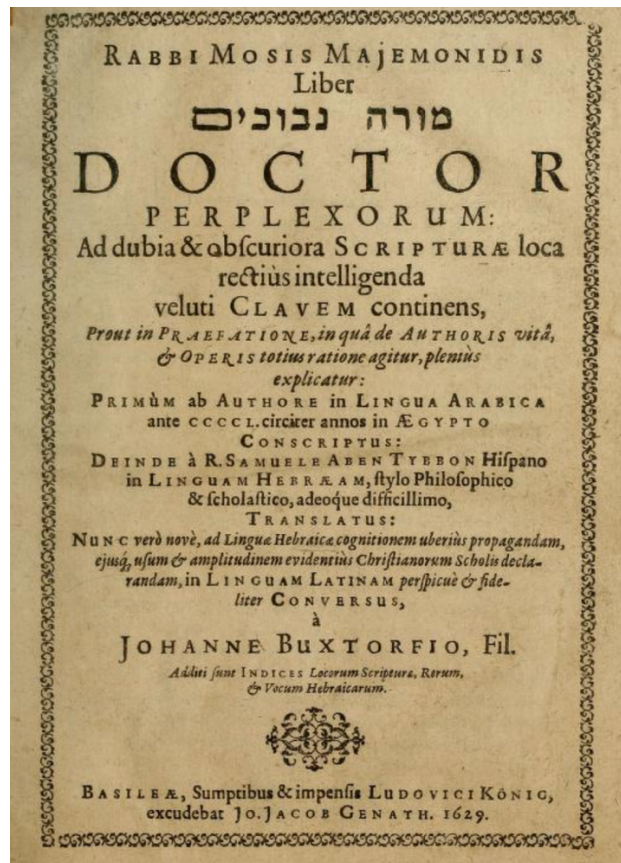
This eulogy from a Muslim scholar to a Jewish scholar – at a times when Europe was carefully persecuting its Jews – illustrates better than a long speech, against illiterate prejudices of all kinds, an interesting aspect of Islamic civilization.

But this is not even the end of our Islamic-Jewish story: al-Tabrīzī's Arabic commentary was twice translated into Hebrew, and one of these translations was printed in Venice during the Renaissance, in 1574, along with Hebrew commentaries on the *Guide*.



It is from al-Tabrīzī's commentary that Hasdai Crescas, a Jewish philosopher from the 14th century, draws essential elements on the question of the existence of actual infinity. Not only Crescas, however: Spinoza's entire discussion on the infinite in the important scholium to *Ethics* I 15 can ultimately be traced back to al-Tabrīzī and his Arabic sources.

Thus, the *Guide*, accompanied by al-Tabrīzī's commentary, became a work of reference for modern philosophers throughout Europe, so much so that it was translated again into Latin, by Johannes Buxtorf, in Basel, in 1629. The title page of the work indicates the history of its transmission:



"Rabbi Mosis Majemonidis liber מורה נבוכים Doctor Perplexorum ad dubia et obscuriora Scripturæ loca rectius intelligenda ... primum ab Authore in Lingua Arabica ante CCCCL circiter annos in Ægypto conscriptus ; deinde a R. Samuele Aben Tybbon Hispano in Linguam Hebræam, stylo philosophico & scholastico, adeoque difficillimo, translatus, nunc verò novè, ad Lingua Hebraicæ cognitionem uberius propagandam, ejusque usum et amplitudinem evidentius Christianorum Scholis declarandam, in Linguam Latinam perspicuè & fideliter conversus à Johanne Buxtorfio, fil. ... Basileæ ... 1629".

The book *Moreh Nebuchim, Guide of the Perplexed* by Rabbi Moses Maimonides, in order to better understand the equivocal and more obscure passages of the Scriptures ... originally composed by the author in the Arabic language, in Egypt, some 450 years ago; then translated into the Hebrew language by R. Samuel Ibn Tibbon, in a philosophical and scholastic style, therefore very difficult; now finally, in order to propagate more widely the knowledge of the Hebrew language and to show more clearly its usefulness and richness to Christian schools, again translated into Latin, with accuracy and fidelity, by Johannes Buxtorf the son, ... Basel ... 1629.

It was mainly – but not only – in this new translation that the great philosophers of the modern age read Maimonides - and discovered the rational theology of Islam that would have a lasting influence on their own systems. This is obvious in the case of Spinoza, whose philosophy is in constant dialogue with Maimonides and, through him, with his Arabic sources. But it is equally

true of Leibniz. Some of Leibniz's reading notes on the *Guide* are still preserved and kept in Hannover. Here's how he begins:

Leibniz, *Notes on Maimonides*, AA, p. 2484

I consider Rabbi Moses Maimonides' book *Guide of the Perplexed* to be remarkable, and more philosophical than I had thought, even worthy of careful reading (*Egregium video esse librum Rabbi Mosis Maimonidis, qui inscribitur Doctor perplexorum, et magis philosophical quam putaram, dignumque adeo lectione attenta*).

The most notable point is that Leibniz is far less interested in the questions of scriptural exegesis raised by Maimonides than in the latter's exposition of the doctrines of those Muslim philosophers (of the materialist and atomist school) who had not been translated into Latin. In other words, what fascinated Leibniz when he read Maimonides, was above all to discover, through the mediation of the Jewish philosopher, the clear prefiguration, in classical Arabic philosophy, of the 17th century debates on substance – and, in particular, to rediscover the terms of the opposition between atomism and continuism, central to all post-Cartesian philosophy and permeating the very work of Leibniz himself, whose conception of substance notoriously oscillates between the Aristotelian model of the link, or *vinculum*, and the atomistic one of the aggregate of parts.

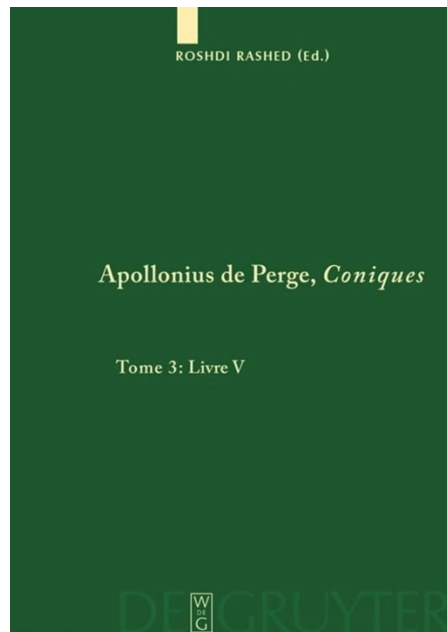
But it's not necessary, as in the case above, to be able to trace the translations of a text in order to be authorized to speak of a unique, indifferently Arabic and Latin, world. For ideas have a life of their own, and contacts can be more diffuse. Europe's Arabic roots are often discreet, and all the more discreet for being so important. Today, I'd like to briefly present, in the form of a short story, an example of how things might have happened, in an important case of all: the beginnings of algebraic geometry in Europe in the 17^e century. Obviously, this chapter is of little interest to the ideologues who populate our political parties. But you all know that it's about the very meaning of European modernity.

My story concerns Jacob Golius (1596-1667), a Dutch scholar and professor at the University of Leiden, whom I believe to be the anonymous person depicted in this painting in the Louvre, by Ferdinand Bol, a pupil of Rembrandt:



Significantly, Golius taught both Arabic and mathematics in Leiden. In 1622, he was in Morocco; in 1626-1629, he lived in Syria. During these trips, he acquired Arabic manuscripts both for himself and for the Leiden library, forming the core of one of the richest collections of oriental manuscripts in modern Europe.

This collection is of capital importance, first, for the history of Greek mathematics. In Syria, Golius discovered an Arabic manuscript containing the last three books of the *Conics* by the Alexandrian mathematician Apollonius. These three books, the pinnacle of Greek geometry, are lost in their original language – due to their considerable technical and theoretical difficulty, they were beyond the reach of the Byzantines but accessible to Arab mathematicians of the 9th century. This Arabic translation has just been published, translated into French and commented on by Roshdi Rashed:



Golius acquired the original manuscript of the *Conics* (now kept at Oxford's Bodleian Library) and had it copied into a collection of scientific treatises, now kept in Leiden as manuscript *Orientalis 14*. Until recently, this extremely valuable manuscript for the history of both Greek and Arabic mathematics was thought to have been copied in Amsterdam by a Levantine scribe. But careful consideration shows that this is not the case. This collection was actually copied in Aleppo in 1627, at the request of Golius who was in Syria at that time. It contains 24 mathematical texts (geometry, algebra and astronomy) of the highest standard. These texts were carefully chosen by Golius, who annotated them extensively. Thus, Golius acquired lost ancient Greek and Arabic texts devoted to the very subjects that occupied European mathematicians in the first half of the XVII^e century. The most fascinating case in point is the treatise by the 11^e century mathematician al-Khayyām on third-degree equations, whose solution by intersection of conic curves closely anticipates Descartes' treatment of the same topic.

Descartes left France for Holland at the end of the 1620s, and was in close contact with Golius as soon as the latter returned from the Orient to Amsterdam in 1629. Is it possible that he never heard the Dutch professor mention al-Khayyām's treatise on equations? This is unlikely, especially as the existence of these new texts reported by Golius was no secret. The philosopher Gassendi published, in Paris as early as 1630, a letter addressed to him by Golius in which the latter catalogued the Arabic books he had acquired for the Leiden library: *Catalogus rarorum librorum quos ex Oriente nuper advexit et in publica Bibliotheca inclytæ Leydensis Academiae deposuit ... Iacobus Golius* ("Catalogue of rare books that Jacob Golius

recently brought from the East and deposited in the public library of the famous Leiden academy"):

CATALOGVS
RARORVM LIBRORVM,

Quos ex Oriente nuper aduexit, &
in publica Bibliotheca inclytæ
Leydenfis Academiæ deposuit

Clariff. & de bonis Artibus meritiff.

IACOBVS GOLIVS,

*In illa eadem Academia, & Linguarum
Orientalium, & Mathefos
Professor insignis.*



PARISIIS,

Excudebat ANTONIVS VITRAY.

M. DC. XXX.

On p. 3 we read *Geometrical, algebraic and astronomical Treatises by Various Authors (Diversorum auctorum tractatus geometrici, algebrici, et astronomici)* :

Terræ sanctæ historia, autore Abu Albunes Alumzi.
Comentarius medicamentorum simplicium in
Oriente vſitatorum.
Diſquiſitiones Aben Timiç in explicationes Alcorani.
Comentarius Alcatebi in Philoſophiam Arrazi,
quem Raſim vulgò dicimus.
Appollonii Pergæi Conicarum ſectionum libri III.
poſtremi, hæcenus deſiderati, ex Græco in Arabi-
cum tranſlati.
Liber, de Arabicæ linguæ proprietatibus, & doctrina.
Loca ſeu Enarrationes variæ Alheriri, liber vniuerſo
Oriente maximi æſtimatus ad percipiendum Ara-
bicæ linguæ idiotiſmos & elegantias, accuratè ſcri-
ptus, plurimiſque notis illuſtratus.
Diuersorum Auctorum tractatus Geometrici, Alge-
brici, & Aſtronomici.
Florilegium epigrammatum Arabicorum, collectum
ab Aben Haſen Alnuadir.

The whole of Europe was thus able to consult these treatises, especially those dealing with algebraic geometry.

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I hope that these examples, which I have dealt with as briefly as possible, have given you an insight into the picture of ancient Mediterranean cultures and Europe's belonging to this world. This belonging is evacuated by Orientalism, whose logic, far from aiming to open up Arabic sciences and philosophy, accentuates their exoticism – whether through ignorance, professional narrowness, or an ideological decision.

I've also tried to present an insight into the interweaving of Hebraic scholarship with Islamic culture, important elements of which were transmitted to the Latin West through this channel. As a consequence, it must be emphasized that the insistence on an exclusively "Judeo-Christian" Europe has something deeply anti-Semitic about it. For this discourse confines Hebrew culture to its earliest phase, that of biblical times, i. e. sees it, in a narrowly teleological way, as the condition for the emergence of Christianity. This narrative destroys the golden age of Hebrew culture - the centuries during which Jewish theology and philosophy, practiced in Hebrew and Arabic, flourished in the lands of Islam and Southern Europe, ensuring the unity of the Mediterranean world of knowledge. The "Judeo-Christian" obsession of Europe's reactionary parties is the provincial declination of Christian Zionism in the US. It is an anti-Semitic Zionism - the contradiction is only apparent, as recent declarations by Donald Trump have clearly shown. Relying on the Orientalist vision of the Arab world, this ideology forgets, or pretends to forget, that without taking Arabic learning into account, Europe's philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, optics, medicine, botany, etc. become historically unintelligible.

The main part of what I've said today was dedicated to explain some of the specific features of Orientalist discourse that have led to the situation described by Said. In short: a folkloric, essentially linguistic relationship with Arabic culture, which, by cutting it off from the universal history of sciences and philosophy, empties it of any substantial interest. This construction, moreover, is based either on ignorance of the specificities of Jewish culture in the Islamic world, or on a conscious concealment, when historical knowledge is placed at the service of State propaganda. This colonial ideology explains why Israel today, a nation where so many people know Arabic and Hebrew, contribute so little to historical research in Greek and medieval studies. Palestinians who would have something to say are silenced from without, and Israelis from within. To free history from State ideology would be to free people themselves – the victim, for sure, but also the oppressor.

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In the last part of my talk, I would like, very briefly (because I won't teach you anything), to address some of the consequences, in Western universities, of the situation I have just described. Supported, as Said had clearly seen, by a colonial construct produced over the last two centuries, the ideological apparatus of the State, in Europe and North-America, is based on an opposition between a "Judeo-Christian" axis and Islam perceived at best as *other*, at worst as *enemy*. The university has become an important front in the ongoing conflict for this very reason: the massive presence of Jewish students in recent anti-Zionist demonstrations is jeopardizing the Zionist narrative.

To understand what has happened over the last fifteen years, we may start with "The Israel Project's 2009. Global Language Dictionary", better known by the name of its promoter, Frank Luntz. Fifteen years ago, in 2009, Luntz noted in his report that American campuses were already very sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, and saw this development as one of the greatest challenges to Zionist propaganda. He wrote, among other things: "The core mood on America's campuses is friendly to the enemies of Israel and hostile to Israel's supporters". And he adds, to the attention of the Zionist propagandist: "Your task will not be easy". This remark was followed by a list of six recommendations, each briefly commented on. I quote: (1) "Above all, talk about peace"; (2) "Personalize the conflict"; (3) "Stress the American-Israeli relationship"; (4) "You can empathize with the Palestinians even if you oppose their leadership, their tactics and their political goals"; (5) "Emphasize the rights of Israeli Arabs"; (6) "Don't argue. Discuss".

Fifteen years later, the situation has changed dramatically. The rhetorical strategies advocated by Luntz are now obsolete. The nature and scale of the conflict on American campuses had changed. It was thus to be expected that, in an attempt to stem the tide of pro-Palestinian protests, all that remained was to use Zionist disarray as a *reason* to silence their opponents. This is, as you know, where we are today: States and universities have equipped themselves with unofficial and legal tools designed to destroy any hint of support for Palestine. Solidarity with the Palestinians has become a clear indication, if not proof, of anti-Semitism. The witch-hunt has been launched in the United States and Western Europe, and the crime of opinion is reappearing on a large scale. When, exceptionally, you dare to ask your dean why the university doesn't apply the same solidarity measures to Palestine as it does to Ukraine, you get either a bureaucratic or sentimental response (such as: "The university is closely following the tragic events in progress"), or a guilt-ridden missive hovering over the suspicion of anti-Semitism (such as "it's up to us academics to guard against any form of excessive speech") or,

more generally, no response at all. The meaning of this silence is clear, of course: in Europe, we haven't been collaborating with Russia since the second day of the invasion of Ukraine, but we'll be collaborating with Israeli universities for ever and ever, despite their complicity in war crimes and what the UN has characterized as *scholasticide*.

Colonialism has thus come full circle. In order to justify the anti-Semitic myth of a "Judeo-Christian" West threatened by Arabs and Muslims, it was necessary to get Western Jews on board. While not necessarily fully aware of the polymorphous history of Judaism and its profound links with Islamic culture, a significant proportion of American Jewish youth nonetheless sensed that they were being manipulated. Their resistance has baffled official Zionism, which, especially since October 7, 2023, has had no choice but to accuse all its enemies, Jews included, of anti-Semitism.

Within the academic world, this new strategy – a large-scale accusation of antisemitism aimed at silencing the voices against the on-going genocide – has had a further consequence: it has caused the institution to drift in an authoritarian direction. The university is increasingly subject to laws of exception, arbitrary decisions and the like. Expulsions, intimidations and denunciations, witch-trials and police interventions on campuses, which would have been unthinkable 15 years ago, when Luntz wrote his report, have become commonplace. As you will have gathered, it is the colonial regime of exception, with its arbitrariness and violence, which, several decades after African and Asian independence, is reinventing itself in the public space, this time no longer on the distant soil of the colonies, but in the heart of the West, in its most prestigious universities.

By now, everyone has understood that to defend the unacceptable, it is necessary to adopt the discourse of the far-right, which supports Israeli policy everywhere in the world; and that it is also necessary to be in favor of a reduction in democratic freedoms, even if it means reducing the secular franchises of universities. It took the full force of Israeli propaganda to achieve this brilliant result.

To put it another way: so-called “left-wing” Zionism today is clinically dead. Israel's drift - from the ethnic cleansing of the founding fathers to the genocide of today - has forced its former supporters to choose: either Zionism or the Left. Western governments and the careerist bureaucrats at the head of our universities have chosen to temper democracy and the universal values of the Enlightenment to save Zionism.

The only way out for today's left-wing Zionist, who is disturbed by the effect produced by his fundamental agreement with far-right discourse on his enlightened friends, is to denounce

anti-Semitism, which he detects in the slightest criticism of Israeli policy - or even in the slightest declaration of support for the Palestinians, especially if this calls for divestment.

Today's presentation develops an element of response to this accusation, which is at the same time a form of outstretched hand to Judaism when it tries to develop a non-Zionist path. I know how derisory this path is in the current situation. I am also well aware that it is power relations that produce ideologies, and not the other way round. But I am also convinced that our side must not allow itself to be crushed by the accusation of anti-Semitism. And the first way to resist is to understand the true historical context in which the great Mediterranean civilisations have interacted over the centuries.

Today, I have tried to show in what sense it was Western Zionism, with its myth of a Judeo-Christian civilization, which, by subordinating Judaism to Christianity, was anti-Semitic. I have also tried to illustrate why there is no other way to study Jewish thought at its most interesting - its medieval golden age - than to understand that it was an important but far from unique sector of Islamic civilization, philosophy and science. Perhaps these considerations are already too late, perhaps Israel has already crossed the red line, perhaps reconciliation, for obvious reasons, will now be impossible - it would help if there were a few Palestinians left alive if Israelis really wanted to reconcile with them. Independently of the question of the survival of Palestine and the Palestinians, which is too serious and sad for me to discuss today, I'll simply end with the outward remark that Judaism is now at a crossroads. Its philosophy will either become a vulgar ideology - seasoning the pagan supremacism of the Nazis with religious fanaticism - or it will become aware of the ineliminable Islamic dimension of Jewish civilization. This awareness would, I'm sure, be a liberation for the Israelis too. It remains to be seen whether they are still capable of it.