

CHRISTENDOM AND CALIPHATE

Humanisms and the "Clash of Civilizations"
between Islam and the West

BY ALEX ANDERLIK

Hello, my name is Alex Anderlik and I am presenting my paper Christendom and Caliphate: Humanisms and the "Clash of Civilizations" between Islam and the West which I wrote for Mehrdad's excellent class Islam and the West, which explored the effects of European contact and invasion into the Muslim world. I apologize for using my notes but otherwise I will take up hours of your time.



The West has a lot to say about the Islamic world but I wanted to turn the lens around and learn what some prominent scholars from that world have to say about the West. How did Christianity and Islam, two Abrahamic religions founded only 750 miles apart (the distance from here to Fargo, ND), become poles in an alleged clash of civilizations between East and West? There is no single answer, but I focused on some ideas you don't often hear about in Western scholarship.



Year 1 AD - The birth of Jesus

One important clue is the context in which each religion was founded. Christianity was of course founded at the peak of the Roman Empire, and was variously persecuted and tolerated for the first couple centuries AD. It spread amongst the lower classes like wildfire and eventually the polytheistic Roman elites realized they had no choice: if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. The Catholic orthodoxy was created by the Councils of Nicaea and soon Christian ideology was deeply integrated while many of the core political institutions were preserved.



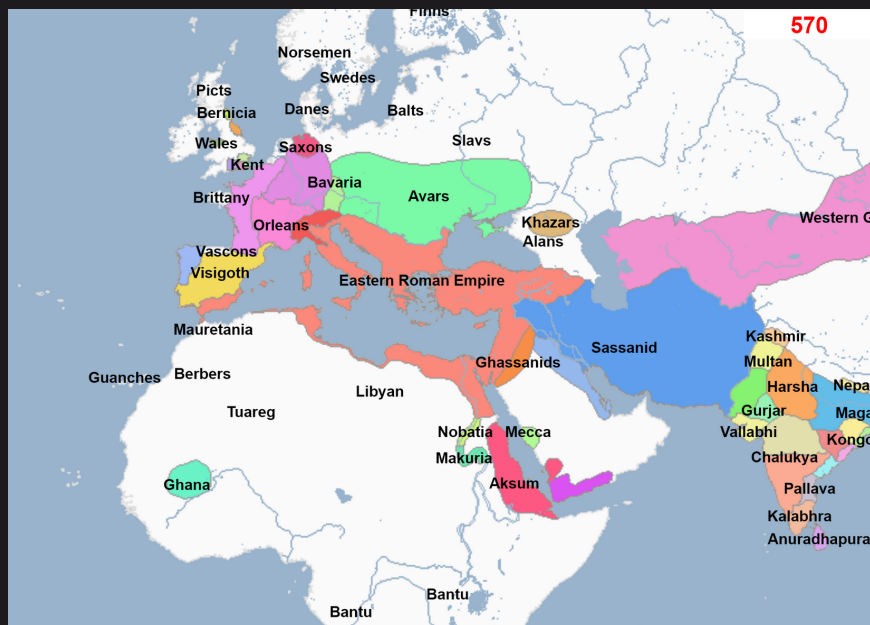
THE CITY OF GOD (& THE CITY OF MAN)

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO
5TH CENTURY AD

Delineated two separate realms: the "Earthly City" of material affairs associated with the declining Roman Empire and the spiritual "City of God" which would be everlasting until the end of times.

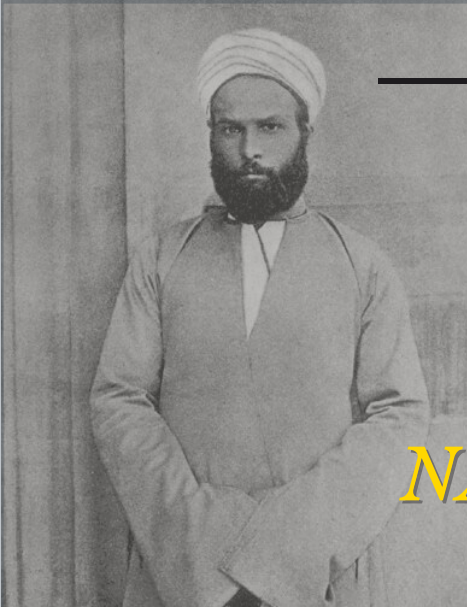
The epitomization of the Biblical phrase, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."

However, an interesting conflict remained; the notion of two separate spheres, the material and the spiritual, one belonging to Caesar and the other to God. For better or worse this meant that Roman political and economic institutions were still separated from the religious structure, and as the Roman empire disintegrated, kings and popes would frequently dispute amongst each other over what exactly fell into the material and spiritual realms, seeding many civil wars and conflicts.



Year 570 AD - The birth of Muhammad


By contrast, Islam was born in a place of virtually no geopolitical importance, a polytheistic place of worship and trading hub to the various nomadic Bedouin tribes. By the end of his life, the Prophet Muhammad had amassed a huge following with wealth, warriors, and major influence. There was no such thing as the separation of church and state; Islam was a unified lifestyle, belief system, legal code, and government.



MUHAMMAD 'ABDUH
1849 – July 11th, 1905

*EGYPTIAN
ISLAMIC
NATIONALISTS*

*SAYYID JAMĀL AL-DĪN
AL-AFGHĀNĪ*
1839 – March 9th, 1897

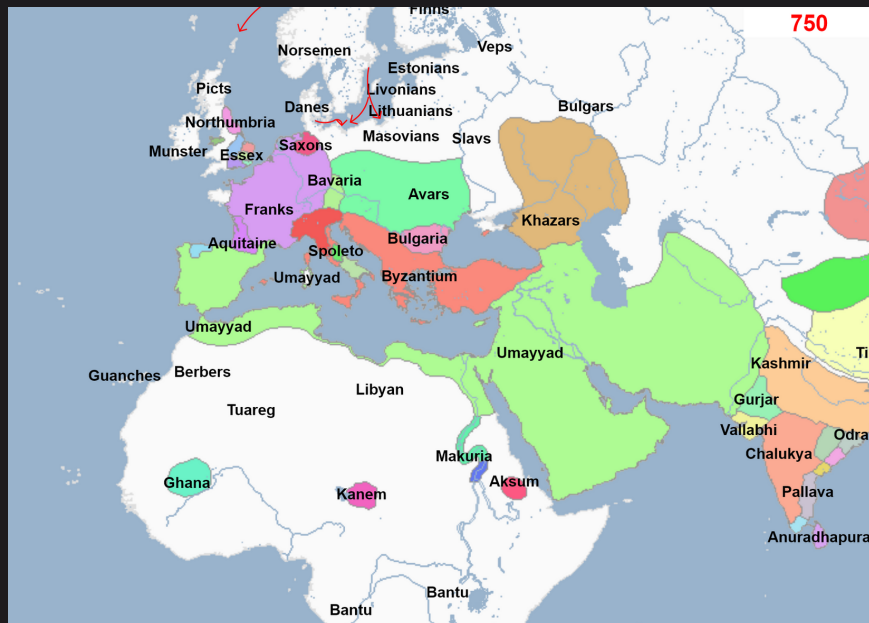


The first scholars I encountered were discussed in Mehrdad's class and may be considered two of the founders of modern political Islam. Al-Afghani, who was actually probably Iranian but hid his identity to appeal to more people, argued that all science is derived from philosophy, which itself can be derived from Islam, and that therefore science is often in harmony with the religion. Al-Afghani tutored Muhammad 'Abduh, an Egyptian scholar, and both hated the British for their colonization of India and other areas. However, while Al-Afghani was increasingly radicalized and facilitated the assassination of a Shah, 'Abduh rejected his mentor's extreme political focus and became a religious reformer as the Grand Mufti of Egypt.



Year 661 AD - The end of the Rashidun Caliphate

Both scholars believed Islam granted the Arabs a newfound inquiry which they used over the first several centuries of Islamic rule to meticulously study, interpret, and preserve ideas and technology from all corners of the world through their new position as intermediary of the Silk Road (and in fact most of the populations of the caliphates were actually non-Muslims who were tolerated in exchange for taxes).



Year 750 AD - The end of the Umayyad Caliphate

However, like all empires, the caliphates did not enjoy total unity; from the beginning, disagreements over religious interpretation and political succession sowed divisions which would manifest as assassinations, civil wars, and entire religious splits like Sunni and Shia, who are really only the tip of the iceberg. 'Abduh lamented the end of the Rashidun caliphate and the subsequent civil wars which led to an increasingly splintered and hostile ummah.

MU'TAZILA

Believed that the Qur'an was "created" and therefore secondary to the Divine

Strongly favored approaching Islam rationally

Influenced by Greek ideas

Believed that the Qur'an existed eternally as an aspect of the Divine

Strongly opposed rationalist approaches to Islam

Rejected Greek influence

ORTHODOXY

One major faction at this time was the Mu'tazila, which also started as a simple dispute over succession but eventually morphed into an entire theological debate which is full of nuance and subtlety that I am going to completely annihilate for the sake of time. In essence, they were inspired by Greek philosophy and believed that most of religion could be explained rationally, which enraged the orthodoxy.

AL-ASH'ARĪ & AL-MĀTURĪDĪ

"Plotted a middle course" between the two extremes of secular rationalism and dogmatic orthodoxy

Emphasized the importance of rational thought as necessary but God-given and therefore secondary to religious tradition and spiritual experience

Together form the ideological basis of the majority of Sunni Muslim beliefs since the 10th century

Are rejected by a minority traditionalist branch, Atharī, which has inspired fundamentalist sects of Islam

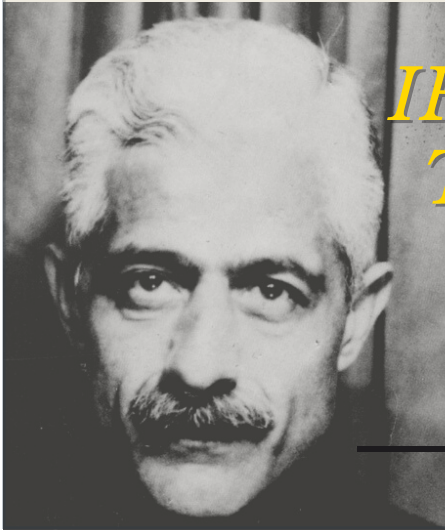
‘Abduh praised the subsequent development of the two very similar schools of Al-Ash’ari and Al-Maturidi, which sought to strike a balance between accepting divine revelation and the need for the human mind to have understanding of the universe. These schools form the basis of most modern Sunni schools of thought, with the notable exception of the Athari (who are followed by the Hanbali school, which we’ll get back to in a moment).

ALI SHARI'ATI

November 23rd, 1933 – June 18th, 1977



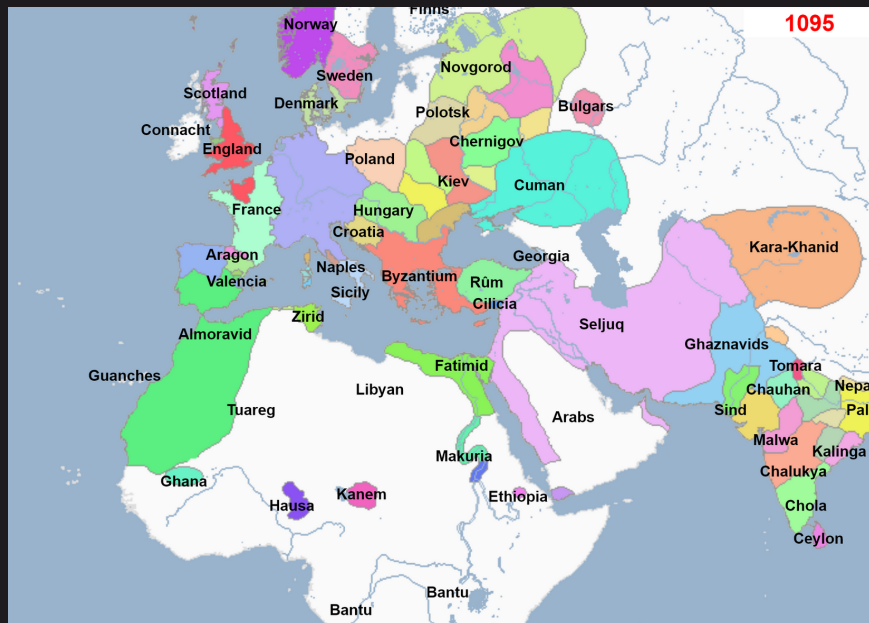
IRANIANS GAZE TO THE WEST



JALAL AL-E AHMAD

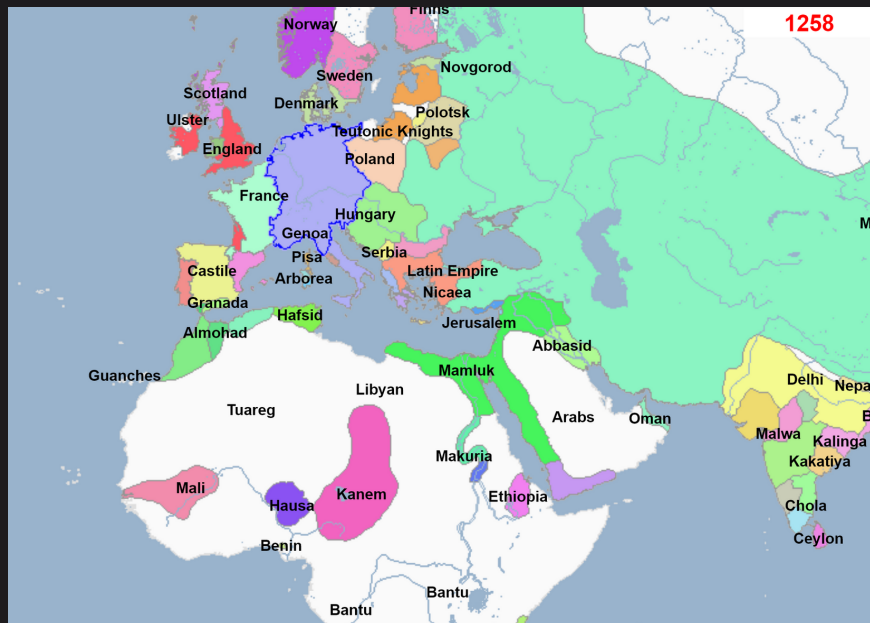
December 2nd, 1923 – September 9th, 1969

I'd now like to jump to two Iranian scholars from the middle of the 20th century who witnessed their country undergo radical transformations of modernism and (to many) Westernization. Ali Shari'ati was an unusual but highly influential scholar best described as a radical socialist Muslim, whose calls for a revolutionary Shi'ism are credited as setting the stage for the 1979 Shia revolution (but his left-wing ideas were quickly left behind).



Year 1095 AD - The First Crusade

His friend and social critic was Jalal Al-e Ahmad, who wrote the influential book *Gharbzadegi* or “Weststruckness” which criticized the economic and political aspects of Iran as being too dependent on the West. He also argued that the rise of modern European hegemony began with the Crusades when Europe set aside its internal conflicts of churches and states to unite against the perceived existential threat of the Arabs and the Turks. Even though from a military standpoint the Crusades were by the end a qualified failure for the Christians, they in turn gave the Muslim world an existential crisis of their own.



Year 1258 AD - The Sack of Baghdad

This was only heightened by the Mongol invasion which swept across Asia and Europe in the 13th century. The conservative Athari produced perhaps their most famous scholar, ibn Taymiyyah, in this time. A controversial scholar of his time (to say the least), ibn Taymiyyah believed that the Crusades were a punishment from God for the religious establishment (which had been solidifying over centuries to the point that many claimed that “the doors to interpretation were closed”) abandoning the true faith and called for radical reforms. In the centuries that followed, he would only grow more popular and he is now considered one of the most influential scholars in modern Islamic fundamentalism.

IDEALISM

Reality is inescapably a construction of the human mind and perception

Popularized by Plato and expanded upon by various Christian theologians and philosophers such as Kant and Hegel

The "City of God"?

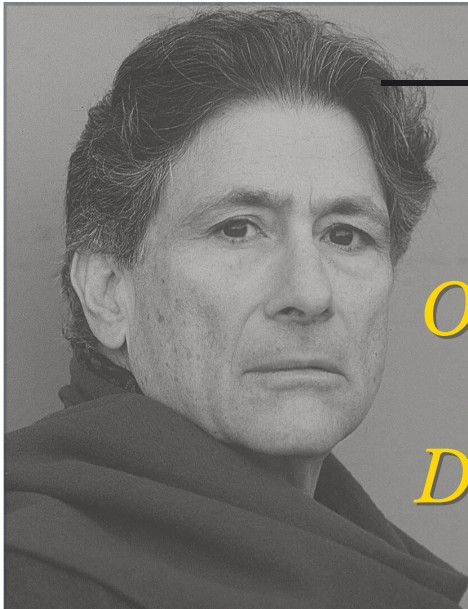
The human mind is simply a product of the objective reality it inhabits

Popularized by secularists and rationalists such as Marx

The "City of Man"?

MATERIALISM

While many scholars agree that the ramifications of the Silk Road, the Crusades and the Mongol invasion set the stage for the Renaissance and Europe's rediscovery of Greek ideas through Arabic translations, and that the Renaissance ultimately led to the rise of Europe as a world power, Shari'ati believed that the upheavals in Europe only heightened its fundamental contradiction, now described in Enlightenment philosophy: idealism vs. materialism.



EDWARD SAID

November 1st, 1935 – September 24th, 2003

ORIENTALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

ROBERT J.C. YOUNG

1950 –



One of the most recent scholars I studied was Edward Said, who is famous for literally writing the book on Orientalism. Said argued that Europeans had built a monolithic and fetishized notion of the East as an exotic and mystical place to justify colonization as early as the Crusades. Said also suggested that this orientalism was actually internalized by the people they colonized, who now saw themselves as irreconcilably alien to the increasingly-materialist West. Robert Young critiqued Said for not really presenting a persuasive solution to this problem and sought to follow the issue back to its source: Europe. Young also concluded that the identity crisis of idealism and materialism was fundamental to the issues that Christendom sought to externalize during the Crusades.



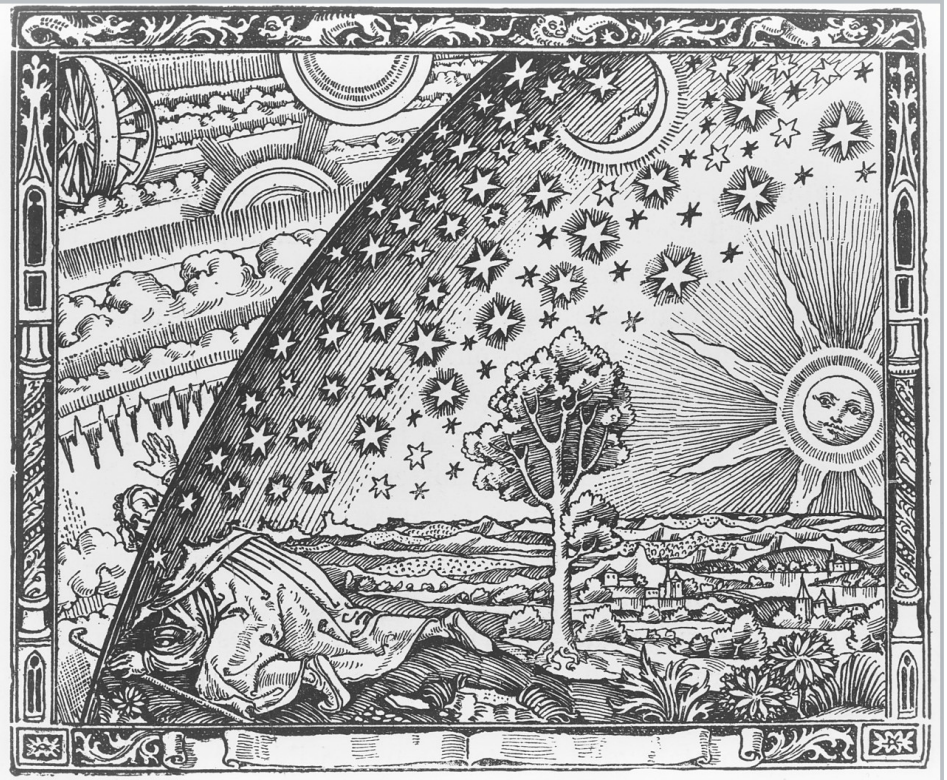
Year 1234 AD - The Ebstorf Mappa Mundi

This externalization is exemplified by this world map found in Germany and dated to the early 13th century. It follows a T-O style common in medieval Europe which is not very geographically accurate but tells an important story. The world is oriented east and divided into three continents, Europe and Africa each taking a quadrant on the left and right with Asia taking a full half. Jesus envelops the world with his head in Asia, his hands to the north and south, and his feet to the west. At the very center of the world is of course the city of Jerusalem. Far from placing Europe at the head of the world, Asia is clearly the head and heart of Christianity.

ISLAMIC HUMANISM

ALI SHARI'ATI

"Islam grants the existence of the natural world separate from our idea of it and also maintains that man, as a being in which the idea subsists, has an independence and nobility relative to material nature, society, and production."



The solution posed by Shari'ati and other Islamic scholars was described as a particular Islamic humanism which sought, at least in theory, to resolve this conflict by placing humanity in the unique position in between the heavenly and the material, neither fully angelic nor fully animal. This definition of humanism is different from the European notion which emerged during the Enlightenment as a turn away from spirituality and medieval thought into secular and classical Greek ideas of human centrality. This alternate definition of humanism, which is also described as *mizan* or balance, is the core of what these scholars believe separates Islam and the West.

However, even that distinction can be hazy. This picture, known as the *Flammarion*, is actually a Western artwork depicting a missionary of the Middle Ages quite literally reaching the edge of the sky. It's become popular as a more mystical and metaphorical artwork since Carl Jung included it in his book about flying saucers in the mid-20th century. But I think the unity between this western artwork and this Islamic quote emphasizes that debates over Greek philosophy vs. Abrahamic religion, spirit vs. matter, king vs. pope, fundamentalism vs. progressivism, have existed in both Europe and Asia for thousands of years. The fact that today's Europe might be considered materialist and today's Middle East might be considered more idealist is not necessarily baked in to the DNA of each place but rather a reflection of the way history has unfolded so far.