The story of a story (text paragraphs)

1) why, I asked myself, should my Western friends take this so readily for granted? Had any of them ever really bothered to gain a direct insight

into Islam - or were their opinions based merely on the handful of clichés and distorted notions that had been handed down to them from previous

generations? Could it perhaps be that the old Graeco-Roman mode of thought which divided the world into Greeks and Romans on one side and

'barbarians' on the other was still so thoroughly ingrained in the Western mind that it was unable to concede, even theoretically, positive value to

anything that lay outside its own cultural orbit?

Ever since Greek and Roman times, European thinkers and historians have been prone to contemplate the history of the world from the standpoint

and in terms of European history and Western cultural experiences alone. Non-Western civilizations enter the picture only in so far as their

existence, or particular movements within them, has or had a direct influence on the destinies of Western man; and thus, in Western eyes, the

history of the world and its various cultures amounts in the last resort to little more than an expanded history of the West.

Naturally, such a narrowed angle of vision is bound to produce a distorted perspective. Accustomed as he is to writings which depict the culture or

discuss the problems of his own civilization in great detail and in vivid colours, with little more than side glances here and there at the rest of the

world, the average European or American easily succumbs to the illusion that the cultural experiences of the West are not merely superior but out

of all proportion to those of the rest of the world; and thus, that the Western way of life is the only valid norm by which other ways of life could be

adjudged - implying, of course, that every intellectual concept, social institution or ethical valuation that disagrees with the Western 'norm' belongs

eo ipso to a lower grade of existence. Following in the footsteps of the Greeks and Romans, the Occidental likes to think that all those 'other'

civilizations are or were only so many stumbling experiments on the path of progress so unerringly pursued by the West; or, at best (as in the case

of the 'ancestor' civilizations which preceded that of the modern West in a direct line),(**page 6in the book)**

2)There is little doubt that the primitive Graeco-Roman outlook is no longer fully operative these days.

Its harshness has been considerably blunted-if for no other reason, because the more mature among Western thinkers have grown disillusioned and

skeptical about many aspects of their own civilization and now begin to look to other parts of the world for cultural inspiration. Upon some of them

it is dawning that there may be not only one book and one story of human progress, but many: simply because mankind, in the historical sense, is

not a homogeneous entity, but rather a variety of groups with widely divergent ideas as to the meaning and purpose of human life. Still, I do not feel

that the West has really become less condescending toward foreign cultures than the Greeks and Romans were: it has only become more tolerant.

Mind you, not toward Islam - only toward certain other Eastern cultures, which offer some sort of spiritual attraction to the spirit-hungry West and

are, at the same time, too distant from the Western world-view to constitute any real challenge to its values.'( **page 6in the book)**

3)The traumatic experience of the Crusades gave Europe its cultural awareness and its unity; but this same experience was destined henceforth also

to provide the false colour in which Islam was to appear to Western eyes. Not simply because the Crusades meant war and bloodshed. So many

wars have been waged between nations and subsequently forgotten, and so many animosities which in their time seemed ineradicable have later

turned into friendships. The damage caused by the Crusades was not restricted to a clash of weapons: it was, first and foremost, an intellectual

damage - the poisoning of the Western mind against the Muslim world through a deliberate misrepresentation of the teachings and ideals of Islam.

For, if the call for a crusade was to maintain its validity, the Prophet of the Muslims had, of necessity, to be stamped as the Anti-Christ and his

religion depicted in the most lurid terms as a fount of immorality and perversion. It was at the time of the Crusades that the ludicrous notion that

Islam was a religion of crude sensualism and brutal violence, of an observance of ritual instead of a purification of the heart, entered the Western

mind and remained there; and it was then that the name of the Prophet Muhammad - the same Muhammad who had insisted that his own followers

respect the prophets of other religions - was contemptuously transformed by Europeans into 'Mahound'. The age when the spirit of independent

inquiry could raise its head was as yet far distant in Europe; it was easy for the powers-that-were to sow the dark seeds of hatred for a religion

and civilization that was so different from the religion and civilization of the West. Thus it was no accident that the fiery Chanson de Roland, which

describes the legendary victory of Christendom over the Muslim 'heathen' in southern France, was composed not at the time of those battles but

three centuries later - to wit, shortly before the First Crusade - immediately to become a kind of 'national anthem' of Europe; and it is no accident,

either, that this warlike epic marks the beginning of a European literature, as distinct from the earlier, localized literatures: for hostility toward Islam

stood over the cradle of European civilization.

It would seem an irony of history that the age-old Western resentment against Islam, which was religious in origin, should still persist

subconsciously at a time when religion has lost most of its hold on the imagination of Western man. This, however, is not really surprising. We

know that a person may completely lose the religious beliefs imparted to him in his childhood while, nevertheless, some particular emotion

connected with those beliefs remains, irrationally, in force throughout his later life -

'- and this,' I concluded, 'is precisely what happened to that collective personality, Western civilization. The shadow of the Crusades hovers over

the West to this day; and all its reactions toward Islam and the Muslim world bear distinct traces of that die-hard ghost…( **page 7 in the book)**

**spirit and flesh**

**4)** Here, I saw, was a society in search of a new spiritual orientation after it had abandoned God: but apparently very few Westerners realized what it was all about. The majority seemed to think, consciously or subconsciously, more or less along these lines: 'Since our reason, our scientific experiments and our calculations do not reveal anything definite about the origin of human life and its destinies after bodily death, we ought to concentrate all our energies on the development of our material and intellectual potential and not allow ourselves to be hampered by transcendental ethics and moral postulates based on assumptions which defy scientific proof.' Thus, while Western society did not expressly deny God, it simply no longer had room for Him in its intellectual system.

**5)** In earlier years, after I had become disappointed with the religion of my ancestors, I had given some thought to Christianity. In my eyes, the Christian concept of God was infinitely superior to that of the Old Testament in that it did not restrict God's concern to any one group of people but postulated His Fatherhood of all mankind. There was, however, an element in the Christian religious view that detracted from the universality of its approach: the distinction it made between the soul and the body, the world of faith and the world of practical affairs. the religion which the Western world professed had failed in what, to me, appeared to have been the true mission of Christ and, indeed, the cardinal task of every religion: to show man not merely how to *feel* but also how to *live* rightly.

6)It is on the basis of this conception that Islam, alone among all higher religions, regards the soul of man as one aspect of his 'personality' and not as an independent phenomenon in its own right. Consequently, to the Muslim, man's spiritual growth is inextricably bound up with all the other aspects of his nature. Physical urges are an integral part of this nature: not the result of an 'original sin' - a concept foreign to the ethics of Islam – but positive, God-given forces, to be accepted and sensibly used as such: hence, the problem for man is not how to suppress the demands of his body but, rather, how to co-ordinate them with the demands of his spirit in such a way that life might become full and righteous.

The root of this almost monistic life-assertion is to be found in the Islamic view that man's original nature is essentially good. Contrary to the Christian idea that man is born sinful, or the teaching of Hinduism that he is originally low and impure and must painfully stagger through a long chain of incarnations toward the ultimate goal of perfection, the Koran says: *Verily, We create man in a perfect state* - a state of purity that may be destroyed only by subsequent wrong behaviour - *and thereupon We reduce him to the lowest of low, with the exception of those who have faith in God and do good works.*

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