4-11-2006

Patterns of Cross-Cultural Tolerance and Intolerance in Medieval Christian Depictions of Islam, Muslims, and Mohammad

Jenn Henry
Macalester College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/islam

---

Patterns of Cross–Cultural Tolerance and Intolerance in Medieval Christian Depictions of Islam, Muslims, and Mohammad

Jenn Henry

Ibn Khaldun (1332 –1406 CE) was a medieval scholar born in Tunisia. He was a philosopher, focusing on sociology and history. Ibn Khaldun's project was to write a *Universal History,* and the best known section of this project is his first volume: the *Muqaddimah* or *Prolegomena,* also called "Introduction to History." In this, Ibn Khaldun details the rise and fall of civilizations, which is a cycle completing itself every three generations (or 120 years). The first generation is nomadic, focusing on warfare and survival. These hard times create a sense of social cohesion, or group feeling. The second generation forms a settled pattern of life, still remembering the past generation's struggle even though existence has been eased substantially. By the third generation, the civilization becomes lazy. People become accustomed to luxury and forget all the hardships of the first generation. The group feeling, or national spirit, of the civilization disintegrates and the civilization decays. This weakened state of the civilization allows another competing civilization to invade and take over, starting the cycle afresh.

While Ibn Khaldun specifically considered this pattern of civilizations' progress as it developed between conquered groups and their conquerors, the pattern of rise and fall of progress over time can also be applied to cross-cultural toleration. The cycle of cross-cultural toleration begins at the first moment of interaction. This event might be the result of trade, exploration, or military conquest, and may be accidental or intentional. Over the span of many years, the two culture groups come to occupy the same land and enter into each others' awareness. Each culture must have a strategy of explaining or dealing with the other, even if that strategy is to ignore the other culture group. As time progresses, people of each culture group begin to acclimate to the other group's presence; the event that brought them into initial contact is beyond any living person's memory. Any information about that moment is recycled, secondhand information; the edge of personal experience is removed.

Enough generations pass so that both culture groups include "native" members who were born, raised, and died on the same land. The two groups begin to forget their intolerance for one another as time goes on, and feelings of security and confidence prevail. However, a new event between the two culture groups in any given location can always spark the cycle of intolerance (and accompanying polemic) afresh as people attempt to make sense of events in the world around them.

This cycle applies to cross-cultural interactions between Christians and Muslims. The first Christian-Muslim contact occurred in the Mediterranean in the 7th century (Tolan, *Saracens*, xiii), and patterns have emerged in the cross-cultural connections between the two groups in the thousands of years that have passed since. Contact between Christians and Muslims in medieval times spanned the entire Mediterranean, and today the two groups intermingle all over the world. Although these interactions span wide geographies as well as many years, patterns still emerge in Islamo-Christian cross-cultural relations. In moments where violent events make people insecure, cultural distinctions become an important defense mechanism. In these times, assimilation is unacceptable, and apologetics and polemics arise to define tolerable and intolerable cultural groups.

Anti-Muslim polemics from Christians look remarkably similar across hundreds of years; in the 7th century, John of Damascus considered the infliction of Muslim presence to be a punishment from God and a sign of the coming apocalypse. In moments of confidence, writers also begin to sound similar. Theodore Abu Qurra, writing in the 9th century, acknowledges that Islam is a force that will endure and will have to be dealt with. In the 15th century, Paul of Burgos writes that Islam cannot be a terrible force, because Christianity survived. Juan de Segovia even begins to translate the Qur'an into vernacular language in this century. Finally, the events that spark these downward turns in cross-cultural tolerance share common characteristics. This paper will address similarities in moments of tolerance, moments of intolerance, and the events that spark the change in Christian perceptions of Islam. These patterns support a regularly fluctuating model of history akin to Ibn Khaldun's theory of the rise and fall of civilizations. The paper will conclude by offering

the value of such a model, also proposing ways in which the model might be used to break the cycle of history.

John Tolan, a scholar who studies Muslim‑Christian interactions in medieval times, writes that it is important to contextualize individual Christian authors; that instead of lauding authors for tolerance or criticizing them for intolerance, it is important to understand the social forces at work motivating each specific author in each specific context instead of creating a coherent "narrative of growing intolerance" from antiquity to the present (Tolan, *Saracens*, 281). Though history has its limitations, and it is impossible to know what each individual Christian and Muslim thought of one another at each moment, it is still important to present as complex a picture as possible without glossing over certain groups at certain times as representative all of Christianity or all of Islam. One danger of using this sine wave model is the lumping together of Muslim‑Christian relations that are occurring in diverse locations and situations. This discussion will focus on a few specific instances where the pattern repeats.

First, there are distinct parallels between character and use of polemics in the 12th and 16th centuries. Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, was a Burgundian monk who wrote in the 1140s and 1150s, around the time of the Second Crusades from 1145‑1147. Peter of Cluny attacked Muhammad as a heresiarch alongside Arius and Mani, criticizing groups who considered Christ to be a mere human being not of divine origin. Peter situates the devil as working through Muhammad to lead his followers down the wrong path. Peter's writings are not discussions of theology; he knew little of Islam itself. While Peter of Cluny's *Contra sectam siue haeresim Saracenorum* is directed at Muslims to convert, *Summa totius haeresis Saracenorum* as well as the Latin translation of the Qur'an (complete with polemical annotations – circa 1142 or 1143) are directed at Christian readers and their spiritual needs (Tolan, *Saracens*, 155‑165). At this moment preceding the Second Crusades, Christians would be hungry for anti‑Muslim polemic to fuel and justify their conquest.

A similar relationship presents itself in 16th century Spain. The Ottoman Turks had begun to advance in the Mediterranean and threatened Habsburg Rule. Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, Naples and Sicily

commanded Gonzalo de Arredondo y Alvarado to write *Castillo inexpugnable de la fee.* Though his contemporaries criticized both his literary and historical merit, describing him as "'affectedly archaic,'" Charles V "must have valued his ability to compose the kind of propaganda needed to arouse support for a holy crusade" (Tolan, *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam,* 293). The Turks had just killed Lewis, King of Hungary and Bohemia, who was Charles V's brother-in-law; this event raised fears that the Turks were approaching and breaking the border between the Islamic world and the Christian. The text is a conversation between a Benedictine monk and Lewis' wife (Charles' sister). Turkish invasion is portrayed as being the result of God's anger that the people had failed to submit to the rule of the Holy Roman Emperor. Turks, Mohammedans, Saracens, and Ismaelites are described as "faithless and spurious'"; Muslims are "evil, lost, and unbelieving"; Muhammad is "'diabolical.'" History's collection of anti-Muslim/Muhammad polemics are used in this account (Tolan, *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam,* 299-300). Arredondo's description of Muhammad and Islam as evil and satanic is especially reminiscent of Peter of Cluny's polemic.

Periods of peace also parallel one another across space and time, often sandwiched by periods of intolerance. *The Travels of Mandeville,* written in French around 1357, portrays Saracens as having a comparatively high degree of humanity, as well as moral and political authority. Though *Mandeville* was also created from past sources, Saracens are described as monotheistic and faithful; Muhammad is said to have received the "Alkaron" from God and Muslims are keepers of commandments. *Mandeville* even criticizes Christians through the voice of the Sultan, using travel as a conceit to express subversive opinions (Tolan, *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam,* 271-288). These cultural critiques of Christianity indicate a situation and time period of confidence quite different than the propagandistic polemics published in other centuries

Juan de Segovia (1400-1458), a professor of theology at the University of Salamanca in Spain, had "some experience of peaceful coexistence with Muslims" (Tolan, *Medieval Muslim Philosophy,* 163). He arranged discussions between Muslims and Christians, recommending that Christians learn about Islam and even supervising the translation of the Qur'an into Castilian and

Latin. While he was sure that the "truth" of Christianity would prevail in dialogue, Segovia emphasized peaceful interactions. Both Segovia and *Mandeville* humanized Muslims and made Islam a religion, foregoing the descriptions of satanic heretics employed by Peter of Cluny in 12th century France and Arredondo in 16th century Spain.

These four examples seem to indicate a rise and fall in toleration for Muslim culture. While toleration was low in 12th century France (according to Peter of Cluny's account), it increased in the 14th and 15th centuries in France and Spain respectively (if *Mandeville* and Segovia's works are good indicators of the general mood), and again fell in the 16th Spain with Arredondo's propaganda.

If used as a predictor of history, this model of an unbreakable cycle repeating unto infinity might be deemed deterministic, even fatalistic. Periods of tolerance are persistently interrupted by events necessarily causing periods of intolerance. Used as a template for the rest of human history, the pattern negates the possibility of permanent human progress, since people are doomed to ride the roller coaster of tolerance and intolerance forever. Instead, the model can be used as an explanation, and the information gathered might be useful in breaking the cycle of intolerance.

This cyclic model of history might productively be used to explain (and hopefully diminish) periods of intolerance. Periods of intolerance trace their roots to specific moments in time. When linked with the event that causes them, cross-cultural polemics can be challenged as an appropriate or an inappropriate reaction to that event. This linkage will not allow intolerance to go unquestioned as the natural way of interacting; positioning polemics as reactions to an event allows for the possibility of other reactions.

It is also important that polemics are seen as recycled arguments, as drops in the bucket of a long historical pattern of interaction that includes both periods of friendship and periods of mistrust. So much of cross-cultural intolerance relies on people's fear of the unknown. It is much harder to portray another culture as "evil" when it is known in collective memory that there once existed friendship between cultures. By the same token, polemics lose some strength when they are revealed not to

be new arguments specifically applicable to the current atmosphere.

Macalester Islam Journal   *Spring 2006*   *page* 17
_____

Works Referenced

"Ibn Khaldun."
http://www.humanistictexts.org/ibn_khaldun.htm. (3 Apr.
2006).

Issawi, Charles. *An Arab Philosophy of History: Selections from the Prolegomena of Ibn*
        Khaldun of Tunis (1332-1406).   London: Butler and Tanner Ltd., 1950.

Tolan, John V.   *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination.* New York:
        Columbia University Press, 2002.

Tolan, John Victor, ed.   *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam.* New York: Routledge,
        1996, 272-291.