

Homo Kaplanensis: “Europe Was Defined By Islam. And Islam Is Redefining It Now.”

by Hugh Fitzgerald (May 2016)

Robert Kaplan, a contributing editor to *The Atlantic*, has just published [a piece on Islam and the future of Europe](#). He claims, startlingly, that Europe “was essentially defined by Islam,” by which he means that before Islam swept across North Africa, Europe consisted of a single civilization, on both banks of the Mediterranean – that of the Roman Empire – and that Islam’s arrival severed “the Mediterranean region into two civilizational halves.” It is true that Muslim conquerors swept across North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries, but not quite true, pace Kaplan, that they “extinguished Christianity there.” Millions of Coptic Christians remained a majority in Egypt until the 14th century (that is, for at least 700 years after the time that Kaplan claims Muslim armies “virtually extinguished Christianity” in North Africa). And while it is true that the Roman Empire was sundered, it was not only by the forces of Islam, as Kaplan appears to believe: before the Arab armies arrived, others had been seizing territory from Roman control, including the Visigoths in Spain and the Vandals, who conquered the Roman province of Africa in 433 and held it till 539.

Kaplan quotes with evident approval Jose Ortega y Gasset that “all European history has been a great migration toward the North.” Is that true? The Roman Empire fell because of a great migration of the Germanic tribes *from* the north and northeast to the South; it was they, the Barbarians, who beat down the steady Roman legions and seized Rome in 476 A.D., with the Germanic warrior Odoacer placed on the throne. And even before the Fall of Rome, the Roman Empire had divided into Eastern and Western Empires, one ruled from Rome, the other from Constantinople. Surely that split was just as significant, for the future of European civilization, with the Western empire embracing Latin Catholicism, and the Eastern empire Orthodox Christianity, as the loss of North Africa to Islam.

Racing through the centuries, Kaplan in the same sentence leaps from “the

breakup of the Roman empire" (into East and West, but he says nothing further about the colossal effect of that split) to "that northward migration" which "saw the Germanic peoples (the Goths, Vandals, Franks, and Lombards) forge the rudiments of Western civilization." This is a doubly bizarre remark, since it was their *southern* migration which brought the Germanic peoples within the borders of the Roman Empire and ultimately to Rome. And it was the Romans of both the Western and Eastern Empires, not the Germanic tribes, who forged more than the rudiments of Western civilization, including such monumental achievements as, in the Eastern Empire, the Code of Justinian.

Kaplan fleetingly mentions, exactly three times, what should be at the center of any history of Europe: Christianity itself. He writes that the Slavs and Magyars "adopted Christianity," that European unity began with the concept of a "Christendom" in "inevitable opposition to Islam," and that Muslims in Europe today "have no desire to be Christians" – and that's all he has to say on the subject of Europe and Christianity. He does not discuss what Christianity has contributed to forming the European mentality over the last two thousand years, or how it has influenced, even shaped, Europe's art and music, its literature, its philosophy, its political thought, its mores, none of it thinkable without taking into the account the influence of Christianity. Kaplan has Islam on his mind, and were he to do justice to Christianity, his readers might begin to see the sense of insisting that it was not Islam, but Christianity, that "defined Europe."

If Islam and the Muslim armies hadn't existed, Europe's civilizational boundaries would be different – could still extend into North Africa and the Levant – but the nature of that civilization would not be different from what it was, and is. Europe would still have been a child of Greece and Rome and ancient Israel. Islam did not contribute to those many things – art, music, literature, philosophy, political theory – that we mean by "western civilization." Islam created in its adherents a mentality that abhorred novelty, or *bida*, that held to a kind of *inshallah*-fatalism based on the view of an Allah who could interfere, at whim and subject to no laws, with the lives of men, that encouraged a habit of mental submission rather than of skeptical inquiry. European civilization stood in stark contrast, promoting rather than anathematizing the new, believing in a God who was not whimsical but rationally prepared to obey His own laws, and promoting critical thought and inquiry.

After the initial sweep of Muslim armies through North Africa, halted at the highwater mark for Islam of Poitiers in the West and, centuries later, of Vienna in the East, Islam's "contribution" to Europe consisted solely of military aggression, mainly through raids by sea (in one case, Muslim raiders got as far as Iceland). But Islam contributed nothing to European culture. Civilizationally, Europe remained a child of Greece and Rome and Israel, and then, of course, for two millennia, of Christianity. The armies of Islam waged war as best they could; their gains and losses helped to define Europe's political boundaries, but Islam had no effect on the European mentality.

Kaplan several times mentions Edward Said's book *Orientalism* favorably, claiming that it set out how "Islam had defined Europe culturally, by showing what it was against. Europe's identity, in other words, was built in significant measure on a sense of superiority to the Muslim Arab world on its periphery." What Said mainly tried to do in *Orientalism* was different: to endow with a new and insidious meaning the word "Orientalist," which hitherto had referred neutrally to Western scholars of the languages of the Levant (especially Arabic), and of Islam and Islamic civilization. Said claimed that these "Orientalists" studied Arabic as part of a deliberate campaign to justify and help the project of Western imperialism by means of their putatively unsympathetic or hostile treatment of Oriental peoples. The devastating detailed critique of Said's use of "Orientalism" as a term of polemical abuse, delivered by Bernard Lewis in 1982, and which many considered a knockout blow, apparently has not yet reached Robert D. Kaplan.

Kaplan appears to believe that European unity in the early modern period could not have been achieved without Europe's "inevitable opposition" to Islam. This "inevitable opposition" to Islam was, Kaplan says, "a concept that culminated in the Crusades." No, the Crusades were not the culmination of some "inevitable opposition" to inoffensive Muslims. Rather, Europe's opposition to Islam "culminating in the Crusades" was fed by centuries of Muslim attacks up and down the coasts of Europe (and not the other way around), and the Crusades were undertaken initially in order to repel an assault by Muslim Seljuk Turks on Anatolia, and the Christian effort then broadened into an attempt to retake the Holy Land because, for a century, Muslims had made life hell for Christians in the Holy Land, beginning with the almost-total destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on the orders of the Caliph Al-Hakim in 1009, and attacks on

Christian pilgrims that kept them from travelling freely to, and within, the Holy Land. This understandable response to continuous Muslim aggression hardly required an “inevitable opposition” to “Islam.”

Kaplan mentions Europe’s “sense of superiority to the Muslim Arab world on its periphery” as building its identity. Curiously, he doesn’t mention Islam’s far greater sense of superiority to the Christian world on *its* periphery. Nor does he mention that Europe had been quite capable of uniting and building an identity without needing Islam to measure itself against – or has he forgotten about the Roman Empire?

And Kaplan continues in the Saidian vein of grand pronouncements, and like Said, turns out to be wrong in many of his details.

He writes that “imperialism proved the ultimate expression of the evolution” from the “inevitable opposition to Islam” to that European “sense of superiority to the Muslim Arab world.” That’s the grand pronouncement. And here’s the cavalier way with history: *“Here modern Europe, starting with Napoleon, conquered the Middle East, then dispatched scholars and diplomats to study Islamic civilization, classifying it as something beautiful, fascinating, and – most crucial – inferior.”*

What happened was this: Napoleon entered Egypt in 1798. Far from this representing the beginning of Europe’s conquest of the Middle East, all French forces had left Egypt by 1801, and no European forces “conquered” any part of the Muslim Middle East or Muslim North Africa until the 20th century, with the single exception of Algeria. But Kaplan appears to believe that Napoleon entered Egypt, and then those Europeans, “starting with Napoleon, conquered the Middle East.” He may not know the true sequence of events: *save for a three-year stay by Napoleon’s troops in Egypt, and the annexing of Algeria by France in 1830, the Europeans had little to do with the Arab lands until just before World War I.* Scrupulosity with the facts of history is indispensable, but Kaplan dispenses with it, and how.

He is careless, too, when he writes that “early modern Europe...dispatched scholars and diplomats to study Islamic civilization, classifying it as beautiful, fascinating, and – most crucial – inferior.” This is pure Said – the Orientalist as handmaiden to imperialism. Is it true? Which scholars and

diplomats were “dispatched” by their governments to study Islamic civilization? A few possibilities come to mind. Edward William Lane produced *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, but no one “dispatched” him; he was simply a rich man indulging his curiosity in Cairo. The Frenchman Champollion was in Egypt, but instead of studying Islamic civilization, he deciphered the Rosetta Stone’s hieroglyphs. The scholar of Islam Theodor Noldeke stayed in Germany, and most of the important Western scholars of Islam similarly remained at home. Perhaps Kaplan was thinking of the scholar who fit his bill most closely – the Hungarian Ignac Goldziher, who did travel in the Muslim East, supported by his government. But Hungary had no imperialist project, in the Near East or anywhere else. And most damning to Kaplan’s suave assumption is that Goldziher – I’m fairly sure Kaplan didn’t know this – did not find “Islamic civilization” at all “inferior.” As for those “scholars and diplomats” who found “Islamic civilization” both “beautiful” and “fascinating,” it’s hard to tell whom Kaplan has in mind. I suspect he may have been thinking of writers, not diplomats or scholars, and got Flaubert, so scathing in his epistolary reports from the fleshpots of Cairo and Beirut, confused with Chateaubriand, who in his *Le Dernier des Abencerages* of a generation before, presented a Romantic view (“beautiful,” “fascinating”) of Islamic Spain, akin to what Washington Irving did with his *Alhambra*. Of course, neither Flaubert nor Chateaubriand was sent to the East by anyone. I’d like to see Kaplan’s list of the “scholars and diplomats” he claims were “dispatched” for such study.

And having misstated so much about early modern Europe in relation to Islam, in treating of the present day Kaplan, consistent in his inaccuracies, does not disappoint. He claims that “Europe’s sense of cultural preeminence was buttressed by the new police states of North Africa and the Levant.” Could it be that Europe’s “sense of cultural preeminence” needed no buttressing from the existence of Arab “police states,” but reflected an unapologetic awareness of Europe’s, and especially of France’s...“cultural preeminence”? And when one thinks of those places where French cultural penetration has been most pronounced, and thus French cultural “preeminence” most clearly on comparative display, they have been Lebanon and Tunisia, the two Arab countries that have been least like police states.

Kaplan thinks that the Europeans welcomed the absence of political freedoms in North Africa and the Levant, because it gave them the opportunity “to lecture

Arabs about human rights” while not having to worry “about the possibility of messy democratic experiments that could lead to significant migration.” This is bizarre. For decades European governments have been monitoring the domestic politics of the Arab states, lecturing them about human rights and – for Turkey, in particular – about standards for admission to the E.U. Kaplan is saying that it’s all been a farce, that the Europeans were happy to tolerate, behind the smokescreen of their human-rights-and-democracy palaver, the “police states” that held the Arab peoples prisoner. But the Europeans meant it; they followed through with threatened sanctions in order to force Arab governments to be less despotic. They supported, and still support, all kinds of NGOs. Kaplan would have you believe that when France and Great Britain bombed Qaddafi’s forces in Libya, thus helping to ensure his overthrow, they were deliberately acting *against their own interests in making possible “messy democratic experiments” possibly leading to greater “migration.”* His view of European malevolence toward the Arabs is not supported either by their words or their deeds. Their enthusiasm for the “Arab Spring” may have been naïve, but it was also genuine.

Kaplan writes that “hundreds of thousands of Muslims are filtering into economically stagnant European states...” True? A moment’s glance at the news tells us that these Muslims are in fact headed as quickly as they can for the most well-off European states, to the Scandinavian countries and, above all, to Germany, and not to the “economically stagnant” states, such as Spain or Greece or Italy.

“The migration,” he claims, is “driven by war and state collapse.” But not only that. What about the availability of more boats, run by better-organized smuggling networks? What about the refusal of Western navies to enforce blockades as they once would have done, because of the power of the *bien-pensants* who have convinced Europeans (with Pope Francis now taking the lead) that they have a duty to accept these “refugees”? Above all, surely the greater migration today is the result of the widespread availability of cell phones and computers in the Third World, spreading tantalizing information about the quality of life in Europe, which would-be migrants assume will be theirs, too, if only they can reach those distant promised lands. Many of those claiming to be “Syrians” fleeing war-torn Syria, or “Iraqis” fleeing war-torn Iraq, turn out to be Muslims from dozens of countries, including Turkey and Pakistan and Kosovo and Russia and Serbia, that are far from collapsing and hardly, right now, war-

torn.

Kaplan talks of the new Muslim migration with a kind of *inshallah*-fatalism. It's here; it can't be stopped; there's no point in even weakly protesting against it, this migration is "erasing the distinction between the imperial centers and their former colonies." Such "imperial centers" as Sweden or Germany? And what were their "former colonies" in North Africa and the Levant? Only two European countries had "former colonies" in those places – France (in North Africa) and Italy (in Libya). Great Britain's mandates and protectorates did not constitute "colonies." But Kaplan likes to think in terms of "imperial centers and their former colonies" – "imperialism" fits a left-wing mindset.

Bizarrely, Kaplan points to "the cultural purity that Europe craves in the face of the Muslim-refugee influx is simply impossible in a world of increasing human interactions." "Craves cultural purity"? Another product of Kaplan's perfervid imagination: Europe does not crave "cultural purity." Europe has admitted into its midst all sorts of immigrants who violate its "cultural, ethnic, and religious purity," such as it was, but who worry the Europeans not at all: Chinese, Vietnamese, Hindus from India, Brazilians, Filipinos, Peruvians and many others; Europe is, like America and the rest of the West, busily celebrating its new diversity. But there is one kind of "diversity," the permanently un-assimilating, threatening kind, the kind that comes from Muslim migrants alone, which Kaplan never mentions. The Islamic division of the world between Believer and Unbeliever, the doctrine of *al-wala' wa-l-bara*, that is, loyalty to fellow Muslims and enmity toward non-Muslims, the belief that Muslims are the "best of people" and non-Muslims "the vilest of creatures," the duty of Jihad, incumbent on all Muslims to spread the faith, until Islam everywhere dominates, and Muslims rule, everywhere – what sensible Europeans "crave" is not "cultural purity," but freedom from the fear of millions of unwanted Muslim migrants.

To accuse Europeans of desiring "cultural purity" (that word "purity" has a distinctly unpleasant – as in "racial purity" – note) when their worries about Muslims are well-founded (see Paris, Brussels, Madrid, London, Cologne for a start), is unfair. To insist that "if [the West] does have a meaning beyond geography"(!), that meaning will be found only in "an ever more inclusive liberalism," by which Kaplan means "liberalism" in the peculiarly kaplanian sense of happily agreeing to admit into your national home everyone who wants to

come in, amounts to suicidal altruism. "Going back now to nationalism" is impossible, Kaplan asserts; it would be "courting disaster." I don't know why Kaplan believes the kind of nationalism that consists of pride in one's own country's history, and an attachment to, and affection for it, is wrong and impossible and means "courting disaster." He relies on authority, quoting Alexander Herzen's version of *inshallah*-fatalism: "History does not turn back..." We derive as little meaning from this kind of portentous but hollow remark as from Fukuyama's "History is Dead," or Obama's incessant prattle about "getting on the Right Side of History" or "getting on the Wrong Side of History." But History is the kind of thing Robert Kaplan likes.

Kaplan sees as inevitable a Europe where Islam must be fully accommodated: "Europe must now find some way to dynamically incorporate the world of Islam without diluting its devotion to the rule-of-law-based system that arose in Europe's north." ("Europe's north"? Has he forgotten where the Code of Justinian was fashioned?) And while Islam has its own rule-of-law-based system, called the Sharia, for Muslims there can be no compromise with another "rule-of-law based system"; accommodation with Islam means surrender to Sharia.

Kaplan ends: "If [Europe] cannot evolve in the direction of universal values, there will be only the dementia of ideologies and coarse nationalisms to fill the void. This would signal the end of 'the West' in Europe."

But Europe already has "universal values" that were doing just fine before the recent Muslim invasion – democratic polities, legal limits on government power, protection for individual human rights including the freedom of speech and freedom of conscience, legal equality for men and women; these are some of the "universal values" that are being attacked daily by Muslim migrants who hold very different "universal values" based on the supremacy of Islam, and submission to the Sharia. Kaplan appears to think it is Europeans who need to compromise, and ignores the grim fact – or does he not know? – that for Muslims there can be no compromising. Their ultimate goal is not "accommodation" with Europe, but "imposition" on Europe of the Sharia.

Kaplan's take on the Islamic invasion of Europe is peculiar: fond of the idea of a once-and-future Europe, on both sides of the Mediterranean, being resurrected in a return to "a classical geography" – that of the Roman Empire – "as terrorism and migration reunite North Africa and the Levant with Europe."

Terrorism and migration are not “reuniting” Europe; they are destroying Europe, for these are simply two means of Muslim conquest, first by striking terror into the hearts of Infidels, and second, by demographically overwhelming them. As for invoking the future threat of the “dementia of ideologies,” what is Kaplan talking about? The only “dementia” apparent in Europe today is that of Muslim migrants in mental thrall to the ideology of Islam and, just as worrisome, the dementia of those non-Muslims who, like Robert Kaplan, fail to see what is staring them in the face – not the promise of a “new Europe” but the threat of a Europe that could be destroyed by the failure of its citizens to recognize, halt, and determinedly turn back, what has now become a Muslim invasion.

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