

Prester John in the Forbidden City?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In the century after Muhammad's death, Muslim armies of the Umayyad caliphate seized the Middle East and North Africa, crossed the Straits of Gibraltar, conquered most of the Iberian peninsula, and pushed deep into central France, where their forces were finally defeated, between Poitiers and Tours, by Charles Martel's Frankish troops in 732; this marked the high-water mark of Islamic conquest in Western Europe. The Muslims were not then driven back out of France; in fact, they remained in Narbonne and Septimania for another 27 years, but eventually they pulled back across the Pyrenees, solidifying their control of the Iberian Peninsula. And as we all know, the Christians of Spain did not quietly acquiesce in that Muslim conquest, but spent 770 years slowly liberating themselves from the Muslims, in what entered history as the Reconquista. The final victory over the Muslims came with the

conquest of Grenada in 1492.

The Christians of Europe in the medieval period were keenly aware of the loss of all that vast territory, peopled by Christians, which Muslims had seized in Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East, and knew, too, that Arab armies were elsewhere on the move, pushing eastward against the Persians of the Sasanian Empire and threatening Byzantium. The Christians of Europe were constantly reminded of an ever-present threat of Islam, as reports would reach them of new Muslim victories. And Muslim slavers raided Christian shipping in the Mediterranean, and attacked villages along the coasts not only of that inland sea, but also in the Atlantic, along the east coast of France and as far north as the Netherlands. Those raiders even reached Ireland and, in 1627, on one occasion, a Muslim raiding party even got as far north as Iceland. (To be precise, there were actually two simultaneous raiding parties in Iceland, one from Algiers, and one from Sale, in Morocco). Those North African raiders came to be known as the Barbary Pirates; they became a real menace to Christian ships and seamen in the Mediterranean, and growing Western naval power, including especially that of the young American Republic, finally put paid to these Barbary Pirates in the early 19th century .

During all those years of an ascendant Islam, the Europeans consoled themselves with stories of a fabulous kingdom of Nestorian Christians that existed on the other side of the Muslim domains. The powerful Christian king who ruled over this mysterious domain was known as Prester John. The legend of Prester John lasted, in the collective European imagination, from the 12th to the 17th centuries. His mythical realm was first placed in India, both because that fabulous land had already established itself in European minds as full of wonders, and because of the reports, often exaggerated, of the evangelical successes of Nestorian Christians in that distant country. Later, when the Mongols arrived in the West,

and under Hulegu Khan conquered Baghdad in 1258, where they destroyed not just the city but the Abbasid Caliphate, Europeans imagined that Prester John's kingdom was not in India, but to be found somewhere in Central Asia, among those same Mongols who, because they were known not to be Muslims, were assumed to be Christians (the Europeans in this period had hardly heard of Buddhists), and therefore as potential allies of Europe's Christians against the ever-threatening Muslims. And finally, after the Europeans discovered that the Mongols had converted to Islam, Prester John was moved yet again, in the fertile imaginations of Europeans, now to Africa, where it was reported by Portuguese explorers that his Nestorian Kingdom was established in Ethiopia, for that land, too, was famous as a Christian kingdom that, amidst so many lands to which Islam had spread and where Islam now dominated, had managed to hold out.

The legend of Prester John, in all of its versions, was created and sustained by fearful Christians, worried about the constant threat of aggressive Muslims, and seeking solace in this mythical king's existence in the same way that a child might seek solace in an Imaginary Friend. All kinds of legends and pseudo-histories were built up around the figure of Prester John and his Nestorian Kingdom. He was said, for example, to be marching on Jerusalem to free the Holy Land of Muslim rulers, but was prevented from doing so by the flooding of the Tigris. And others, too, in his kingdom – his son, and grandson – were said to have the same intention to help Europeans against their common enemy, the Muslims. There were even attempts by the Crusaders to create a Franco-Mongol alliance against the Islamic caliphates, an obvious choice given that there were many influential Nestorians in the Mongol court, and the Mongols were generally sympathetic to Christianity before their own conversion to Islam. It should be emphasized that the Franks (Western Europeans and those in the Crusader States of the Levant) were open to the idea of support from the East in large part because of the legend of

the mythical Prester John. However, that proposed alliance never led to any coordinated attack on the Muslims.

Over the centuries, as the Western Europeans became militarily stronger and Muslims weaker, there was less need, and finally no need at all, for the myth of Prester John to console and hold out hope for Europeans. They no longer required either consolation or hope, for by the 19th century Islam was everywhere on the run, as the European powers, militarily now more powerful than Muslims, began in earnest their building of colonial empires, in many places doing so at the expense of Islam. The British in India (where they defeated Muslim rulers), the French in Muslim North Africa, the Dutch in the Muslim East Indies, even the Russians in the Muslim Caucasus, signaled this clear reversal of religio-political fortunes between Western Christendom and Islam. Everywhere the Muslims were losing to more powerful Christian powers.

And now we are living through the reverse: a resurgent and self-confident Islam steadily encroaches on a retreating and intimidated West. First, there was the end of colonialism. Formerly British India became two independent states, India and Pakistan, and then Pakistan itself became two Muslim states, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and India, though still mainly Hindu, sees its Muslims steadily rising as a percentage of the total population. The British pulled out of Muslim Malaya in 1957. What had been the Dutch East Indies (and where the great Dutch Islamologue Snouck Hurgronje helped run the colony's religious affairs for sixteen years) is now an independent Muslim country, Indonesia, finally recognized as such by the Dutch in 1949 after four years of a nationalist insurrection. Muslims dominate everywhere in Indonesia, save in Bali, the last redoubt of Hinduism. In Egypt, the English who under Lord Cromer had arrived, beginning in 1882, to reform the Egyptian civil service, ended their self-declared "protectorate" in 1922, when Egypt declared its independence. In Libya, the former Italian overlords were pushed out by the

British and French in 1943; from then until 1951 the French held Fezzan, while Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were under British administration; by the end of 1951 Libya became independent. The French granted Morocco independence in 1955, and Tunisia attained its independence in 1956. Algeria was a more complicated matter, given the comparatively large size of its French population and the ferocious determination of some French to keep Algeria French. Finally, after a long and bloody war, Algeria attained its independence in 1962. Thus did the West retreat from so many Muslim lands in North Africa that had once been controlled by European powers.

It was the same story in the Middle East. The French had ended their Syria/Lebanon mandate in 1943, and the two independent nations of Syria and Lebanon emerged. The British held their mandate in Iraq beginning in 1921 and ending it in 1932. The British did hold on elsewhere, with military garrisons on the western littoral of the Persian Gulf, but then, to save money, the British government withdrew the last of its troops in 1971 from Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, now independent states. The Colony of Aden, too, had been given up, and eventually became part of Yemen, after British troops left in 1967. Everywhere in the Middle East, there was the long low receding roar of retreat by the European powers.

But having left so many Muslim lands, the West then discovered that Muslims were not satisfied, their geopolitical appetites whetted rather than sated. Muslims are on the march against Infidels again, this time not with a clash of armies, but through the movement of millions of Muslims into the West, where they have been conducting a Stealth Jihad, both insidious and effective, to steadily undermine our societies. We begin to be unsure of ourselves, begin to question the superiority of our values. Many are ready to accept changes in our laws and customs, including curtailments of the freedom of speech and of religion, in favor of Islam. We are even ready, in parts of the West, as has happened in Canada. to ban

criticism of Islam as “Islamophobia,” which has become for some Westerners practically a crime against humanity. And at the same time violent jihad, mainly in the form of terrorist attacks, keeps the West off balance, and damages, in sensational fashion, the morale of Infidels. Given the blend of confusion, misunderstanding, fear, and despair that an ever-greater Muslim presence, now amounting to more than 25 million in Europe, has caused, it may be time to revive our spirits, and our will to resist, by interpreting events in China as a new version of Prester John.

I was struck recently by the latest developments in the anti-Islam campaign by the Communist government. Two years ago, imams in Xinjiang were “forced to dance in the streets” – a way of humiliating them publicly, by stripping them of their dignity (the way, during the Cultural Revolution, professors were made to wear dunce caps) and, the government clearly hoped, to permanently damage their authority in the eyes of the local Muslims. They were made to carry signs that read “our income comes from the CKP” (the Chinese Communist Party), not from Allah.” This mocking of the imams as wage-slave mercenaries, forced to recognize and declare publicly that their salaries were coming not from Allah but from the Chinese Communist Party, that could remove its support at any time, was even more humiliating. For it was a way to remind the Uighur people that these clerics were merely government employees, and to remind the clerics themselves that he who pays the piper gets to call the tune. Finally, these imams had to swear that they would not teach religion to children, for the Communists, being themselves past masters of brainwashing, knew that if they could prevent Muslim children from being indoctrinated when they are young and most impressionable, that would make it easier to prevent them from embracing Allah later on.

Last year, the Chinese leaders warned the Chinese people to shun the practice of Islam and to stick to the official policy

of "Marxist Atheism." This year, in Xinjiang, where ten million of China's Muslims, the Uighurs, live, burqas and "abnormal" (i.e., of a certain length in accordance with Islamic strictures) beards were banned. The naming of children "to exaggerate religious fervor" was forbidden: presumably, that means no more little "Jihads" or "Aishas" or "Osamas" (given what that name now conjures up), though one doubts that even the Chinese would dare to ban "Mohammed" itself.

The Chinese are determined to stamp out as many outward and visible signs of Islam as they can; to make its practice harder, to make its transmission to the young more difficult, to make attacks on it more public and frequent. Children cannot refuse to attend public school (as some Muslim students have been doing, attending their own madrasas instead). They must be taught to revere "science." Finally, the Communist Chinese now require Muslims to listen only to state radio and watch state television, on which anti-Islam programs are broadcast. From now on, it will be forbidden to "reject or refuse radio, television and other public facilities and services" (that may include propaganda against Islam). In Communist China, in many public spaces, there are round-the-clock radio or television broadcasts that can't be shut off. Schools, of course, would be limited to such broadcasts, as would waiting rooms everywhere – bus and train stations, airports, and communal meeting rooms in apartment complexes.

Other measures announced include banning marriage "using religious rather than legal procedures." Forbidden, too, is "using the name of Halal to meddle in the secular life" of others. This means that labelling meat as Halal will be banned, thus making it very difficult, if not impossible, for Muslims to follow their dietary laws. Muslims must obey the rules on family size (it's unclear to me if that means that the former exemption for Uighurs from the "one child policy" – Uighur families had been allowed to have two children, and three if living in the countryside – is now being revoked, or

if they are simply being reminded not to have more children than they are currently allowed to have).

These are measures which, though instituted by a ruthless dictatorship, left me with mixed feelings. I found myself envious of the Chinese assault on Islam, its ruthlessness and relentlessness. The Chinese readiness to ban things outright ("abnormal" beards, burqas, names smacking too much of Islam), to publicly undermine the authority and dignity of the imams by having them dance in public, and also having them hold up signs (while assuming the kowtow position), about who their real paymasters are, all in order to humiliate them, smacked, I realized, of the Cultural Revolution's punishments, and ought not to be something I should endorse. Yet I also recognized that the ban on labelling foodstuffs "Halal" will make it more difficult for Muslims to observe their dietary restrictions. And I was glad to learn that imams in China are banned from teaching religion to the very young, and that Muslims will now have to listen to state radio and state television, where anti-Islam information and propaganda will be broadcast. Clearly, when it comes to constraining Islam, the Chinese mean business.

The menace of Islam, and the failure of the West to properly defend itself, have hardened my views on what are acceptable measures of self-protection by the world's Infidels. And after moving from India to Central Asia, and thence to Ethiopia, Prester John seems finally to have come to rest in Beijing. He's still what he always was, a mythical foreign potentate, on the other side of the Muslim lands, who stands ready to take our side in the titanic struggle between the Camp of Islam and the Camp of Unbelievers.

This latest iteration of the Kingdom of Prester John is, however, no fantasy: it is Communist China. That's right – it shares our recognition that Islam constitutes a permanent menace to all non-Muslims. Just as it was comforting for the Christians of Medieval Europe to believe in the myth of

Prester John, it is comforting to think of the CKP succeeding in its campaign to subject Muslims, and Islam, to every conceivable pressure and constraint, and not just in Xinjiang. We might even imagine the Chinese military, aware that it had now made the Camp of Islam its mortal enemy, and that there was no going back, deciding to make the long march into Thailand and Burma to smash any remaining opposition by local Muslims to the dominant Buddhists, and to turn north, into Bangladesh, to rescue the Buddhists in the Chittagong Hills tract, and then plunge into Central Asia, into Afghanistan, and Pakistan, bringing the preemptive fight right into Muslim lands.

The world's Muslims would no longer be dealing with a confused, weakened, demoralized Europe, but with a determined take-no-prisoners enemy like Communist China. And what would or could the world's Muslims do when confronted by such a determined enemy? Militarily, the world's Muslim countries would be no match for the Chinese. And no Stealth Jihad is possible within China, where the Muslims, closely monitored, constitute only 2% of the population, and most of them – the Uighurs certainly, if the Hui only sometimes – are easily identifiable, with half the country's Muslims concentrated in Xinjiang. They have not been allowed to propagandize; you won't find anywhere in China new mosques being built, or anything smacking of those "Meet-Your-Muslim-Neighbors" sessions of propaganda. The Chinese are determined to regulate every aspect of a Muslim's life, from the naming of children to what broadcasts Muslims can listen to or view, to the role of the imams, who are deliberately humiliated and stripped of their authority. And finally, the assurance of an immediate, far-reaching, and brutal response to the slightest act of terrorism should make even the most fanatical Muslims hesitate, for they would now be confronting an enemy just as ruthless, and far more cunning and powerful, than themselves.

One part of me whispers that sometimes you need to make pacts

with the Devil, or follow the Devil's example, because there's another, even greater Devil who needs to be defeated. Roosevelt delivered Lend-Lease aid to Joseph Stalin, and FDR and Churchill did whatever else they could to help Soviet Russia in that colossal struggle against Hitler. And they were right to do so. Communist China is our enemy in almost every way except one: it feels threatened by, and opposed to, Islam. And which is a greater enemy to the liberal West? China lays plausible claim to becoming the world's greatest economic power within a few decades. It might someday become the world's greatest military power as well. But Islam lays claim to even more than China ever will: Islam lays claim to the whole world. It demands the ultimate subjugation of all non-Muslims to the Camp of Islam. It purports to regulate every area of life, and is no less totalitarian than the Chinese variety of Communism. And don't we need all the allies we can get, to defeat the forces of Islam? China provides a useful example of ways to deal with an internal Muslim threat, especially ways to undermine the authority, through public humiliation of, Muslim clerics.

But then another part of me steps back and says no, that in the end the Chinese Communists are more dangerous militarily than the combined armed forces of the world's Muslim powers, and that while China's economic power continually increases, the economic power of the Muslim states is almost entirely dependent on the sale of oil, and both the percentage of the world's oil that comes from Muslim states, and the price of oil, keep going down. With each year that passes, new fields are found outside the Middle East, and new methods of extraction, too, such as, most famously, fracking – are made economic.

But the main reason that the Muslim oil states are now suffering, and will continue to do so, is that gigantic, ever-increasing, and unstoppable advances are being made in solar and wind energy, and in batteries, and in electric vehicles.

Solar energy now costs 1/150th of what it did in the 1970s. Just since 2000, the amount of global electricity produced by solar power has increased sixty-four times. Wind power has doubled four times over, or 32 times, during the same period. These are not fuels that can run out, but technologies that are ever improving.

So in the end, the Camp of Islam, unless it could somehow wean itself from its near-total dependence on oil revenues, is doomed to fail economically. Militarily, all the Muslim states together are no match for the American military, and as their revenues decrease, they will have fewer funds with which to outfit their armies and air forces. So there is no need to make a pact with a lesser Devil, or to pin our hopes on a new version of Prester John, this one reigning in the Forbidden City. Put your hopes, instead, on Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and Robert Spencer, and Ibn Warraq, and Elon Musk, as each in his or her own way deals blows to Islam beyond even what the boys in Beijing, doing their damndest, have managed to deliver.