

What the West Owes to Islam

by Hugh Fitzgerald

European	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Arabic-Indic	.	١	٢	٣	٤	٥	٦	٧	٨	٩
Eastern Arabic-Indic (Persian and Urdu)	.	۱	۲	۳	۴	۵	۶	۷	۸	۹
Devanagari (Hindi)	०	१	२	३	४	५	६	७	८	९
Tamil		௦	௧	௨	௩	௪	௫	௬	௭	௮

Last Saturday at the annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America, presidential candidate Julián Castro [said](#): “Muslim Americans for generations have been part of the fabric of our American family. They have helped make America the great nation it is.”

Every other day, it seems, someone takes it upon himself to instruct the West about what it “owes to Islam.” This is offered in a tone of intellectual reproach: how ignorant and ungrateful of the West not to appreciate Islamic civilization for all the things it has brought us.

[Here](#) is one recent example of such articles, by Constant Mews, who is head of the Centre for Religious Studies at Monash University.

Algebra, alchemy, artichoke, alcohol, and apricot all derive from Arabic words which came to the West during the age of Crusades.

What do these five English words, that came from the Arabic, prove? They do not prove any significant Islamic intellectual influence on the West. Algebra originated with Sanskrit mathematicians; Arab mathematicians became interested, and

further developed the field; the celebrated mathematician Al-Khwarizmi gave that field its name, al-jabr (“the reunion of broken parts”), which when englished became “algebra.” But use of that word should not mislead us into thinking algebra was a product of Muslim Arabs; Arabs have convinced the world to overlook the Sanskrit mathematicians who preceded them in this area of mathematics.

“Alchemy” (“the transmutation of metals”), and the foods (“artichoke” and “apricot”) and drink (“alcohol”) are all taken from the Arabic, but what does this signify? That our Western civilization was affected because of this handful of words taken from the Arabic? We now have the words “apricot” and “artichoke,” but so what? Far more significant, it seems to me, are the Arabic words which in the last few decades have entered not just English, but all the languages of Europe: Jihad, Jizyah, dhimmi are words that tellingly encapsulate the relationship of Muslim Believer to Unbeliever. The Believer wages constant Jihad against the Unbeliever, as commanded in 109 Qur’anic verses. The Unbeliever in a Muslim land is supposed to pay, as a dhimmi, the Jizyah, a capitation tax, to the Muslim state, in order to be “protected” by the Muslims themselves from their attack; it’s a form of extortion. These three words tell us a good deal about Islam. It’s too bad Mews left them out of his little lexicon, but we know why.

Even more fundamental are the Indo-Arabic numerals (0-9), which replaced Roman numerals during the same period and revolutionised our capacity to engage in science and trade. This came about through Latin discovery of the ninth-century Persian scholar, Al-Khwarizmi (whose name gives us the word algorithm).

Note that Mr. Mews doesn’t dare to call these “Arabic numerals,” but instead calls them “Indo-Arabic numerals.” In fact, these numerals were invented by Hindu mathematicians in the 6th or 7th centuries, and the Arabs only appropriated

them, a fact unclear in his telling. He does say they were introduced to the West through the writings of Al-Khwarizmi, but doesn't explain that this celebrated Persian mathematician was merely the transmitter of the numerals, not their inventor.

*This debt to Islamic civilisation contradicts the claim put forward by political scientist Samuel Huntington in his book **The Clash of Civilizations** some 25 years ago, that Islam and the West have always been diametrically opposed. In 2004, historian Richard Bulliet proposed an alternative perspective. He argued civilisation is a continuing conversation and exchange, rather than a uniquely Western phenomenon.*

The "debt to Islamic civilization" is simply assumed by Mews to have been proven by his pitiful handful of unimpressive examples. What have we been offered as examples of that "debt"? Five words from the Arabic, numerals that turn out to have been invented by Hindu mathematicians, a link claimed between Dante's *Divine Comedy* and an Arabic work about Muhammad's Night Journey that Dante scholars have rejected, and another most unlikely link made between Robinson Crusoe and a 12th-century Arabic novel, when Defoe had before him the real-life example of a castaway in the tale of Alexander Selkirk. Some debt.

Mews misstates Huntington, whose thesis was that the "borders of Islam" were "bloody" everywhere, not just with the West. Islam, according to Huntington, had always been at war with all non-Muslims. The best example of this outside the West is the Muslim conquest of India, which ultimately led to the deaths of 70-80 million Hindus.

*Even so, **Australia and the West still struggle to acknowledge the contributions of Islamic cultures (whether Arabic speaking, Persian, Ottoman or others) to civilization.***

Australia is mentioned because Constant Mews teaches at an Australian university. When he writes that "Australia and the West still struggle to acknowledge the contributions of Islamic cultures," he is assuming there is some kind of willful refusal to recognize those "contributions." But it is much more likely that Western scholars are not going to be railroaded into finding "contributions of Islamic cultures" to the West where there have been none, or what there has been is trivial (like the words "artichoke," "apricot," and "alcohol"). They are not refusing to acknowledge what is truly there and significant, but struggling to uphold scholarly standards that are under such constant assault from those who insist, like Constant Mews, that the West owes a "great debt" to Islamic cultures.

In an initial curriculum proposed by the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilization, only one Islamic text was listed, a collection of often-humorous stories about the Crusades from a 12th-century Syrian aristocrat. But Islamic majority cultures have produced many other texts with a greater claim to shaping civilisation.

Mr. Mews should have listed a few of those "many other texts" here, just to remind us of how Islam has helped to "shape civilization." It's unclear if he means "Western civilization" or some "world civilization" that he now assumes exists. I can think of only one such influential text by Muslims that has helped to shape that "world civilization": the Qur'an itself. Does Mr. Mews not agree that the Qur'an, which set Muslims on the path of jihad 1,400 years ago, a path from which devout Muslims have not wavered, even though in the West they now use different instruments, ought to be read by Western students? Hasn't the fear of Islam that Unbelievers acquire from reading the Qur'an, and from the observable behavior of many Muslims, helped – in a negative way – to shape our civilization? Hasn't the Qur'an caused Muslims to conquer many lands and many peoples? Hasn't Islamic terrorism

in a few decades managed in a most fearful way to affect our Western civilization? Would Mr. Mews prefer that the Qur'an not be mentioned, for fear that reading the Quran might give non-Muslims the wrong idea about Islam, might mislead non-Muslims into thinking there is something inherently violent about Islam? That would never do.

Constant Mews claims [here](#) that the West owes a great debt to Islam and to Muslims. He even has a few books in mind which he thinks are examples of that insufficiently acknowledged debt.

*While there is debate about the extent to which the Italian writer Dante was exposed to Islamic influences, **it is very likely** he knew *The Book of Mohammed's Ladder* (translated into Castilian, French and Latin), which describes the Prophet's ascent to heaven. *The Divine Comedy*, with its account of Dante's imagined journey from Inferno to Paradise, was following in this tradition.*

Dante was not "following" in this supposed "tradition," which consists apparently of one work, *The Book of Mohammed's Ladder*. The first, and still the most important, scholar to have suggested that the *Kitab al Miraj*, or "The Book of Mohammed's Ladder," was Dante's inspiration or model for the *Divine Comedy* was the Spanish priest Miguel Asin Palacios in 1919. Since then many Dante scholars have questioned his notion that Dante was influenced by the *Kitab al Miraj*. The celebrated 20th century Orientalist Francesco Gabrieli expressed deep skepticism regarding the claimed similarities, and noted the lack of evidence of a vehicle through which it could have been transmitted to Dante. René Guénon, a Sufi convert and scholar of Ibn Arabi, in *The Esoterism of Dante* rejected the theory of Ibn Arabi's influence (direct or indirect) on Dante. Palacios' theory that Dante was influenced by Ibn Arabi was satirized as an absurdity by the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk in his novel *The Black Book*.

Dante deplored Islam as schismatic, a heresy sowing discord in the world. He places Muhammad in the ninth ditch of the Eighth Circle of Hell (Inferno, Canto 28), designed for those who have caused schism; specifically, Muhammad was placed among the Sowers of Religious Discord. Muhammad is memorably described as split in half, with his entrails hanging out, representing his status as a heresiarch. Would Dante have read, much less emulated, a book celebrating this same Muhammad whom he so detested?

Note how Constant Mews protects himself: **he repeatedly says about some unproven claim that "it is very likely."** So he writes that **"it is very likely"** that Dante knew **"The Book of Mohammed's Ladder."** Why is it **"very likely"** that he knew that **book?** Just because it existed? He offers no evidence for this claim; there is no mention of, nor allusion to, the book or its author anywhere in Dante's writings. It is quite a leap to describe something as **"very likely"** when not only is there no supporting evidence, but almost every Dante scholar denies a link between Dante's masterpiece and the *Kitab al Miraj*.

Dante very likely heard lectures from Riccoldo da Monte di Croce, a learned Dominican who spent many years studying Arabic in Baghdad before returning to Florence around 1300 and writing about his travels in the lands of Islam. Dante may have criticized Muslim teaching, but he was aware of its vast influence.

Riccoldo da Monte di Croce went to the East in order to convert Nestorian Christians to Latin Christianity. He spent roughly 13 years in the East, from 1288 to 1301, where he engaged in theological disputes both with Nestorians and with Muslims. When he returned to Florence, he completed several works, including a damning study of Islamic theology, *Contra legem sarracenorum* (Against the Laws of the Saracens). That anti-Islamic study is not mentioned by Constant Mews, though it was Riccoldo's most important work. We have no way of

knowing whether Dante attended lectures by Riccoldo, though Mews claims it is “very likely” that he “heard lectures from Riccoldo.” Why is it “very likely”?

Dante is thought to have been influenced by Islamic cultures.

Dante is “thought to have been influenced by Islamic cultures” that he regarded with horror? He places Muhammad himself in the Eighth Circle of Hell, that is, deep in the *Inferno*. Where is the evidence that Dante was “influenced by Islamic cultures” that he so openly and completely rejected? Notice that Mews, instead of adducing even one bit of such evidence, offers the vague “**Dante is thought to have been influenced...**” By whom? And what about all the eminent Dante scholars who have denied any such influence? Should we ignore them?

Islam also gave us the quintessential image of the Enlightenment, the self-taught philosopher. This character had his origins in an Arabic novel, Hayy ibn Yaqzan, penned by a 12th-century Arab intellectual, Ibn Tufayl. It tells the story of how a feral child abandoned on a desert island comes through reason alone to a vision of reality.

*Hayy ibn Yaqzan was published in Oxford, with an Arabic-Latin edition in 1671, and became a catalyst for the contributions of seminal European philosophers including John Locke and Robert Boyle. Translated into English in 1708 as *The Improvement of Human Reason*, it also influenced novelists, beginning with Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719. The sources of the Enlightenment are not simply in Greece and Rome.*

Here again we have the matter of evidence, or of its lack. How does the author conclude that John Locke read and was influenced by the “Hayy ibn Yaqzan” written by Ibn Tufayl? Did Locke anywhere make reference to it? Surely, if he had, Constant Mews would have quoted it. The absence of any such

reference is telling. And the Enlightenment did indeed have sources outside of Greece and Rome, but they were not found in Muslim writers. The main influence, "outside of Greece and Rome," on the European Enlightenment was Spinoza, whom Professor Jonathan Israel credits as the father of the "Radical Enlightenment."

It is hard to comprehend how Islam, which discourages skeptical inquiry, and encourages the habit of unquestioning mental submission (see the many online sites where Muslims submit questions, and a cleric authoritatively answers them, adducing as unquestioned authority a Qur'anic verse, or a statement of Muhammad in the hadith, in ipse-dixit fashion, brooking no discussion or disagreement), could possibly have been one of the progenitors of the European Enlightenment. Indeed, Islam's most trenchant contemporary critics, such as Ibn Warraq, point out that Islam never experienced "an Enlightenment," nor, given the nature of the faith, could it.

As for Daniel Defoe owing a debt to Ibn Tufayl for his *Robinson Crusoe*, nowhere did Defoe mention he was even aware of the novel *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*. Mews is not the only one to make large claims for Ibn Tufayl. We find on Muslim sites such remarks as this: "Ibn Tufayl may have inspired Daniel Defoe's famous novel about an island castaway." **"May have..." "Very likely..." "Some have thought..."** Defoe had no need of Ibn Tufayl's novel to come up with the idea of an island castaway; he had before his eyes the real-life tale of Alexander Selkirk, a contemporary of Defoe, who had been stranded on a tropical island for four years.

Civilisation is always being reinvented. The civilisation some call "Western" has been, and still is, continually shaped by a wide range of political, literary and intellectual influences, all worthy of our attention.

"Civilization is always being reinvented." Is that true? Is

Islamic civilization “always being reinvented”? In what way? And what exactly does it mean to claim that a “civilization is always being reinvented”?

The quotes around “Western” are meant to call into question the very idea of this so-called “Western civilization.” Western civilization may be “continually shaped by a wide range of...influences,” but it has not been “equally” shaped by those influences. We are supposed to believe, from what Mews has written, that Muslim writers have had an important influence on Western literature. There are exactly two examples provided as evidence of this, which I have discussed above, but the details bear repeating. The first is *Kitab al Miraj*, a book concerning Muhammad’s Night Journey to Heaven, that Miguel Asin Palacios, a Spanish scholar-priest, in 1919 first proposed as having influenced Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. More recent scholars, including the celebrated Orientalist and Arabist Francesco Gabrieli, the Sufi convert Rene Guenon, who wrote on metaphysics and sacred scripture, and the Turkish Nobel Prizewinner, the writer Orhan Pamuk, have all roundly rejected this supposed source for Dante. The second claimed literary influence is that of Ibn Tufayl’s tale of a castaway on Daniel Defoe, but there is no evidence that Defoe ever read Ibn Tufayl’s story, and besides, he had no need: the real-life story of Alexander Selkirk, contemporaneous with Defoe, was influence enough.

The West does “owe” Islam in a number of ways. Let us count those ways. It owes Islam for the vast and expensive security apparatus, costing hundreds of billions of dollars, that has been deployed all over the Western world, that Islamic terrorism has necessitated. Think of all the jobs that have been created as a result, in Europe and North America, at airports, train and bus stations, outside government office buildings, around national monuments, at sports stadiums, in museums, in lecture halls, at synagogues and churches. Think, too, of the extra work now provided to defense lawyers, to

police, prosecutors, judges, prison guards. It is thanks to Islam that hundreds of millions of man-hours are now spent annually by passengers who must arrive several hours earlier for airline flights, in order to stand in line and go through security, all because of the threat of Islamic terrorism. We “owe” a debt to Islam, too, for the general atmosphere of anxiety that has been created in the West by the fact, and the threat, of Islamic terrorism, and that keeps us from worrying about other matters. We “owe” Muslims a debt, too, for allowing us to practice charity, by helping millions of Muslim economic migrants to settle comfortably in the welfare states of Europe, where non-Muslims now lavish every possible benefit on them, including free or highly subsidized housing, free medical care, free education, unemployment benefits (even without the need to have been previously employed), and family allowances. We owe Muslims a debt for having brought into the West, undeclared in their mental baggage, a new strain of antisemitism, which makes all our lives just that much more exciting. We Americans owe a special debt to Muslims for making us spend several trillion dollars fighting jihadis in Iraq and Afghanistan, which has put our military in a state of combat readiness, and besides, that is money that otherwise we would no doubt have wasted. We owe Islam a debt for all that, and much, much more.

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