
Aristote au Mont-Saint-Michel. Les racines grecques de l'Europe chrétienne by Sylvain Gouguenheim.

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Reviewed by
Gad Freudenthal
CNRS, Paris
freudent@msh-paris.fr

When this book appeared in March 2008, it immediately raised an immense uproar, not only among the directly concerned students of medieval philosophy and science but among many intellectuals too. Newspapers carried articles for or against, petitions were signed, the author was prevented from teaching at his institution of higher learning, and what not. It was *un scandale à la française*, as only France can produce it. Why?

Gouguenheim's book advocates a strong thesis concerning the contribution of the Islamic/Arabic world to Western medieval culture, and, hence, to the emergence of modernity in Europe. According to him, in recent decades the thesis that medieval European culture is strongly indebted to the Arabic/Islamic civilization has become a dogma; and he sets out to dismantle it. In other words, he would wish us to go back to the earlier, 19-century dogma defended most eloquently by Ernest Renan (1823–1892), who contended that the ancestor of modern European civilization is Greece alone, and that the medieval Arabic-Islamic culture contributed next to nothing to the advancement of science and philosophy.¹ Gouguenheim similarly thinks that European culture has no Islamic roots: 'Europe, and Europe alone, has created modern science,' he states [23]. Nineteenth-century euro-centrism has been replaced by orientalo-centrism, he further complains [17].

¹ E.g., in a famous lecture, 'L'Islamisme et la science', delivered at the Sorbonne on 29 March 1883 and first published in *Journal des Débats* on 30 March 1883 [see Psichari 1947, 946–965]. This lecture includes such statements as:

Gouguenheim maintains that the Greek heritage, especially Aristotle's writings, did not reach the West primarily *via* translations from Arabic (beginning in the 12th century) and that the Arabic/ Islamic mediation in the reception of Greek science and philosophy was of secondary importance. Rather, after the fall of Byzantium, philosophical and scientific works continued to be studied and copied in the West in Greek throughout the centuries; and, therefore, they did not have to be 'rediscovered'. They were also translated into Latin directly from Greek without the mediation of Arabic. The latter came later and its importance was secondary. Gouguenheim particularly emphasizes the role of James of Venice, who translated Aristotelian works from Greek into Latin in the second quarter of the 12th century. The conclusion is that Scholastic science, and, further down the road, modern science, would have emerged even if there had been no Arabic-into-Latin translations.

To make the point that Europe's roots are Greek and owe nothing to the Orient, Gouguenheim devotes a chapter to arguing that the 'esprit grec' did not at all gain footing in the Arabic/ Islamic world and remained an artificial implant, the sole occupation of a few intellectuals. Put differently: the Arabic/ Islamic civilization does not provide a favorable context for the development of science; that is the sole privilege of the West.

Is Gouguenheim's antagonism directed against the Arabs or against Islam? 'Arab' of course includes not only Muslims but also Christians, Jews, and Pagans. Gouguenheim goes out of his way to emphasize time and again that scholars who played an important role in the development of science in Arabic were Christians. Clearly, he takes issue not with the Arab Orient but with Islam: inasmuch as Islamic civilization was Islamic, it contributed to science only little;

Tel est ce grand ensemble philosophique, que l'on a coutume d'appeler arabe, parce qu'il est écrit en arabe, mais qui est en réalité greco-sassanide. Il serait plus exact de dire grec; car l'élément vraiment fécond de tout cela venait de la Grèce... La Grèce était la source unique du savoir et de la droite pensée... [1883, 951]

This then is the great philosophical corpus which is usually called 'Arabic' because it is written in Arabic, but which in truth is Greek-Sassanian. It would be more exact to say 'Greek'; for the truly fruitful element in all this came from Greece... Greece was the only source of knowledge and of right thought.

and where contributions emerged within it, this was mostly due to non-Muslim individuals. Gouguenheim's conception of Islam and of Islamic civilization is entirely limited to a superficial reading of the *Qur'an* and devoid of any sociological dimension.

Gouguenheim is aware that his subject has political dimensions and immediate implications for contemporary politics: it is part of the long *face-à-face* of Islam and the West, he writes [14]. In Europe, the subject of the West's indebtedness to Islam gains in visibility and in urgency on account, first, of the increasing presence of Muslims in many European countries and, second, of the looming question of Turkey's entry into the European Union. Gouguenheim's book not only can be used in this ideological-political struggle, it was written in order to contribute to it. This is perhaps the most disturbing and irritating aspect of this book: that it is written and argued as a pamphlet and not as a scholarly book (its 16 pages of 'selective bibliography' notwithstanding). This style, together with the innumerable factual errors and bad-will interpretations, are what has caused the uproar.

Readers may be interested to know that there came to light in September 2009 an argued rejoinder to Gouguenheim edited by Irène Rosier-Catach, Alain de Libera, Marwan Rashed, and Philippe Büttgen.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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