

## [Does the Christian West Owe Anything to the Islamic East?](#)

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By Jacob Thomas

Back at college in the Levant, when I studied the *“History of the Arab-Islamic Civilization,”* I remember our teacher extolling the cultural activities that took place in Baghdad during the early years of the Abbasid Caliphate. We learned about Bayt al-Hikma (the House of Wisdom), that august Institution where translation work was done, enriching the growing Arab culture with works from Greek, Aramaic, Persian, and Indian sources.

We were also introduced to the *Mu’tazilites*, a group of Arab scholars, who having digested some of the translated materials of the *Bayt al-Hikma* began a movement that emphasized the importance of the intellect. They challenged the developing orthodoxies of the various legal schools active in the interpretation of the *Shari’ah Law*. They went so far as to deny the eternal nature of the Qur’an, over against the teaching of *Imam Hanbal*. They criticized the fatalistic doctrine of Islamic theology that held man totally non-responsible for his acts.

The importance of the *Mu’tazilites* in the cultural history of Islam is not to be denied. Yet their influence was limited to an elite group in Baghdad; and that too receded and eventually faded away when they lost the support of the ruling Caliph.

I draw attention to this detail in the history of Islamic civilization in order to point out that even though the Hellenistic culture did have an impact on Islam; it was not to the degree that modern Muslim scholars suggest. So the question of the nature and extent of the influence of Islamic civilization on the West is not a settled matter. In fact, the subject is currently being debated in France, due to the appearance in 2008, of a book that questioned the claim that the West owes much to Islam for its appropriation of the Hellenistic culture.

On 20 November, 2008, the Arabic language daily, [www.alawan.org](http://www.alawan.org) published an interesting article entitled *“Does the Christian West Owe anything to the Islamic East?”* It was a discussion of the reaction of certain Islamic apologists and their friends in the French academic community, to Professor Sylvain Gouguenheim’s book *ARISTOTE AU MONT SAINT MICHEL*, published by Le Seuil Publishing House, in Paris, France. Once again we witness, in action, the attempts of Islamic apologists to silence all intellectual endeavors that offend them in any way. Here are some translated excerpts from the article, my comments will follow thereafter.

“Recently the historian Sylvain Gouguenheim published a book in which he minimized the importance of the impact Muslims had on Christian Europe during the Middle Ages.

The thesis of '*Aristotle on Mount Saint Michel*,' published in 2008 by Le Seuil Publishing House, is that the Hellenistic heritage did not reach Europe through Muslims, as historians have been claiming; rather it came directly to the West, during the 11th and 12th centuries, without Arab philosophers playing a major role in that transmission. Therefore, we may conclude that Muslims did not have a major impact on the European Renaissance, which according to Gouguenheim 'was going to take place anyhow, even if the Europeans did not have any relations with the Islamic world.'

"The thesis of Sylvain Gouguenheim, which is at variance with the opinions of a number of specialists in medieval history, caused a great storm in French cultural circles. It was regarded as an erroneous historical theory, and an ethnic slur. Some Islamists began to use the thesis as an irrefutable proof for the growth of Western animosity directed at Muslims and Islam. For example, the former foreign minister of Algeria, Dr. Taleb Librahimi, declared that this thesis was a part of a campaign to spread Christianity in Islamic countries such as in Algeria; and another example of the growth of anti-Islamic movements. Even some French scholars, who consider themselves experts in the field, agreed with Librahimi; one of them going so far as to state that those who acclaimed the publication of the book were participating in the spread of Islamophobia!

"Actually, the criticisms directed against the book did not deal with the very heart of the subject; they simply referred to certain errors in details that appeared in the book, in order to question its serious nature. Some claimed that it was similar to an academic thesis submitted at a university. However, the book was written for ordinary readers who are not interested in details, or in a detailed academic bibliography.

"The discussions surrounding the book took a familiar turn. Opponents of its thesis did not respond to the author with serious facts. Instead, they criticized him personally, and accused him of racism by siding with the radical Right. Thus, the problem became politicized. Fifty six philosophers and historians signed a petition 'asking for the head' of the man, and published a document that contradicted Gouguenheim's thesis, under the title: '**Yes, the West Is Indebted to the Muslim world.**' It appeared in the daily leftist newspaper, **Liberation**, on 30 April, 2008. They claimed that the author advanced a deceptive reading of the relations between the Christian West and Islam. They denounced the newspaper, **Le Monde**, for applauding the book with a positive review on 4 April 2008, written by Roger-Pol Droit. Pol Droit did more than simply repeat Gouguenheim's thesis, he also wrote the following in '**World of Books**', a supplement of **Le Monde**.

***"Contrary to what came down to us from the 1960s, European culture, in its history and evolution, does not owe much to Islam. Basically, it is not indebted to Islam regarding anything that is essential. Thus this book, with proper references, placed the subject in the right light and with great courage."***

"Gouguenheim, a professor of medieval history at **l'École Normale Supérieure de Lyon**, was not spared criticism even by some of his colleagues at the university. This led to the convening of a committee to investigate whether his book was to be considered as a serious scientific work! He was forced to stop teaching while waiting for the results of

the investigation. It was some Polish historians who came to his defense as they had experienced first hand the impact of censorship during the Soviet domination of their country. They wrote of the difficult times researchers endured during those dark days; and wondered whether similar conditions were about to descend on France!

“We may consider this book as a needed antidote to that illness that has afflicted some European university professors and Islamist propagandists who had invented an exaggerated role for Islam in bringing about the Renaissance. We can also regard the complaint raised against Gouguenheim’s thesis that was signed by those 56 academicians and the reactions that followed it, tantamount to a **fatwa** directed against the historian

“Why should we become angry at the author who claimed that the Arabic language was a language for poetry, and did not lend itself to philosophical expressions? It is a fact that teaching philosophy is forbidden in the Gulf countries; and where it is taught in those countries where it is not outlawed as a subject, it amounts to a joke! Why should we be bothered by Gouguenheim’s thesis when Adonis, a well-known Syrian intellectual was furiously attacked by the clerical establishment, simply for advocating the need for freedom rather than *fiqh (1)*, rationality in place of mythology, and philosophical concepts, rather than endless repetitions of the *Basmalah (2)*, and the *Hamdalah, (Praise be to Allah)*.

“We need to pose such questions as these, which deserve to be seriously addressed.

“The silence of Arab historians regarding the subject discussed in Gouguenheim’s book is much to be regretted. Thus they left the topic for others to deal with it. What a pity! Rather than engage in serious studies that require hard work, all we do is mouth generalities, and make ill-prepared speeches in defense of our culture!”

### **Analysis**

The author in al-Awan, put it well in analyzing the critique of the article by stating, *“Actually, the criticisms directed against the book did not deal with the very heart of the subject; they simply referred to certain errors in details that appeared in the book, in order to question its serious nature.”*

### **Comments**

The article made clear that there were a lot of questions left hanging by Gouguenheim’s critics and no substantive answers. What it objected to most strongly was the attitude of those French academicians who joined the Arab critics in denouncing Gouguenheim, rather than responding calmly and logically to his thesis. The article bemoaned the silence of Arab historians to even touch the subject.

Le Monde and Le Figaro commented on Gouguenheim’s work as evidenced in the following excerpts that I translated from French:

“The Hellenization of Christian Europe was, first of all, the fruit of European will. If the term root has any meaning for civilizations, the roots of the European world are Greek, while those of the Islamic world are not.

“As a startling rectification of the prejudices of the hour, this work of Sylvain Gouguenheim will cause debates and polemics. His theme is: ***the cultural connection between the Western world, and the Islamic world.*** As far as this subject is concerned, the ideological and political stakes weigh heavy. Now this serious academician, a professor of mediaeval history at *l'École Normale Supérieure de Lyon*, refutes a number of convictions that had become dominant. During the last decades, following the works of Alain de Libera, or Mohammed Arkoun, Edward Said, or the Counsel of Europe, a wrong turn had been taken regarding the role of Islam in the history and culture of Europe ... Should we follow this book, it will be necessary to revise further our judgments. Rather than believing that the entire body of European philosophical knowledge was dependent on Arab intermediaries, we should remember the major role played by the translators of Mount-Saint-Michel. They had transmitted all of Aristotle directly from Greek into Latin, several decades before the same works were translated in Toledo from the Arabic versions. Instead of dreaming that the Islamic world was both open and generous and offered to dark and dormant Europe the means for its renewal, it is necessary to remember that Europe did not receive all that learning as a gift. It had to go and search for it. And it was Europe alone that applied that knowledge both in the scientific and political fields.” Roger-Pol Droit - Le Monde du 4 avril 2008

“Contradicting the thesis of “*an Islam of Lights,*” Sylvain Gouguenheim proves that the ancient Greek knowledge had never actually disappeared in Europe; and that the Arabs who translated these texts were not Muslims. We congratulate Mr. Gouguenheim for not being afraid to remind us that there existed a mediaeval Christian crucible that was the heritage from both Athens and Jerusalem.” Stéphane Boiron - Le Figaro du 17 avril 2008

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

1. Islamic theologizing; the cleric who engages in *fiqh* is called, *faqih*.
2. The invocation of the name of *Allah*, by quoting the opening words of “*Al-Fatiha,*” (the first chapter of the *Qur'an*.) is known in Arabic as the *Basmalah*.