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Commentary on social and moral issues of the day

The Not-So-Dark Ages

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Some very good things from the French mind are appearing among us. Daniel Mahoney brought Pierre Manent to our attention. He re-presents Raymond Aron, Charles de Gaulle, and the pertinent French background to Solzhenitsyn's work. Jean-Luc Marion, Alain Besançon, and Rémi Brague have become "must-reads" if we want to escape modern ideology – unfortunately, not everyone does.

Last semester a French exchange student attended one of my classes. Her father, a medical doctor from Nice, visited one day. I mentioned a review of Sylvain Gouguenheim's *Aristote au Mont Saint-Michel: Les racines grecques de l'Europe Chrétienne* ("Aristotle at Mont Saint-Michel: The Greek Roots of Christian Europe"). Weeks later, his daughter presented me with a copy from Nice. I have now read this remarkable, enormously learned book.

It examines the now often heard and widely popular assumption that civilization was stimulated to become "modern" because of "enlightened" Islamic philosophy that arrived in the stagnant West through Toledo and Sicily. The Christian Dark and Middle Ages are pictured as be-knighted, populated mostly by primitive folks just vegetating till the Enlightenment came from Islam to early modern Europe.

Gouguenheim's method often is to take a learned citation advocating this thesis, and then to demolish it. For example, he cites the following passage from a study of Islam in Europe: "Europe would not be that which it is if it did not know Islam. It belongs to its patrimony." We should greet this thesis, he says, with a "profound reserve." The reason is that the impetus in question came ultimately from the Greeks and the Christians, not Islam. And even when a Greek text appeared in the Arabic language, it was usually translated by Christians or those conquered by Islam.

Gouguenheim attacks the notion that the so-called Dark and Middle Ages were so backward that they could not recognize a self-evident principle if it stared them in the face. The book's title refers to manuscripts of the works of Aristotle that were found in the famous abbey at Mt. Saint-Michel where they were translated into Latin not from Arab sources but directly from Greek texts. This endeavor happened before Arabic translations of Aristotle reached Toledo.

Gouguenheim then examines the whole history of what happened to Greek texts of the classical authors translated into Arabic. In general, he finds that writers often forget the Byzantine world, the world of the Eastern Roman Empire, a world that had Greek as its language. Christianity from the beginning recognized that it had to deal with precisely Greek philosophy and culture. Benedict XVI in the Regensburg Lecture remarked that the Christian mind was concerned not so much with classical myth or religion as with classical philosophy, with Plato, Aristotle, and friends.

Gouguenheim, in an erudite study, shows that the Arab conquests in the beginning were of Persian, Syrian, and Byzantine territories. Only one Muslim philosopher was actually an Arab, al-Kindi; the others, the great ones, were Persians, Syrians, or Spaniards. Moreover, most of the texts that were translated from Greek to Arabic were translated by Arab speaking Christians: Syrians, Copts, or Greeks.

All through the classical, Carolingian, and Ottonian periods we find constant exchanges of texts. What Gouguenheim points out is that interest in Greek science and philosophy was restricted to a few scholars in the

Muslim world. These acted as private citizens. They were often condemned or restricted in their philosophic activities.

In the Christian world, however, primary interest was devoted to finding the exact meaning of the dynamic Greek texts. This search was both religious and philosophic. So the classical texts were not "Islamicized" to meet the requirements of Koranic culture. The Christian understanding of reason led to a desire to know what Aristotle actually teaches, even if on some point he might be criticized.

This book is eye-opening. It is far more realistic than most things we read about the ease of multicultural "adaption" or endless dialogue. Gouguenheim's approach is blunter than we usually encounter in the discussion of different religions: "Fundamentally, European civilization remains Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian in inspiration. In its further course, European philosophy or science developed its own proper and original conceptions. Islam was, from the redaction of the Koran on, the bearer of another global system. From that point of view, Greek knowledge was able to be integrated only in a particular manner, limited to certain sectors or to certain thinkers."

Islamic scholars, as Gueguenheim shows, go through contortions to demonstrate that the Koran preceded the Old and New Testament. Therefore, Jews and Christians must have deliberately rewritten the text so that the Muslim interpretation of its own revelation would still hold.

Gueguenheim concludes that Western civilization does not owe its genius or energy to Islam. It has its own roots. In its dynamic form, Islam was not itself able to assimilate the Greek heritage. It proved too dangerous to the Koranic understanding of reality.



Read the entire article on the [The Catholic Thing](#) website (new window will open).

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