

## **SULAYMAN THE MAGNIFICENT AND CHRISTIANITY: THE LIMITS OF AN ANTOGONISM**

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The epoch of the Crusades, from the 11th to the 13th centuries, remained in the memories of the Muslims as well as Christians, as the peak of confrontation between the two religions, as an emblematic forerunner of all the 'clashes of civilisations' to come. However, another more recent period of history, namely the 15th and 16th centuries, could be characterized in the same way. Western historians have given these decades the enhancing title of Renaissance, but they could also have discerned a spectacular resurgence of antagonism between Christianity (henceforth torn apart between Catholicism and the Protestant reformation) and Islam. As if by a curious result of the phenomenon of communicating receptacles, while Islam was forced, under the merciless assaults of the Spanish *Reconquista*, forced to withdraw in the West, first with the fall of Grenada in 1492 and then by the expulsion of the Moors in 1609-1611, which put an end to the Muslim presence on the Iberian Peninsula, at the same time it advanced in eastern and central Europe with the progress of the Ottomans.

This progress, which had already begun in the middle of the 14th century, took a major step with the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and would be checked for the first time only by Süleyman the Magnificent's unsuccessful siege of Vienna in 1529. Thereafter, for the Christians, the word synonymous with terror and massacres, the incarnation of the Antichrist or God's scourge, no longer was the Moor or the Saracen as was the case in the

Naturally, such a horrendous aberration was duly hunted down and pursued by the tribunals of the Inquisition in Spain and Italy. The testimonies, be they of ecclesiastic or of traditional origin, abound; through texts or images they depict infuriated Turkish hordes burning and plundering all that was in their way, massacring, impaling, reducing to slavery or converting by force everyone who crossed their path. Likewise, they denounced the perils that the pirates of the Barbary Coast represented to the goods and the lives of the travellers sailing over the seas. To those who suspected such gloomy pictures of having been somewhat

blackened, the response given by the official Ottoman declarations, recorded in the documents of the archives, is hardly reassuring. The 'Grand Seigneur' presents himself as the champion of the Holy War, of the *gazâ* and the *jihâd*, inciting his troops to fight night and day, to shed blood, to menace the enemy by laying waste to their lands, not leaving a stone standing, and making slaves of their population, of which the Sultan would receive his share of one fifth.

In view of the sovereign rhetoric and also of its legal basis, the law of war according to the *shar'ia*, the European lands which had not yet fallen under the domination of Islam, especially of its leader the 'sultan of the ghazis', i.e. the Ottoman *pâdishâh*, constituted an undifferentiated whole designated as 'the territories of war' (*dâr ül-harb*). They were destined to be subjugated by 'the sword of Islam', the victorious blade of the 'Sultan of the Sultans' which 'threw off showers of sparks'. Only the truces (*sulh ü salâh*), which were necessarily temporary, could delay their ineluctable fate for a short while. In due time, those territories would be conquered either by force (thus leaving to the inhabitants the choice between death and slavery) or by submission: in this latter case the inhabitants of the conquered lands benefited from the status of *dhimmî*, which indeed saved them and allowed them to preserve their faith but abased them to an inferior and humiliating position in society (by the way, this prospect, hardly exulting but yet apt to discourage all resistance, was obscured by Christian propaganda).

This was roughly the situation as it was lived and described by some and only depicted by others; the remnants of the fantasies of many, as it was imagined by them, still survive in the collective memory as well as in the writings of a certain class of historians. The least we can say is that the frontal antagonism corresponding to the situation left little room for mutual discovery, for exchanges, meetings and friendship between the parties. And yet the historian who observes this period without blinkers and bias does not need to press on with his inquiry too much in order to find the numerous links between the two worlds, supposedly separated by an impassable boundary. Does this mean that the dark picture of the initial description was false? No, it was not. At least all the elements which composed it were true. It was but one side of the reality and only one side, which was too abrupt and too rugged to constitute, for a long time, the sole reality. The descriptions are simple but the practices are more complicated. Everything is simple for the authors of these descriptions and for those who content themselves with their views. However, the history that men make is

never so simple. It is up to the historian to discern and to restore it in its different aspects and to correct the oversimplified pictures .

Even if the deeply entrenched postulate of reciprocal rejection is in contradiction with it (which, by the way, is not dwelt on sufficiently), few Europeans went to the lands of the great Sultan, for official or private reasons. Some of these travellers were diplomats, pilgrims or merchants; others were trying to escape prosecution, be it well-founded or not, in their countries of origin, or sought to make their fortune by utilising their professional skills. Yet others were motivated simply by curiosity. The books of travel they left show the open-mindedness of many among them, their often qualified opinions and remarks on the people they discovered, on their customs and institutions. The immense success of many of these books, which were republished several times, is no less significant . The genre was sufficiently profitable to incite some cunning authors to give detailed description of lands on which they had never set their feet.

It is true that the relationship between the two communities has been marked by two occidental illusions that are also arrogant. They are, more or less explicitly, present in the ideas generally accepted by many, including historians, and the picture is thereof markedly distorted. The first of these illusions is to believe that the sole concern, the unique objective of Ottoman policy was to attack and subjugate Christianity. This reveals a deficient study of the geographical maps and ignorance of many events. In fact, the Sultan was obliged to face up to several fronts, in the east and in the west; he had adversaries also among the Muslims (the Shiites of Yemen and more permanently of Iran, or later on, at the end of the 18th century, the 'Wahhabis' of Arabia), which forced him to redistribute his forces, thus limiting his action and forcing him to hold back on one front in order to advance on the other. In short, his *dâr ül-harb* was too vast for him not to make distinctions and choices, as well as enter the way of negotiations.

The second illusion consists in considering that if breaches indeed were made in the wall of hostility, all the credit was due to the occidentals. Even if the famous thesis of Bernard Lewis on the fundamental dissymmetry in their relationships, manifest in the attitudes of the occidentals and the attitudes of the Muslims, is not indeed void of basis, it should not be over-simplified and generalized, thereby going well beyond the thoughts of the author. It is true that the occidental travellers in the lands of the Sultan had always been incomparably more numerous than the Ottoman travellers in the Occident. Ottoman

literature, with very few exceptions, does not offer an equivalent to our travel books, allowing the contrast in Manichaean terms between the vigorous open-mindedness of one and the frantic withdrawal into themselves of the other. European merchants constituted very active communities in cities such as Istanbul, Aleppo, Beirut, Smyrna and Salonica, but no subjects of the Sultan could be found in Marseilles, Naples or in Amsterdam although a few -- including some Muslims -- lived in Venice where the *Fondaco dei Turchi* was established for them at the beginning of the 17th century. A few could also be found in Warsaw and in Moscow.

In any case, the point of view adopted on the utility of commercial activity and the interest shown in exchanges cannot be only due to the act of running about all over the world instead of staying home. It is evident that if the 'Franks' could go and trade in the Ottoman Empire, it was because the Sultan was willing to let them to do so. If these merchants obtained the guarantees indispensable for a durable and lucrative activity (whatever the obstacles they met and the vexations they endured), it was because the Sultan granted them the required conditions within the framework of the treaties.

It is true that political objectives were not absent from the famous Capitulations (*'ahdnâme* or *imtiyazât* in Ottoman), but the considerations strictly of commercial nature were well and truly present. As a matter of fact, the Ottomans appreciated commerce for the valuable, useful or novel articles it procured for the wealthy and for the substantial fiscal revenues it brought into the Treasury and its agents, the tax farmers (not to speak of the very profitable investments, not always respectful of the legislation on exportations, that the high government officials of the Empire themselves made in the commercial enterprises). They were favorable enough to give to the merchants the means to weigh in their litigations with the central government or the local port authorities.

These merchants were not preaching in the desert when they threatened to quit the ports or to keep their boats away if their demands were not satisfied. The articles of commerce exchanged opened the way to acquaintanceship of one with the other, with his skill, his aesthetic sensibility and his way of life.

The intrusion of diplomacy, which replaced the confrontation with periods of peaceful coexistence and even a *modus vivendi*, was also the fruit of their common efforts. Once more, the Occident seems to have taken the initiative by sending diplomats and by

opening permanent embassies in Constantinople, as was the case of Venice, installed on the Bosphorus already in the 15th century with its *Bailos* appointed for periods of three years. Indeed, the permanent embassies of the Sultan in Europe would appear much later, at the end of the 18th century; however this does not imply that the *pâdishâh*, in his superb ivory tower, was indifferent to the world outside. Not only did it happen that he dispatched a *chavush*, a *kapiji*, a *muteferrika* or a dragoman as his ambassador extraordinary to Venice, Paris, Vienna, Cracow, Moscow or to any other infidel land when the situation called for it, but he established, once and for all, the principle that diplomatic relations were fully justified and useful. Otherwise, the Occidental embassies would never have been allowed in the capital. Süleymân the Magnificent expressed this principle when he declared, as a leitmotif, that his door was always accessible and open to everyone, friends and enemies, who wished to come.

From this point of view, the history of Franco-Ottoman diplomatic relations is emblematic: at the end of the 15th century, Bâyezîd II was strongly motivated to inaugurate diplomatic relations with France, for reasons, in fact, concerning his brother and potential rival Jem Sultân, who after having found refuge among the Knights of St. John in Rhodes, was later sent to France as hostage. The sultan wished ardently to have him sent back or least to receive information about him. For this, he had sent a messenger to Louis XI, but the king, at death's door and seized by scrupulous piety, refused to allow an infidel to approach his deathbed.

This was a rather bad beginning for Franco-Ottoman relations. However some decades later, the situation was altogether different. For Francis I, defeated at Pavia by Charles V and kept prisoner in Madrid, the Great Turk was the unique sovereign in the world who, by his power and his geographical situation, was capable of helping him materially and of taking his enemy from the rear. The religious scruples of the 'roi très chrétien' and his counsellors had not in any way disappeared but were brushed aside by the political exigencies of the moment. The immediate and unreserved reaction of Sultan Sulayman is doubly significant: not only did he immediately perceive the interest of having an ally of importance on the European political scene, and of appearing as the protector of one of the eminent princes of the 'Franks', but he draped this relationship in paternal affection and sincere friendship as it appears in the tone of his first reply and in all of his letters that followed. He remained loyal to his engagements for a long time, even when his French partners were

constantly trying his patience by neglecting their engagements and by negotiating with their common enemy behind his back.

From the moment when diplomacy worked its way into the relations of the Sultan and the Christian nations, the Islamic juridical concept of *dâr ül-harb* necessarily lost its rigidity and uniformity. A scene much more complex and varied replaced a picture without subtleness and painted in colors that were invariably sombre. Mehmed II, speaking of Italy, is said to have declared to Benedetto Dei, a merchant of Florence: "You have in your country 20 governments and leagues, disunited and fierce enemies of one other". The chancellor Ferîdûn himself would later evoke those 'infidels of divided nations' (*müteferrik el-milel*).

In principle each one of these sovereigns, be they small or great, merited attention and consideration. At the beginning of the letters addressed to them, all would be designated by such noble formulas as 'the paragon of the glorious emirs of the Religion of Jesus, model for the illustrious notables of the nation of Messiah, you who are the administrator of the affairs of the community of the Nazarenes ...', accorded to them by the Sultan. In reality, a situation full of contrasts is hidden behind these flattering words which reflect at least a partial recognition of Christianity by Islam. From the point of view of the Sultan, all those 'Christian beys' (*Hiristiyan beyleri*) were distinguishable from each other by the function of their respective powers, their relative seniorities in their relations with the Sublime Porte and especially by the quality of these relations since the epochs of the 'illustrious ancestors' and the 'glorious forefathers' of the reigning Sultan. That is why he took the initiative to establish the hierarchy of the Occidental sovereigns, taking into account the realities, but also his proper criteria of appraisal, especially for the sovereigns of a higher level: some of them who claimed to be emperors were simply kings (*kiral*) for the Sultan; on the contrary, others, esteemed by him, such as the king of France and sometimes the king of Poland, are elevated as an example and honored by the title of *pâdishâh*. At the same time he placed himself at the top of this hierarchy, and, taking over and resting on the Western historical traditions, reserved for himself the title of Caesar.

On the other hand however, he did not have irreconcilable enemies with whom he would not negotiate and deal when needed, be it the Habsbourgs, Safavid heretics or the king of Portugal whose maritime expeditions worried him a lot. In any case, diplomacy and war, when it is not reduced to the ravages of savage hordes, cannot forgo intelligence.

It was not fortuitous that Mehmed II is known to have relentlessly questioned visiting foreigners on all the distinctive characteristics of their countries of origin, or that Ibrâhîm Pasha, the Grand Vizier of Süleymân the Magnificent, harassed the ambassadors with whom he was negotiating with questions. He wanted to be given exact information about the number of rivers in Spain and why its lands were less cultivated than those of France; in this way he discovered also the harm that the expulsion of the Jews and the oppression of the Moors had caused the Spanish economy.

Of course, these private conversations, although revealing the vivid curiosity of at least some of the Ottoman statesmen of the epoch for 'Frëngistan', did not meet all the needs of the empire for information. Therefore, like other states, they had recourse to all sorts of spies (or 'tongues', as they were also called). So today we find among the documents of the archives of Topkapı Palace curious reports on the political and military situation of the Western countries, and the important events which were taking place there.

One of these documents, sent by an officer of the frontier, the *subashi* of Durazzo and probably written in 1530, bears on the answers to his numerous questions that he obtained from an Albanian textile merchant back from three years' commercial travels in Spain, France and in the 'country of the Pope' (*Rîm papa memleketi*). In it, the subjects are 'a certain bey named Frère Martin Luther' who had 'founded a new religion', the negotiations for the Treaty of Cambrais between the representatives of Francis I and of Charles V, and the advantages offered by the site of the port of Marseille.

There is no doubt that the search for intelligence, whatever the form it takes and the channels it uses, is by no means a disinterested quest, inspired by the sole passion of discovery or the pure love of learning. But it is clear from the turn taken by the discussions between ministers and diplomats or, likewise, through the different 'national histories' commissioned by the Ottoman officials of the time (such as an History of Hungary or an History of France), how one imperceptibly progresses from utilitarian information, collected for military or at least diplomatic ends, to a more disinterested research, in response to genuine cultural and intellectual expectations.

Here we perhaps reach the final lesson of all that has been stated before, which constitutes a kind of apologue: even in a situation which at first glance appeared as the most striking expression of cultural, religious and ideological antagonism, beyond these

despairing appearances, realism as well as some fundamental human dispositions irresistibly paved the way for cultural exchanges and mutual knowledge.

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Middle Ages but was the Turk -- the 'terrible Turk'. This term Turk became also the synonym for Muslim; for example, the expression 'to become Turk' signified 'to convert to Islam'.