

## **Strangers and Friends—Cultural Identity and Community\***

This paper is not a definitive study of European forgotten history but a series of quotes, reaffirming a need to look into the resources for tolerance practice from the histories of rejected peoples, memories and cultural movements. Through examples from cultural history we shall explore the little known fertilizing and benevolent presence of strangers in traditional societies and view them in the context of issues of tolerance and difference.

The establishment of Christianity created a large schism in the Roman Empire. Byzantium, with its own brand of Christianity, rivaled the Catholic faith of Rome. To protect the interests of Byzantium, and control and diffuse the indigenous people of the Balkans, Constantinople invited and encouraged Slavic tribes from the North to come and settle. Once Christianized they were given the land and property of dispersed indigenous people who were looking to Rome for their protection and allegiances. Those who didn't run towards Rome assimilated with newcomers. The situation is not unlike Celtic and Druidic traditions, which were pushed into the uninhabitable parts of the British Isles and were persecuted by advancing Christianity. An old lady in England once told me, "Oh, those Druids were powerful, very powerful; they buried a talisman in Ireland, so the Christians would experience over and over again what they inflicted on the Druids." She concluded by saying, "that they would experience the violence with which they conquered." If we replace the idea of the Talisman buried in the land, with the suppressed and forgotten histories within ancestral memories and places, we might have a tentative starting point for healing and change. Unearthing the forgotten histories within the mainstream cultures could be a beginning of the healing practice of tolerance and change. As in Ireland and in the Balkans, every thirty years (prodded by some external interest) people begin to act the upset and intolerance of their forgotten and unresolved pasts. To protect its borders, the Byzantine Empire had to create, adopt, compromise, and often fight the very kingdoms it created. An example of this is the complex relationships and tolerance of the heretical sects of Paulicians who were the expert border guards.

From The Encyclopedia of Heresies and Heretics, Chas S. Clifton says "For a time, its members created a kingdom on the upper Euphrates River, becoming a border state between the Christian Byzantine Empire and Muslim realms to the east. Paulician forces raided the eastern borders of the empire during the ninth century until the emperor Basil I in 872 defeated them. The survivors fled into the mountains of Armenia or took refuge among the Arabs. One group, however, had been settled in Thrace by an earlier eighth-century emperor to serve as a frontier garrison; these Paulicians have been viewed by some historians as providing the seed of the latter Bogomil belief. The Bogomil heresy began in the Balkans circa 930. Not only did it persist in the Byzantine Empire for sometime, but Bogomil missionaries traveled to Italy and Provence (southern France) and perhaps other parts of western Europe, seeding their doctrines and contributing to the later rise of the Albigensian heresy.

Its founder was Bogomil, (meaning beloved of God in the Slavonic language) a village priest. Bogomil taught that the only valid prayer was the Lord's Prayer (a prayer

also retained by the Albigensians). Bogomil's congregation had no priesthood or hierarchy; men and woman confessed their sins to one another and gave one another absolution. The spread of Bogomil's teaching has been explained by historians as a peasant religious uprising masking the Slavonic-speaking Balkan peasants' resentment of their Byzantine Greek rulers in Constantinople (modern Istanbul) and of Constantinople's local agents. The Bogomil heresy pitted a Slavic peasantry and their Bulgarian overlords, who were of Tatar stock and had been converted by Byzantine missionaries, against one another, as well as pitting a Greek-speaking church hierarchy against Slavic village priests."

Certainly this gave the heresy an additional dimension, and parallels are frequently drawn between the tenth-century Balkan situation and the subsequent events in southern France in which the Albigensian heresy had its own political dimension. When the Ottoman Turks conquered areas of the Balkans where Bogomilism was widespread in the fifteenth century, many Bogomils embraced Islam. Like the Paulicians, Bogomils had a close link with Islamic and pre-Islamic thought from Mesopotamia and Egypt, which was incorporated into many heretical sects. Also Byzantine scholars were students of Arabic civilization which preserved a great amount of classical learning and Egyptian/Mesopotamian indigenous rituals and thought. Five centuries later we can see some of the similar threads reappearing in renaissance Florence where Kabbalah, Neoplatonism, Egyptian mysteries, and the forgotten and hidden histories of Mary Magdalen were studied and preserved. The independent city-state of Florence offered a more cosmopolitan climate and collected the freethinkers of the age.

Rodney Collin in his essay Cycles of Civilization says, "But yet again, within this aging culture, a new one had already been conceived. At the very moment when the fires of the Spanish Inquisition showed to what depths the medieval idea could fall, a new light appeared in Italy. As before, an unnoticed corner, away from the warring and unwieldy empires, was a birthplace. In keeping with the new age, not abbots nor priests, but a family of rich bankers, made possible the conditions."

Cosimo Medici found himself chief citizen of Florence at a time when his small city was becoming the focus both of mounting opposition to Papal Rome, and of passionate devotion to classical antiquity. A strange thing then occurred. In 1438 the Emperor John Paleologus of Constantinople with a train of scholars, artists and churchmen, came to the west in a last endeavor to enlist help against the Turks. Cosimo Medici persuaded the Emperor, Pope and the whole assembly to adjourn to Florence at his personal expense. No western aid was forthcoming, and the Emperor returned empty-handed to Constantinople to face the inevitable tragedy alone. But behind the scenes something very important had happened. Schoolmen in the Emperor's suit seem to have been looking for a refuge for their tradition. An understanding was reached. Fourteen years later Constantinople fell, as it had to. But all that was important had already been transferred to Florence.

One of the most feared, denigrated and rejected histories is the European debt to the Islamic world. In the Balkans, due to particular bias, and the influence of industrial nations, 500 years of Ottoman rule are only remembered in derogatory terms. The Inquisition has done the same to Spain. An example of Islamic enlightenment and intercultural exchange can be found in the life and work of Ibn-Arabi, the Murcian, who was born in 1164. One of his many names was "the Andalusian," and he was one of the

most profound influences upon both the Muslim and Christian world. Ibn-Arabi died in Damascus in 1240.

Like Ibn-Arabi, there were Jewish mystics who thrived and spread their influences in Spain. The 'Golden Age of Spain,' was golden due to a nearly two hundred year spell of religious and philosophical tolerance enabling the three great traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to flourish with relatively little resistance from clerical and royal powers. Skilled in Arabic astronomy, Greek science, philosophy, Talmud, Hindu and Egyptian theology, 10<sup>th</sup> century scholars from Worms migrated to Southern France (the Pyrenees, Provence, and the Basque Country) founding academies of learning. Powerful upheavals in the Christian world occurred when the Cathar sect gained control of Languedoc, where the first centers of Kabbalah were to be formed. The Spanish Kabbalists of the 13<sup>th</sup> century were responsible for the translation of sacred books such as Sefer Yetzirah into Hebrew, Spanish, and Arabic. The Kabbalist center of Gerona emerged from Provence. Rabbinic circles emerged in Catalonia, between the Pyrenees and Barcelona. Moses b. Nachman (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), the most influential mystic and interpreter of Judaic theology traveled to the city of Gerona and made it one of the greatest intellectual centers of Europe. The ecstatic path of self-revelation through mystical contemplation was launched by Abraham Abulafia, who had been in contact with Sufi circles, and had been reared in Kabbalistic and Zoroastrian thought from his youth. The pinnacle of this Rabbinic renaissance came with the publication of the Sefer ha-Zohar, (1280-86) by Moses de Leon in Guadalajara. The Zohar, written in an age of tolerance and intellectual freedom gave birth to 16<sup>th</sup> Century Lurianic Kabbalah, the legacy of the Baal Shem Tov in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Poland, and is the foundation of modern mystical scholarship in Europe and The United States. In sum, the idea of tolerance was no mere trope of expediency, but a notion deeply sensitive to the nature of ideas. This climate of tolerance existing just to the anxious edges of the Inquisition compelled disparate traditions to engage in collaborative speculation, and temporarily flourish.

With regard to the Egyptian influence on the Middle East, and by extension on Greece, Gary Greenberg says in his book The Moses Mystery: The African Origins of the Jewish People, (1996) that the archeological site, the Merneptah Stele, is reexamined through carbon dating, and pharonic dynasties. Mr. Greenberg traces Adamic origins in 3761 BCE to The United Monarchy of David in 1000 BCE, and finds a direct match between the chronology of the Egyptian pharaohs and the Hebrew Bible. After entering Canaan, the Egyptian followers of Moses formed military alliances with local Canaanite Kings and with the recent arrival of Greek invaders known as the Sea People. This nontribal alliance of small kingdoms and city-states became biblical Israel.

Viewed from a certain standpoint the Jewish and Greek civilizations are but the offspring of Africa and Egyptian epicenters of cultures. Plato specifically tells us that Solon, his ancestor, was taught by Egyptian priests during his visit to Sais about 590 BCE, and Clement of Alexandria adds that Pythagoras acquired his science from the same source. In the Timaeus it is further made clear that the school at Sais deliberately revealed knowledge long kept hidden to the visiting Greeks. In The Sirius Mystery, Robert K.G. Temple says: "In Wallis Budge we find a description of an Egyptian-influenced Italian temple of the first century BC which contained "seven large paintings representing Egyptian landscapes, and Io received by Isis in Egypt. What were the mysteries of Isis? Well, they seem to have been related to the Thesmophoria Mysteries

that the daughters of Danaos were said to have brought from Egypt to Argos. Plutarch in Isis and Osirus (378 d) informs us: ‘Among the Greeks also many things are done which are similar to the Egyptian ceremonies in the shrine of Isis, and they do them at about the same time. At Athens the women fast as the Thesmophoria sitting upon the ground.’

In Wallis Budge we also read excerpts of Egyptian texts speaking of holy emanations proceeding from Sirius and Orion which ‘vivify gods, men, cattle, and creeping things...both gods and men’, and are a pouring out of the seed of the soul. Of course, the Dogen [African tribe of Dogon] maintain the same thing in almost precisely the same terms. To them the seed which energizes the world pours forth from the [location of] the Sirius [constellation of stars.]”

Rodney Collin concludes his essay on Cycle and Civilization, and says “For those concerned, the birth of a new civilization must over and over again in history have meant that everything had to be reconstructed, everything had to be made over again from the beginning, in a new form, suitable to a new age. Looking back from our standpoint over the whole descent of history, we can see that each new beginning was in reality but a tremendous effort to continue. To those who had to begin, to engender a new phase of human development, this beginning was life or death. But from the point of view of the stars nothing was altered, because humanity and all its potentialities remain the same.”

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