

“Godless Saracens Threatening Destruction”: Premodern Christian Responses to Islam and Muslims

by Daniel Pipes

Author’s note: This study was announced as “forthcoming” in my 1983 book, *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power* (New York: Basic), [p. 348, fn. 47](#). It took 38 years to finish, but here it is, with a different subtitle. This article is part one; part two, on the modern era, will appear in the next issue.

In a conversation that apparently took place on July 13, 634, just two years after Muhammad’s death, an [old man](#) was asked what he made of “the prophet who has appeared among the Saracens?” He replied that Muhammad “is an imposter. Do the prophets come with swords and chariots?” Another person agreed, noting, “There is no truth from the so-called prophet, only bloodshed.” Several months later, in a sermon on Christmas Eve in 634, the [patriarch of Jerusalem](#) referred to the Muslims as “the slime of the godless Saracens [that] threatens slaughter and destruction.”¹

Thus, the Christian reaction to Muslims inauspiciously began at a moment when religious passions ran highest and receptivity to new influences lowest. This hostile response then stayed largely static over the next millennium, 634-1700. Only in the past three centuries did attitudes evolve, mixing that old hostility with something startlingly different. The following article sketches the Christian responses to Islam and Muslims over the millennium. Why did Europe² for so long view Muslims negatively? Part II will ask why this partially changed and what the current situation is.

¹ Walter Emil Kaegi, Jr., “Initial Byzantine Reactions to the Arab Conquest,” *Church History*, June 1969, pp. 139-49.

² Europe is defined here as the peninsula west of about the 30th meridian east, plus its adjoining islands, thereby excluding most of Russia and Turkey, with the signal exception of Istanbul. This account focuses specifically on Christians in premodern Europe and subsequently broadens sometimes to include the West as a whole.

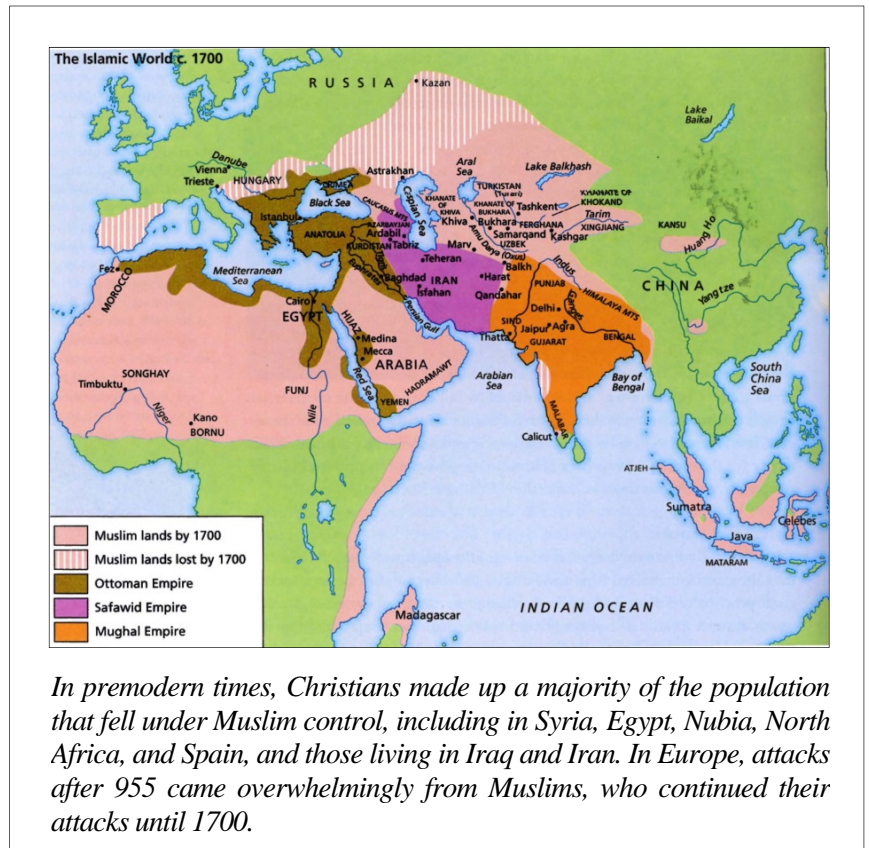
Military: Outside Europe

Two challenges, military and religious, account for Europe's initial and abiding animus toward Muslims. Not only did Muslims conquer much of Christendom before 1700 and threaten what resisted their control, but they posed a singular religious challenge. This combination gave them a unique role.

What has been called "the oldest frontier in the world"³ opened with the military victories of Muslims over Christians. Two years after the death of Muhammad in 632, Muslims began raiding Byzantine territory to the north of Arabia; a mere eighty-two years later, they had conquered lands stretching from the Pyrenees to Central Asia. Christians made up a majority of the population in many regions that fell under Muslim control, including Syria, Egypt, Nubia, North Africa, and Spain, as did the many Christians living in Iraq and Iran. In fact, in less than a century, nearly the whole of Christendom outside of Europe and Anatolia abruptly became incorporated in what the Muslims call *Dar al-Islam* (territories controlled by Muslim rulers).

With a single exception, the few regions outside Europe that survived the initial Arabian onslaught eventually fell to Muslim conquests. Constantinople, capital of Byzantium and gateway to East Europe, resisted Muslim attacks for eight centuries, starting with a

³ Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (State Univ. of N.Y. Press and the Islamic Texts Society, 1985), p. 2. This analysis accepts the conventional account of Islam's origins.



Muslim naval expedition in 654. It eventually succumbed to the Ottoman Turks on May 29, 1453, one of the blackest and most resonant dates in Christian history. Byzantium stood firm in Anatolia for over four centuries, 653-1071, but then Turks overran their lands, finally eliminating the last Greek kingdom in 1461. Armenians fell to Muslim rule in 666 and remained subjugated thereafter, with the exception of one long period, 885-1375. Similarly, Georgians fell under Muslim control in 654, enjoyed a medieval resurgence, and fell back under Muslim rule in the sixteenth century. Many Maronite Christians living in the plains of Syria fled Muslim rule by taking to the mountains of Lebanon; there they maintained their independence through most of the Islamic era but finally fell to the Ottomans. Dongola in the Sudan lasted until about 1350 and nearby Alwa to 1504.

Only the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia withstood the Muslim drive for territory, making it the unique ancient Christian land outside Europe to survive. And it too would have succumbed to jihad (Muslim war against non-Muslims) but for what historian Elaine Sanceau calls the “[not far short of miraculous](#)” intervention by a small Portuguese contingent on its behalf.⁴ It was, indeed, nearly miraculous, for the Muslim invasion of 1530-31, led by Ahmad Gran, would have overrun the ancient Christian kingdom but for 350 Portuguese bombardiers and riflemen in 1541 who, along with two hundred Ethiopians, prevailed against 15,000 bowmen, 1,500 horsemen, and 200 Turkish arquebusiers.

These Christian lands were lost at a time when the Levant and North Africa—not Europe—constituted the heartlands of Christianity, containing most of its population, key institutions, and cultural centers. Muslim rule destroyed the primacy of eastern Christianity and decimated the power of its churches. Four out of five patriarchates (Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, Jerusalem) lost much of their autonomy and influence when brought under Muslim rule. Western Europeans, Norman Daniel writes, saw Christendom as “a single nation, which in the rise of Islam had been robbed of a third of its best provinces,”⁵ and more thereafter. Europe was orphaned.

⁴ Elaine Sanceau, *The Land of Prester John: A Chronicle of Portuguese Exploration* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), p. 136.

⁵ Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1958), p. 109.



Orthodox Ethiopian priests attend a religious ceremony, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In the 4th century, Ethiopia adopted Christianity as the state religion. It was the only Christian kingdom outside of Europe to withstand the Muslim drive for territory. More than 60 percent of Ethiopians remain Christian today.

Military: Europe

Closer to Europe, every major island in the Mediterranean Sea came under Muslim domination. The duration varied from several months in Sardinia to over six centuries in Cyprus. Muslims ruled the Balearic Islands from 903 to 1228 and raided the islands hundreds of years before and after those dates. They ruled Corsica from 814 to the early tenth century; Crete in 826-961 and 1669-1897; Cyprus in 649-965 and 1573-1878; Malta in 869-1091; Rhodes briefly in 653-58 and 717-18, then in 1522-1912; Sardinia in 1015-16; and Sicily from 827 (though only parts of the island were under Muslim control before 965) to 1091.

As for mainland Europe, waves of invaders attacked it in the ancient and early medieval periods. Incursions by non-Muslim peoples such as the Celts, Goths, Magyars, and Vikings ended in 955, with the sole

exception of the Mongol invasion of eastern Europe in 1240-41. In contrast, Muslims continued to attack for almost another eight hundred years until 1700. Thus, other than the Mongols (many of whom converted to Islam, so they too nearly fitted the pattern), attacks on Europe after 955 came overwhelmingly from Muslims.

Jihad came in two principal waves: an Arabian campaign in the west from the eighth to the tenth centuries and a Turkish campaign in the east from the fourteenth to the seventeenth. (The two eras of Muslim control over Crete, Cyprus, and Rhodes reflect this double offensive.)

On the European mainland, Christians often succumbed to Muslim attack. Arabians conquered Spain between 711 and 716, destroyed the Christian Visigoth kingdom there, proceeded to Gaul, and in 732 reached as far as Poitiers, two hundred miles southwest of Paris. [Edward Gibbon](#) famously speculated that, if not for the Franks' victory at Poitiers,

Perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet.⁶

⁶ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 3 (London: Everyman's Library, 1993), p. 469.



In the 920s, Muslims controlled many of the passes leading through the Alps. In 954, Arab raiders sacked the monastery of St. Gallen (above) on today's Swiss-German border.

Although the Arabs did not manage to establish a firm base outside Iberia, their raids became an unhappy fact of life in many parts of ninth- and tenth-century Europe. One notable expedition took Muslim invaders in 846 to the suburbs of Rome where they attacked the papal church of St. Peter's. A wall built after this incursion to protect the pope—with labor largely provided by Muslim prisoners—eventually led to the establishment of an independent Vatican state. Italy at one time hosted an independent Muslim emirate, brief (853-71) and small (at Bari, near the heel of Italy) as it was.

Arab raiders captured the town of Fraxinetum (now called Garde-Frainet) near St. Tropez on the Côte d'Azur in 889 and held it for nearly half a century; from there, they roamed the Rhine Valley, reaching Switzerland. On one occasion, in 954, Muslims from Fraxinetum sacked the monastery of St. Gallen by Lake Constance on today's Swiss-German border. In the 920s, Muslims controlled many of the passes leading through the Alps.

The Arab presence extended east to Athens where a colony of Muslims lived around the year 1000. They built a mosque on the site of the ancient temple, the Asclepium, and worked as laborers in the city.⁷ These invasions are still commemorated by place names: thus, [Pontresina](#), a town near St. Moritz, Switzerland, derives its name from the Latin “Pons Saracenorum,” Bridge of the Saracens, a medieval term for Arabs and Muslims.⁸ Although frightening and powerfully etched in the memories of local residents, these incursions had little staying power; indeed, for many centuries after taking Spain, the Muslims made no lasting advances in Europe.

A second wave of conquests began in 1356 when the Ottoman Turks crossed the Bosphorus and captured Gallipoli from the Byzantines. Over the next several centuries, the Ottomans captured Greece and nearly the entire Balkan region, a fact again commemorated by many place names: *Balkan*, for example, is Turkish for *mountain*. Many Christian peoples, including the Greeks, Serbs, and Hungarians, fell under Muslim rule. The Ottoman advance climaxed with two unsuccessful sieges of Vienna in 1529 and 1683.

As part of an effort to free Greece of Ottoman rule, a coalition of European mercenary armies bombarded the Parthenon,

Muslim sea power could reach almost any coast. Barbary pirates landed in Iceland in 1627 and seized hundreds to sell as slaves.

which the Turks used as a storage magazine, and in September 1687, a direct hit and the ensuing fire left the structure in the ruins familiar today. (The explosion also had the effect of forcing the Turks to surrender.)

Turkish power reached beyond the Balkans: To the north, the Ottomans held the Polish region of Podolia from 1672 to 1699; to the east, an independent Muslim dynasty ruled the Crimea from 1475 to 1774; and to the west, they momentarily held Otranto, Italy, in 1480-81. Muslim sea power could reach almost any coast. In an extreme case, two sets of Barbary pirates, one from Morocco, the other from Algeria, landed in Iceland in 1627 in an incident known as the [Tyrkjaránið](#) and seized hundreds of captives to sell as slaves back home. Though not much came of these advances, matters might have turned out differently. Consider the Italian offensive, abandoned due to internal Ottoman constraints; as [Bernard Lewis](#) points out, it could have had major consequences.

The ease with which, a few years later in 1494-1495, the French were able to conquer the Italian states one after another, almost without resistance, suggests that had the Turks persisted in their plans, they would have conquered most or all of Italy without undue difficulty. A Turkish conquest of Italy in 1480, when the Renaissance was just beginning, would have transformed the history of the world.⁹

⁷ Kenneth M. Setton, “On the Raids of the Moslems in the Aegean in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries and Their Alleged Occupation of Athens,” *American Journal of Archaeology*, 58 (1954): 319.

⁸ Manfred W. Wenner, “The Arab/Muslim Presence in Medieval Central Europe,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Aug. 1980, p. 66 (with a list of other names).

⁹ Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York and London: WW Norton, 2001), p. 32.

Looking at the whole of continental Europe, Muslims at some time controlled most or all of the modern states of Portugal, Spain, Hungary, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Belarus, and Moldova. In addition, they ruled parts of France, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine.

This widespread Muslim presence meant that Christians over a twelve-hundred-year period repeatedly won their independence against Muslims, from the Spanish *Reconquista* begun in 722 to Albania's war of independence in 1912. Not surprisingly, Muslims were widely seen as the foremost enemy, and national identities formed in opposition to them in much of southern Europe, especially in Portugal, Spain, Sicily, Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania. Arabians, Saracens, Moors, terrible Turks, Tatar hordes, and Barbary pirates served as set foils for Christian valor. Saints (most notably, King Louis IX of France) made their reputations by standing up to Muslims.

Muslims also played this role in literature, from the medieval *Chanson de Roland* and *Cantar de mio Cid* to the early modern *Don Quixote* and *Os Lusíadas* to the modern [Le Camp des Saints and Soumission](#).¹⁰ [Andorra](#)'s national anthem, adopted in 1921, begins with: "The great Charlemagne, my father, liberated me from the Saracens."

Hostilities with Muslims spurred military technology. For example, Galileo developed the telescope not just to prove Copernicus' heliocentric theory but also as a

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"spy glass" that military intelligence could use to see Ottoman naval vessels two hours earlier than with the naked eye.¹¹ Being surrounded by Muslims inspired naval discoveries, starting with those

prompted by Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal (1394-1460).

A membrane of Muslim peoples from Spain across North Africa to the Levant, on to Central Asia and Siberia, separated medieval Europe from the rest of the eastern hemisphere; being effectively surrounded by Muslims further exacerbated Christian views. Not only did few Europeans manage to reach beyond the Muslims, but reports from non-Muslim Africa and Asia—for example Marco Polo's—were often received with skepticism.

Encircled by Muslims and "preoccupied with immediate problems brought on by the threat of Islam, Europe almost completely lost sight of the [non-Muslim] East as a land of reality," writes historian Donald Lach.¹² Christians hardly realized how limited their vision was: "Islam not only obliged the Christians to live in a tiny enclosed world ... it also made them feel that such an existence was a normal one," notes John Meyendorff.¹³ In addition, Europeans often felt isolated and hopeless. As Roger Bacon wrote in the late 1260s, "there are few Christians; the whole

¹⁰ Daniel Pipes, "[Who Will Write France's Future?](#)" *The Washington Times*, June 7, 2016.

¹¹ Dankwart A. Rustow, "The Military Legacy," in L. Carl Brown, ed., [Imperial Legacy: The Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 252-53.

¹² Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, vol. 1, bk. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 22.

¹³ John Meyendorff, "Byzantine Views of Islam," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 18 (1964): 131-32.

breadth of the world is occupied by unbelievers, and there is no one to show them the truth.”¹⁴ Europeans retained this claustrophobic sense of being surrounded by enemies until about 1450.

For about one thousand years, from the initial attack on Constantinople in 654 to the second attack on Vienna in 1683, Muslims posed the most consistent external challenge to Europe, causing Europeans to worry deeply for over a millennium about Muslim power. The Islamic religious challenge then reinforced this sense of threat.

Religious: A False Religion, Muhammad

The Islamic religion worried Europeans no less than Muslim armies. Islam presented several unique challenges to Christianity: It was seen as false. It presumed to complete the Gospel and supersede it. It offered a viable and attractive alternate way of life. And it attracted more Christian converts than any other religion. The prominent Scottish administrator in India and scholar of Islam, Sir [William Muir](#), wrote in 1845 that Islam was “the only undisguised and formidable antagonist of Christianity.”¹⁵ [Wilfred Cantwell Smith](#) added in 1957:

Until Karl Marx and the rise of

¹⁴ Roger Bacon, *Baconiis Opus Maius Pars Septima seu Moralis Philosophia*, Eugenia Massa, ed. (Turici: In aedibus Thesauri mundi, 1953), 3:122, cited in R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 57.

¹⁵ Sir William Muir, *The Mohammedan Controversy and Other Indian Articles* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1897), p. 2.



Throughout the medieval period, Christians saw Islam as a perversion of their own faith. The Greek icon above depicts St. John the Damascene who deemed Islam the “superstition of the Ishmaelites.”

communism, the Prophet organized and launched the only serious challenge to Western civilization that it has faced in the whole course of its history.¹⁶

Throughout the medieval period, Christians saw Islam not just as a false religion but as a distortion of the Christian message, a perversion of their own faith. [St. John the Damascene](#) (d. ca. 749) considered the “superstition of the Ishmaelites” to be a

¹⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton, N.J. and Oxford: Princeton University Press and Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 105.

Christian heresy.¹⁷ In this spirit, medieval Christians imagined that Muslims worshipped an unholy trinity: Mahon (i.e., Muhammad), Tervagant, and Apollin. They viewed

Islam as the epitome of evil, as a fiendishly clever amalgam of doctrines designed to exploit human weaknesses. In a concise formulation, Norman Daniel explains how Islam stood for “a sexually corrupt tyranny based on false teaching.”¹⁸

Accusations about Islamic manipulation of religion, power, and sex became part of the standard European repertoire and showed an “astonishing tenacity,” appearing again and again in various forms and endless variety through the Middle Ages.¹⁹ As [Richard Chenevix](#) (1774-1830), the Irish author of a two-volume work on national character, explained, Islam fulfilled every evil impulse:

To suit the various characters which belong to Arabia Felix, to Arabia Petrea, and to Arabia Deserta, [the Islamic] religion must be as diversified as those districts. It must be ferocious for the one, and sensual for the other; vain, luxurious, enthusiastic, wild for all. To the robber, it must inculcate the plunder of unbelievers; to the warrior, it must preach conquest and extermi-

The rejection of Islam as a valid faith centered on the person of the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

nation; to the slothful, it must allow the pleasures of the senses; to all its votaries, it must promise an eternity of voluptuous beatitude, provided they fall in defence of the prophet.²⁰

The rejection of Islam as a valid faith centered on the person of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Annemarie Schimmel notes that, “more than any other historical figure, it was Muhammad who aroused fear, aversion, and hatred in the medieval Christian world.”²¹ Christians assumed Muhammad to be more than human, for how could a mere mortal devise such clever ways to win followers and make them believe evident falsehoods? Muhammad’s message represented deceit and violence; in particular, his life (the many wives, the sanction of polygamy and concubinage) led to the charge of sexual license. Daniel observes that Muhammad was maligned for

the violence and force with which he imposed his religion; the salacity and laxness with which he bribed his followers whom he did not compel; and finally his evident humanity, which it was consistently considered necessary to prove, although no Muslim denied, or even wished to deny, it.²²

¹⁷ Modern research has revived this interpretation: see [Robert Spencer](#), *Did Muhammad Exist? An Inquiry into Islam’s Obscure Origins* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2012).

¹⁸ Norman Daniel, *Islam, Europe and Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), p. 6.

¹⁹ Southern, *Western Views of Islam*, p. 28.

²⁰ Richard Chenevix, *An Essay upon National Character* (London: James Duncan, 1832), vol. 1, p. 97.

²¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 3.

²² Daniel, *Islam and the West*, p. 107.

Such attitudes toward Muhammad justified Christian rejection of all that Islam represented. If Muhammad was an imposter, how could Muslims be sincere? Christians expressed this skepticism in their terminology. “Mahomet” meant an idol in sixteenth-century English, while “Mahometry” meant idolatry.²³

Similarly, European Christians showed their disrespect for Islam by assigning ethnic rather than religious names to the followers of Muhammad. As Bernard Lewis notes,

In Greece, the Muslims could be Arabs, Persians, Hagarenes, or even Assyrians; in Russia, they were Tatars; in Spain, Moors; in most of Europe, Turks; and in both Eastern and Western Christendom, they were commonly called Saracens, a name of obscure origin but certainly ethnic in meaning.²⁴

Religious: Conversion

As civilized peoples who brought a sophisticated faith with an appealing culture, Muslims differed from nearly all other invaders of Europe, who were tribesmen focused on plunder. Muslims did more than destroy property; they also challenged the continued predominance of Christianity.

Most medieval Christians living in Dar al-Islam made the irrevocable step and converted to Islam, the faith of their political masters, though at highly variable rates. Christians nearly disappeared from Arabia, North Africa, and most of Anatolia while

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holding on as small minorities elsewhere in the Middle East. Copts today make up but a tenth of Egypt’s population, and mere vestiges of the Jacobite, Malachite,

Nestorian, and Orthodox communities survive in the Fertile Crescent and Iran. A combination of political solidarity and inaccessible terrain permitted Armenians and Lebanese to remain predominantly Christian.

Christians in the Middle East currently number about fifteen million, living mostly in Egypt, Lebanon, Cyprus, and Syria, and constituting less than 5 percent of the region’s roughly 370 million population.

In Europe, Christian conversions to Islam occurred with greatest frequency in Iberia, on some Mediterranean islands, and in parts of the Balkans. Spain and Sicily even became important medieval centers of Muslim culture. On occasion, Christian reconquest could force Muslims to leave a region entirely, as happened in Spain and on all major Mediterranean islands except Cyprus (where about 150,000 indigenous Turks now live).²⁵

Muslim rule could be and was reversed but much less so conversions to Islam, for negligible numbers of Muslims apostatize, and they usually do so as isolated individuals; the two leading cases of community conversions—the Tatars of seventeenth-century Russia and the Sunnis of Lebanon of about 1700—were both done under pressure and with the expectation of immediate benefits for converts. Today, an indigenous Muslim population (that is, not including immigrants to Europe over the past century or recent indigenous converts to

²³ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “Mahomet” and “Mahometry.”

²⁴ Bernard Lewis, “Gibbon on Muhammad,” *Daedalus*, Summer 1976, p. 89.

²⁵ Muslims lived in Crete until 1923, when, under the terms of the Treaty of Lausanne, they had to leave for Turkey.

Islam) of fifteen million lives in Europe, mostly in the Balkans and Turkish Thrace. The densest concentration and largest number (about ten million) are found in Istanbul with lesser numbers in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro.

Conclusion

The encounter with Islam occurred about eight hundred years before contact with the Japanese or Chinese, Hindus or Buddhists, Africans or Americans. Indeed, the uniquely hostile nature of European views toward Muslims became evident from the early 1400s with the advent of Europe's explorations when Christians responded far more favorably to the non-Muslims they encountered, and Muslims stood out ever more clearly as the permanent enemy.

As medieval Europe's only persistent rival, Muslims evoked powerful responses that affected all Western relations with the outside world. The planet seemed to contain two major parts, one Christian, the other Muslim; these represented self and other, good and evil. The historian R. W. Southern finds "the existence of Islam ... the most far-reaching problem in medieval Christendom. It was a problem at every level of experience"—practical, theological, and historical.²⁶ The Muslim factor influenced the medieval Christian sense of self, innovation, voyages of discovery, and views of the outside world.

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²⁶ Southern, *Western Views on Islam*, pp. 2-3.