



ANNALES ISLAMOLOGIQUES

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The Critical Approach to Arab Society in the Middle Ages.

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THE CRITICAL APPROACH TO ARAB SOCIETY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Norman DANIEL

Was there any social criticism in the Middle Ages? Medieval social criticism does not use the forms of modern sociology, nor does it employ the historical techniques that developed in the nineteenth century. Eighteenth century ideas of the social conditions in which Islam arose are found in it in embryonic form,⁽¹⁾ but usually medieval social criticism is tied to moral theory, and only rarely pragmatic. We might dismiss it as moralistic, in the pejorative usage of our own day, but most social analysis is tied to one theory or another, and morals are in fact rules of social relationship. European society was expected to conform to Christian moral teaching, in which the inhibitions were in theory as absolute as they are in practice in the « behavioural analogy with morals » in the animal world⁽²⁾. Certain major problems within this framework, notably problems of power and authority (including peace and war) and problems of sexual functions in society, took on a new and special importance when they were related to a society outside Christendom where the Christian rules did not obtain. Every little difference was exaggerated, but apologists for any system of social relations will inevitably argue that the result will be disastrous if it is ignored or neglected, or if it simply is not there. Can the rules be so important, if the results of ignoring them cannot be shown to be bad in practice ?.

Medieval authors only occasionally based their criticisms of Islamic society on actual observation, and their rare observations were often as erroneous as their knowledge of Islamic legal requirements. On the whole, it was simply taken for granted that the divergence of Islamic law from Christian law must be dreadful in its consequences. « Should be » and therefore « is »; however, « objectivity »

⁽¹⁾ Examples in my *Islam and the West*, Edinburgh reprinted 1980, III. 1 and 2 and X. 3.

⁽²⁾ Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*. English translation (London, 1966) of *Das Sogenannte Böse* (Vienna, 1963). Ch. VII.

is notoriously a controversial concept, even when the establishment of a fact is as objective as it can be; and all interpretation is likely to be ideological, or, if not, at least culturally biased. With this caveat, we must insist that most medieval criticism of Islamic society was based on pre-conceptions of the consequences of any divergence from a moral theory conceived as both unique and absolute.

I shall not be concerned in this paper to examine why aspects of social criticism familiar to-day did not interest medieval writers, but just to identify the social criticisms that were in fact made of Islamic society, both those that were based on some measure of authentic information, and those which were thoroughly, even ludicrously, ill-informed. I shall consider not only the theologians and intellectuals, but also what is explicit or implicit in secular literature, and, in particular, poetry which, if it has any polemic intention at all, proceeds in quite a different way from that adopted by men of theory. The poets and the polemicists are our two main classes of critic, and are quite dissimilar in their objections to Islam. The objections of the poets to «paganism» were unreal and perhaps not very seriously meant. The objections of the professional theologians were both serious and inevitable, and inevitably apologetic; we may call them «official» Christian objections, because every revealed religion must consider another one to be falsely or at least incompletely revealed. Among the variety of demonstrations with which Christian apologists supported their opinions are some that concern social criticism closely. The failure of the poets to adopt the same criticisms itself constitutes a point of view in the matter, perhaps even a deliberate rejection of the official attitude.

The distorted clerical image of the Muslim family is an outstanding case in point. We may consider it the natural result of the confessor's *déformation professionnelle*; he does not think in terms of the family, but in terms of the individual's acts, specifically his sexual indulgence. In this view it looked like licence to permit polygyny, even under the strict restraints that Islam imposes, because, even under these, more is allowed than is allowed by Christendom. «Allowed» here has the sense of «allowed under canon law», which (one could say) permits polygamy (polygynous or polyandrous, however) only after the death of one partner. But if we extend «allowed» to mean «tolerated in practice by society» (and particularly, of course, in the cases of individuals in Christendom too powerful to control), no one can say whether there has been much difference

between Islam, often strict in enforcement, and Christendom, in their practice. As we shall see, the argument, and the social criticism, were not about what actually happened, but about the recognition of polygamy in Muslim jurisprudence, a permission which the Christian clerical critic was always conscious was never conceded in principle in Christendom, in spite of some elastic applications of the law, usually for dynastic reasons ⁽¹⁾. Thus it was the breach of a Christian theory which was made the criticism of Islamic society, however little it related to actual social behaviour observed in either Europe or the Arab world.

There are many more examples than we have space for here. Jacques de Vitry, who was Bishop of Acre and a Frenchman by birth, and who should have been ideally fitted to explain authentic facts about the Arabs to the curious, in fact subtly distorts when he is most nearly accurate : « Saracens to-day marry not more than three or four wives at a time, and these are freewomen; concubines and servant girls that they buy, they can have as many of as they want ». A claim to inside knowledge is the most misleading of all : « he who can make most women pregnant is considered to be the most religious among them » ⁽²⁾. Here is a malicious misconstruction characteristic of minority resentment, and may well have been picked up from local informants who would tell the foreign bishop what he wanted to hear. Vitry was an intelligent commentator but he lacked sympathy for his subject and after a few years he left Palestine, where the pastoral calling was too difficult.

Most critics based their argument on written materials of varying value, and any oral sources of interpretation went unacknowledged. The best informed writers used their knowledge of the Islamic texts to dig out whatever they thought most discreditable; it is likely that even the most knowledgeable used intermediaries, not necessarily the best qualified, as guides to this literature. Thus the *quadruplex reprobatio* (very likely by Ramon Marti) wants to show that a true revelation must be holy and good, but the jurisprudence of Islam (it asserts) is *immunda, nociva et mala* ⁽³⁾. This is presented as self-evident. Thus the writer quotes the

⁽¹⁾ Cf. Georges Duby, *Medieval Marriage*, Baltimore and London, 1978.

⁽²⁾ Iacobi de Vitriaco *Libri duo quorum prior Orientalis* ... Douai 1597, cap. 6 de pessima doctrina (p. 27).

⁽³⁾ Printed as *Galensis de origine et progressu et fine Machometis et quadruplici reprobatione* ... liber in W. Drechsler, *de Saracenis et Turcis chronicon*, Strasburg, 1550, cap. VIII p. 23 et seq.

traditionist Muslim ibn al-Hajjāj as authority for permission to marry for a limited period, and both him and al-Buḥārī as justifying *effusio seminis extra vas debitum*: the first is against the law of God and the public interest (*contra Reipublicae utilitatem*) and the second against the divine law and the good of reproduction, so that no further refutation is needed, *non indiget alia reprobatione*. Similarly, Ricoldo da Monte Croce in his *Itinerarius*⁽¹⁾ says that the Islamic law is obscure (he in fact uses the word *occulta*); as an example, he admits that it forbids fornication, but adds that some trade is « permitted and not forbidden », and that it is « allowed to do as you please with your own »: so a contract with a prostitute in a brothel is acceptable. Here he is making a certain assumption; he is not telling us that he has been to the brothel and observed the transaction. It is not only that he does not fully understand the rules he is attacking. The Islamic distinction between the act absolutely forbidden and the act discouraged but allowed (e.g. divorce) escaped the notice of all medieval writers; but they would not have liked it if they had understood it. For them anything *immundus* was contrary to Christian law, every divergence from the morals of Christian revelation — the scholastic moral system — was necessarily contrary to the public good without further proof, and in each case lubricity was characteristic of the alternative system. They did not consider or examine whether Islamic society suffered in the ways they took it for granted it must suffer as a result of following different rules. Of course, the workings of Islamic jurisprudence were not known to them exactly, to many were not known at all, but, once again, I do not think they would have reacted differently if their ignorance had been less abysmal.

It was the religious endorsement of sexual pleasure, even sometimes in marriage, that shocked the critics. It was, of course, more shocking that sodomy should be only reproved and forbidden, and not treated as unspeakable; and the law of divorce was also a source of great scandal⁽²⁾. Ricoldo thought that captured nuns became mothers of the greatest enemies of Christendom; Vitry implied the contrary⁽³⁾. I have quoted authors who knew more than most and whose

⁽¹⁾ *Itinerarius* (sic) p. xxxii in J.C. Laurent, *Peregrinatores medii aevi quatuor*, Leipzig, 1864.

⁽²⁾ A good example at Vitry, loc. cit. and *quad. reprob.*, loc. cit. and see Daniel, *op. cit.*

s.v. *divorce*.

⁽³⁾ *Epistolae V de commentariae de perditione Acconis*, I and III, in R. Röhrich, « Lettres de Ricoldo », in *Archives de l'Orient Latin*, Paris, 1884. Vitry, loc. cit.

polemic quality is relatively high, but their views are wholly representative of general attitudes. Writers who had no sources of special authenticity of their own usually depended on Ketton's Cluniac Qur'ān⁽¹⁾, a paraphrase almost in itself a commentary, based on misinterpretation, antipathetic in its bias and untrue as a guide to the crucial texts. The team who worked on this document for Peter the Venerable were of the usual opinion and shared the main sexual criticism of Arab Islam, though the great abbot himself preferred to ignore this line of argument in favour of discussions of prophecy, Scripture and the process of conversion⁽²⁾. Nearly all the critics of the Islamic world known to the West, Arab society that is, used the same battery of arguments («unclean, contrary to divine law, contrary to reason, harmful to society») not always so clearly expressed, and often on even poorer evidence, always without direct observation. Reason was always based on dogmatic data. Divorce is indeed harmful to the children of the marriage, but it would be anachronistic to expect an interest in the effects on the children. The medieval objection was to its being arbitrary (at the man's instance) and not permitted because of some fault. Christians could conceive divorce, but only for a reason. In any case, the effects of divorce would have been less noticeable than under modern conditions; probably in Arab society and European alike the father's authority held together the children of a dissolved union, and without doubt divorce put an end to many fewer marriages than death did.

The estimate of «Saracen» sexuality in epic poems and romances does not conform to the theoretical and polemic pattern. It is not at all contentious. I cannot recall any reference to a polygynous Saracen family in some seventy long poems. In *La Prise d'Orange* Queen Orable is Arragon's young stepmother, but there is no suggestion that his own mother is still a senior queen, or even that she is still alive⁽³⁾. All the poems exhibit great ignorance of Islam, and this may be deliberate, because they show equal ignorance of what other Christian writers said about Islam. It is hard to believe in quite such a degree of ignorance in the first case, and I do not believe in it at all in the second. We do find the idea of

⁽¹⁾ Texts in J. Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, Princeton, 1964, and Bibliander, *Machumetis Saracenorum principis . . . doctrina ac ipse Alcoran . . .*, Basle, 1550.

⁽²⁾ E.g. the *capitula* of Peter of Poitiers

reprinted by Migne in the *Patrologia Latina*, 189, with others of the texts, 662-3.

⁽³⁾ C. Régnier, *La Prise d'Orange*, Paris, 5th ed. 1977; cf. *laisses* 20, 50 et seq.

sexual licence as socially corrupting in sources of another kind, mostly gossipy chronicles ⁽¹⁾, but also in a few poems, but poems of quite a different kind from the epic/romantic. The idea occurs in an extreme form in the *Otia de Machomete* of Gautier of Compiègne and its French adaptation by Alexandre du Pont, where, absurdly enough, it extends to polyandry ⁽²⁾. The whole of this libellous and legendary group is related, if often only distantly, to the group of academic polemicists, who remained attached to some of the libels, but were separated from them by their anxiety to find incontrovertible polemic material.

In a crude form, the libels are found in a wide sample, but in the extreme and complex form they are not, and cannot be considered typical. On the other hand, the failure or refusal of the epic and romantic literature to project any form of polygamy into Islam is a very wide sample indeed, and there are abundant examples over roughly four centuries. It is notorious that they have their own libellous conventions about Saracens, and yet they ignore not only the sexual libel, but all these contentious themes that others use to libel Islam and the Prophet; it is almost as though they bought freedom from the alternative convention when they adopted their own. (There are very few exceptions, inserted into the poems, clearly inconsistent with their context and inserted thoughtlessly) ⁽³⁾. The themes on which the theologians laid most stress are quite absent. The Saracens of heroic and romantic fiction do not behave differently from the Christians, least of all sexually. No poet projects polygyny into the Arab institution of marriage. One or two Saracens are breakers of hearts, but there is no hint of their being so in any special Saracen way; they belong to a sort of person well known also in Christendom, as elsewhere, and are as easily identified by the hearer as by the poet ⁽⁴⁾.

⁽¹⁾ Extensive references in Daniel, *op. cit.*

⁽²⁾ Y.G. Lepage, *Le Roman de Mahomet de Alexandre du Pont ... avec le texte des Otia de Machomete de Gautier de Compiègne établi par R.B.C. Huygens*, Paris, 1977.

⁽³⁾ Examples in *Le Couronnement de Louis*, ed. E. Langlois, Paris, 1969, 845 et seq., and in *Les Rédactions en Vers du Couronnement de Louis*, ed. Y.G. Lepage, Geneva, 1978, AB 848 C 590; *Floovant, chanson de geste du*

XII^e siècle, ed. S. Andolf, Uppsala, 1941, 374 and ed. F.H. Bateson, Loughborough, 1938; *Aiol, chanson de geste*, ed. J. Normand and G. Reynaud, Paris, 1877, 10085.

⁽⁴⁾ Examples, Margariz in *La Chanson de Roland* (ed. J. Bédier, frequent editions) 957; «Folque de Candie» in *Gesellschaft für Romanisch Literatur*, ed. O. Schultz-Gova, Band 38, Dresden 1815, Tiebaut, 9899 and Froiecuier, 13168.

The poems in fact show a good deal more interest in the practice of marriage among Arabs than do the diatribes of clerical intellectuals. The hero very often falls in love with a Saracen princess, often after she has fallen in love with him, and together they outwit her royal father, so that the young man wins both the city and the girl, *sa fort cité garnie / Et sa moillier* ⁽¹⁾. The awareness of the power of a father who is usually the protagonist in the parts of the poem concerned with the rivalry of the two religions, and so the personification of the enemy as enemy, shows a social realism which the more abstract and serious writers entirely miss. In stories set in the West, the hero often carves out a fief for himself at the expense of the Saracen who holds it. In a sense the poet justifies this act by the difference in religion, and in that sense the traditional idea that these poems are Crusade propaganda is not wholly wrong. But there are strong hints in those poems where the hero does marry an heiress that the marriage justifies the inheritance ⁽²⁾. These plots also exemplify a new generation taking over from an older one — the man who wields the authority in the Saracen religion is also the tyrant of the family. I have elsewhere argued that the «paganism» of the Saracens of poetry is a deliberately chosen convention, and not meant to be a serious assertion about Islam, not an assertion of fact at all ⁽³⁾. The whole conventional framework within which the stories are set is always the same; but, even if only by accident, it hits off many of the facts about Arab society better than does the theoretical polemic of the discursive and descriptive writers. The fact is that the poets take it for granted that Saracen life is not seriously different, perhaps not different at all, from life in Christendom, and that was often not far wrong.

The second main assertion about Islam and the Arabs which the polemicists made is that it is in a peculiar and characteristic way violent : « their religion is violent and was brought in by violence. The most certain thing about them is that their religion shall last only as long as the victory of the sword shall remain with them » ⁽⁴⁾. Assertions like this seem strange to us who have the benefit of hindsight, and who can distinguish no important difference between the idea of Crusade

⁽¹⁾ *Orange*, *op. cit.*, 1322-3.

⁽²⁾ Examples, several of the Aymerids (though not Aymeri himself); also *Fierabras* (ed. M.A. Kroeler and G. Servois, Paris, 1860), the hand of Floripas; cf. the cancelled

marriage in *Elie de St. Gilles* (ed. G. Reynaud, Paris, 1879).

⁽³⁾ In course of publication or preparation.

⁽⁴⁾ Ricoldo, *Itinerarius*, loc. cit., XXXV.

and that of *jihād*. Admittedly, the idea of jihad was present in Islam from its beginnings, and the foundation of the two religions is dissimilar in this regard, but we are talking about Christian attitudes which developed in the eleventh century and continued until the fifteenth, and which were totally unaffected by earlier religious history. The contemporary similarity of the Muslim and Christian attitudes to war at this date is so close that the Christian criticisms of Islam for religious violence seem just hypocritical, and so meaningless; but it was essential to this type of medieval critic of Islamic society to treat its historical origins, misconceived and misunderstood, as present in some effective, if unexplained, way in all its later developments.

Once again the poems are refreshingly free of this particular smell of hypocrisy or of any undemonstrable mystique of moral corruption. They contain a number of Saracen villains, but there are many Christian villains too, and many of the Saracens are praised for their *cortoisie* and their *prouesse* — a point I shall return to. They are on the wrong side, and few of these noble characters are allowed to escape baptism or death. Death is the usual fate of the best, death on the battlefield or even death at the hands of the headsman. The latter is not dishonourable, and there is no suggestion that the Saracens and Christians are in any way different in their behaviour or their attitude to a war which on both sides everyone accepts as inevitable. In many cases Saracens are fighting to avenge the death in earlier wars of friends or, more usually, kinsmen : here is another realistic social assessment ⁽¹⁾. They are on the wrong side, but they are no more evil in themselves than the Christians are. Their society, as it is described, and still more as it is implied to be, is recognisably the same as European society saw itself

⁽¹⁾ Examples, *Moniage Guillaume, chanson de geste du XII^e siècle*, ed. W. Cloetta, 1906-11, 2. 3950, 4640 et seq.; *Le Siège de Barbastre*, ed. J.L. Perrier (Paris, 1926) 5635-6; *Aliscans*, ed. F. Guessard and A de Montaigle, (Paris, 1870) pp. 33 and 35-7, also ed. E. Weinbeck, W. Hartnacke and P. Rasch (Halle, 1903); *La Chanson d'Aspremont, chanson de geste du XII^e siècle*, ed. L. Brandin (Paris, 1924, 244, 316, 2459 et alibi; critical ed. A. de Mandach

(Geneva, 1975-80), concordance with Brandin (ms. W); *La Bataille Loquifer*, ed. M. Barnett (Oxford, 1975) 3369, App. J 2920, 3029 etc., and ed. J. Runeberg in *Acta Societatis Scientiarum Fennicae*, tom. 38 (Helsingfors, 1913); *Otinél, ehanson de geste*, ed. F. Guessard and H. Michelant (Paris, 1858) 788; many further examples of deaths of relatives and / or war damage separately or together.

to be, and Crusade serves only as a licence to fight wars which are conceived in practical terms of profitable aggression or desperate defence, rather than any identification of Europe with the faith.

There is one theological problem which was important to everyone, whether theologically trained or crudely uninterested in most theology, and that is the problem of Providence : who will win ? This question goes deep; men's hope of victory masks their fear for their survival. It affects the social critique and raises the problem of authority, the right to rule and so to make war and peace, and we must briefly consider it. Islam (we have seen) was thought a « religion of the sword », but, though Christian morale had been defensive and dispirited until the tenth century, from then until the Ottoman invasions Europeans do not seem seriously to have feared failure, except in the Eastern Mediterranean, and there, despite the legalistic justification of Crusade as defence of *terra sancta*, territory Christian by right, most people realised that failure was only the failure to retain the initiative, a slackening of aggression, less exhaustion than loss of interest ⁽¹⁾. For those who lived in the East, however, there was a failure in every sense, and one which, if « God is with us », needed explaining. Indeed, the Arab countries of the Eastern Mediterranean gave an impression of wealth and well-being, and even this seemed to some travellers to need a theological explanation. Such people did not reflect that by and large Europeans had done rather well, failed here and there, but on the whole succeeded. They remained much more conscious of earlier history, of the fact of the Arab invasions that followed the rise of Islam and took Asia, Africa and part of Europe away from the Christian world; they lived by a theory of Arab aggression somewhat like the modern third world theory of imperialist aggression. Many were curiously ambiguous about their classical inheritance. The Arabs had invaded the Roman world and taken it from the Christians; but Arabs also were by continuous descent the peoples of the ancient world and, in that sense chiefly, were the « pagans ». It was the Saracens who supposedly had left behind the monuments of antiquity which were to be seen

⁽¹⁾ See for example Humbert of Romans, *Opus Tripartitum in Appendix ad Fasciculum Rerum Expetendarum et Fugiendarum*, ed. E. Brown (London, 1690) and cf. Pierre Dubois, *de recuperatione Terrae Sanctae*, ed.

Ch. V. Langlois (Paris, 1891). See A.S. Atiya, *The Crusade in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1938) and P.A. Throop, *Criticism of the Crusade* (Amsterdam, 1940).

everywhere in Southern France and in Italy and elsewhere⁽¹⁾. It was important for these critics to believe that the revelation of Islam had been debased by social practices that were thought of as characteristically «irrational» and in a vague sense «pagan», so that they saw Islam uneasily as not altogether a part of the same society as their own (in this unlike the poets), but as not quite different from it either, ambiguous both in its historical development and in its contemporary structure. The fact that Providence did not always ensure the material advantage to the Christians did nothing to diminish the ambiguity of their attitude. The «irrational» society is not described as totally corrupted, but rather as one which, while corrupted, was really a falling short from the Christian standard. In their writings, the polemicists ignored the fact that Christendom was corrupted and fell short too, but can hardly have done so in their own minds. When all is said, we cannot read into their attack on Islamic teaching any implication that they thought Arab society essentially different from the Christian, but only that false doctrine corrupts and the truth conserves. It was mysterious to them that a self-evident truth was not regularly reflected in the greater material prosperity and success in war of the good society, and this mystery remained unresolved.

Success was equally important in the poetry, where there is not the same problem of Providence, because of course the poet can decide who shall win, and, naturally, though the poems enshrine memories of devastating attacks and great disasters of old invasions of Europe, of Vikings even more than of Arabs, perhaps of Magyars, and certainly of the Saxon wars, the end is always the victory of the goodies, that is, Christians of the Latin West, the Franks who have once again saved *France la douce*⁽²⁾. The social orientation of the theologians is to Christendom often rather theoretically conceived, whereas the poets frequently recall their homes, or their patrons' homes in France. Their local and feudal patriotism, whether contrived or spontaneous, is another point of realism unknown to theology. The main point of the great poetic framework of chivalry and feudal military power is that it succeeds, at any rate in the long run; and in the final analysis of

⁽¹⁾ Cf. J. Bédier, *Les Légendes épiques* (Paris, many reprints) vol. 1, p. 434. *France le delitable* 4671; constant references to particular towns e.g. in *Orange*, ed. cit.,

⁽²⁾ Eg. *Otinél*, cit., 34; *Loquifer*, ed. cit., 497, 539, 801.
1079, 1093, *Moniage Guillaume*, ed. cit.,

this literature it seems that the Christians win, not quite because God is on their side, but almost because it is their own prowess which vindicates the true God. Of course, if challenged, the poets would not put it so, and it would be wrong to press this point too far; it can be maintained only with a number of reservations. God supports the heroes in their prowess and they do not fail to pray to him, most often recalling the salient events of the redemption, Old Testament promises and the facts of the Gospel and Gospel legends. Nevertheless, like other soldiers, they evidently believe that God helps those that help themselves. It would be true to say that in these fictions the victory is a vindication of the whole Christian side, but it would not be true to say that the two sides, Christian and Saracen, are just « good » and « bad ». It is this that makes it possible to describe Arab and European societies in the poems as almost interchangeable.

The kind of evidence that we have been reviewing has general implications. Saracen society is so similar to European feudal society that it is worth examining the material further. In poems dating over several centuries, Saracens are constantly described as *courtois*, and their social structure is based, not only on kinship, as we have seen, but also on a feudal monarchy quite ordinary except in the variety of exotic titles occasionally used. The titles of *aumaçor*, *amustant*, and such, used largely in stories set in Spain, may be seen as equivalent to Christian titles such as marquis and count. It was characteristic of the feudal approach of the writers to these stories that they depended on lordly patronage and left the idea of sovereignty or overlordship uncertain, even in the case of Saracens. The title *amir* (*amiral*, etc.) was much used, both to designate Saracen lords in general and sometimes to indicate an overlord, when perhaps it reflects the caliphal title (*amīral-mu'minīn*) and parallels the Christian kings Charles or Louis. More often the great overlord is the soudan of Babylon (Cairo). The amir or sultan may rule over a number of *rois coronés*, but in other cases the principal role among the Saracens is entitled the « king ». It does not matter which title is used, because the role designated is evidently always the same as some equivalent that obtains in Christendom, and its ambiguities are also similar. Wide estates and property of different sorts are often quoted to measure the importance of a Saracen ruler, both his own and those of his barons; and so is the size of his armies. None of these descriptions hint that the Saracen world is any different from the Christian. When Charlemagne as a young man (« Mainet »), Roland, Maugis d'Aigremont,

Bernier (in *Raoul de Cambrai*), and other adventurers conceived later, such as Blancandin, and the Normans Fouke Fitz Warin, Gui de Warewic and Bueves de Hamtoun, take service with Saracen rulers, they are not shown, or imagined, as needing to acculturate into a strange society with different customs ⁽¹⁾. Saracens are naturally *gentis* and *baron*, like Christians, and, religion apart, there is no problem of acculturation.

Is there anything in the poems that distinguishes the noble Saracen from his Christian counterpart? He is rarely seen in the act of ruling, but the same is true of the Christian kings, except when Charles or Louis is persecuting his great barons and promoting traitors. There are the laments of sufferers who cry to Charlemagne for protection or revenge, but, for the most part, the courtoisie of a great man, king or lord, is shown in his prowess, his courage, his morale under physical stress and in danger, and above all in his loyalty, not so much to his own side or even, sometimes, to his king, as to his friends and his kindred. Caraheu in *Les Enfances Ogier* is a loyal friend, ally and lover, and the Christians love him for those virtues. It would be not only cynical but anachronistic to say that they really love him for betraying his own side. Here for once a « good » and heroic Saracen is not converted to Christianity, and yet departs freely and with honour. He earns this singular reward by his personal qualities; with unswerving loyalty to his personal commitment, he reproves and condemns his own king and his own people and co-religionists, while recognising his duty to the survivors when their aggression and treason have been defeated. His reward is that which usually a Christian hero receives, the hand of his lover and the

⁽¹⁾ « Mainet, fragments d'une chanson de geste du XII^e siècle » by G. Paris, in *Romania* IV, 1895 and *Primera Cronica General*, ed. R. Menendez Pidal (Madrid, 1955) (Fruela I) cap. 597-9; Roland in Antoine Thomas, *L'Entrée d'Espagne, chanson de geste franco-italienne* (Paris, 1913), *Raoul de Cambrai, chanson de geste*, ed. P. Meyer and A. Longnon (Paris, 1882); *Blancandin et l'Orgueilleuse d'Amour*, ed. F.-P. Sweetser (Geneva, 1964); « Maugis d'Aigremont » F. Castets in *Revue*

des langues romanes, série 4 tome 6 (Montpellier, 92); *Fouke Fitz Warin, roman du XIV^e siècle*, ed. L. Brandin (Paris, 1924); *Gui de Warewic, roman du XIII^e siècle*, ed. E. Ewert (Paris, 1932-3); *Der Anglonormannische Boeve de Haumtone* (Halle, 1899) and « Der Festländische Bueve de Hantone » in *Gesellschaft für Romanische Literatur*, Band 25, 30, 34, 42 (Dresden 1911-20), both ed. A. Stimmung.

succession to her father's kingdom. This is not the usual reward of a Saracen, however good, but it is the simple aristocratic formula in itself, almost as if it were being presented in a « typical » form ⁽¹⁾. Equally striking is Ganor, King of Aigremore, and a noble Saracen even before he turns Christian for love of Aye d'Avignon, and on behalf of his stepson takes on the family feud he inherits from her previous husband ⁽²⁾. He too has no difficulty in acculturation.

Some of the Christian heroes are highly individualised by an entire cycle of poems; if no one Saracen receives quite so much attention, it is not because of any distinguishable difference in the quality of Saracen life, but because a Saracen is more often shown as a type than as an individual. The part that Gorhan plays in *Aspremont* is not commensurate with his elaborate description as wise and inventive (*engignols*), proud with the proud, compassionate with the low and humble, not covetous in his possessions; he knows how to give, whether to the great, or to unimportant people ⁽³⁾. The Saracen King Tiebaut does appear, and is derided as a cuckolded laughing stock, in many poems of the Orange cycle, but in *Foucon de Candie* he suddenly becomes *mout preudom*, knowing well the arts of war and its skills, how to harm his enemy and help his friend; he is debonaire, an accomplished lord who values a good man and does no injustice to any free man. No knight has better put up with so many pains in war, or boasted about it less in the evening, after eating; he plays board games without quarrelling, is a skilled huntsman, the ladies love him and he is wise in judgement : « if he had believed in the Lord God, the true Justicier, there would have been no better prince in the world for governing » ⁽⁴⁾. This is simply the ideal picture of the war leader in a feudal world, but the attribution of this near-stereotype to Saracens is a deliberate assertion. The reading of such passages is that Saracen feudality is like European feudality, and sometimes like the European at its best and most ideal.

Part of the style of these poems is a humour of exaggeration, often macabre enough; the heroes cleave their enemies in half, rider and horse as well, and

⁽¹⁾ *Les Enfances Ogier*, ed. A. Scheler (Brussels, 1874).

⁽²⁾ *Aye d'Avignon, chanson de geste anonyme*, ed. S.J. Borg (Geneva, 1967) and *Gui de Nanteuil, chanson de geste*, ed J.R. Mc Cor-

mack (Geneva, 1970); cf. E.R. Woods, *Aye d'Avignon, A Study of Genre and Society*.

⁽³⁾ *La Chanson d'Aspremont*, ed. cit., 2209.

⁽⁴⁾ *Foucon de Candie*, ed. cit., 9883-9904 cf. 12494-12515.

scatter their blood and their brains on the ground; they stagger round dying for hours, with their bowels hanging out. The redoubtable Rainouart (by birth a noble Saracen, not yet baptised but fighting on the Christian side) lays men out with his cudgel by the hundred. This heroic quality seems to be shed haphazard on Christians and Saracens alike (though comic misfortune is largely confined to the enemy). Sometimes there seems nothing in the behaviour or the character of any Saracen of whom it is said, « no better king would there have been, if he had believed in God » ⁽¹⁾ (such phrases recur), that he rather than another Saracen ruler who seems to live and fight equally bravely should be singled out for distinction. The point seems to be less individual characterisation than an implied, but unambiguous, assertion about Saracens in general, that, theology apart, they can be as good as anyone else. The nobility of Saracens is important to the Christians of the poems, as when Charlemagne asks the Saracen ambassador Otinel to state his lineage, not to present his credentials ⁽²⁾. In *Daurel et Beton*, a scion of aristocracy is a refugee from a French kinship feud, brought up incognito by his jongleur guardian at the court of the amir of Babylon. His spontaneous actions reveal the secret of his nobility, and the amir realises that he cannot be the son of a jongleur ⁽³⁾ : not only nobility, but the ability to discern it, extends to Saracens.

There is very little social criticism — or, rather, in an aristocracy social criticism is a matter of individual virtues, of appreciating in the members of the ruling class what qualifies them for their ruling function. When Guillaume d'Orange becomes the guest of a poor man, Bernard, who lives in a hut in the Paris city moat, he treats him with courtesy and addresses him as an equal. They are allies against the Saracen invader, each in his station, and Bernard contributes what money and what courage he can, and his reward is wealth which raises him to the bourgeoisie. He does not become noble ⁽⁴⁾; the qualities of the peasant and merchant are despised — Guillaume in another poem is furious, when he is

⁽¹⁾ *Aspremont*, ed. cit., 2863, 6022, 6029, 8143, 10220. Exaggeration cf. *Chanson de Guillaume*, ed. D. Mc Millan (Paris, 1949-50).

⁽²⁾ *Otinél*, ed. cit., 231-2.

⁽³⁾ *Daurel et Beton*, *chanson de geste Pro-*

vençale, ed. P. Mayer (Paris, 1880).

⁽⁴⁾ *Le Moniage Guillaume*, ed. cit., see e.g. lines 5798, 6494; cf. *Le Charroi de Nîmes*, *chanson de geste du XII^e siècle*, ed. J.-L. Perrier (Paris, 1972), *laissez* 52, 53.

disguised as a merchant, to be treated as one — but heroism is not always an exclusive club, and the membership fee is some share of the qualities of aristocracy, accessible to those who are not noble. It is in the light of this social attitude that we have to assess the treatment of Saracens by the poets. Nobility and kinship are recognised and even required among them, but it is more important that they partake of the virtues of chivalry, and share a common world with Christian knights.

Polemic writers do not treat these matters, nor do they the social customs to which the poems refer. The poets show no sign of having formed their ideas on actual observation, any more than the polemicists, but this makes it all the easier for them to assume common interests and way of life with the Saracens, a matter in those days of no interest to academic minds. In the poems the amusements and sports of the Saracens are those of the Christians, hunting, hawking, and, indoors, board games, chess, backgammon. There are diversions with girls — « acoitement de dames por avoir druerie » — and love of horses, both these unambiguously both Saracen and Christian. There are pathetic set-pieces about a favourite horse that the dying warrior must see carried off by his victor, who will not know how to care for it, and these are sometimes put prominently in the mouths of dying Saracen leaders in a battle of crucial importance for Christian survival : no dehumanised or unsympathetic enemy, however dangerous, but one who loves a noble animal and respects its efficiency as a war machine to be properly cared for ⁽¹⁾. All this underlines the poets' conviction of a single world of aristocratic values, the same as we remarked in the characters of some of the Saracen kings and knights.

One experience was not confined to an aristocracy, either in fact or in literature, where the miseries of war are directly described, though not as often as its joys; but the joys were individual, and the miseries were communal, and struck everyone, the soldiers and the whole population, gentle and others, Saracens and Christians. This awareness of the evil of war is a curious but inevitable concomitant of a social attitude that derives from aristocratic rule, and it is not shared by the champions of the Crusade, who always reprove prudential considerations. Not

⁽¹⁾ *La Chanson de Guillaume*, ed. cit., *bastre, chanson de geste du XII^e siècle*, ed. laisses 127-8, 138; cf. 137. *Le Siège de Bar-* J.L. Perrier (Paris, 1926), 5627.

all fictional heroes have, like Vivien, taken the fatal oath never to retreat ⁽¹⁾; all but he know when to do so. This illustrates less the difference between fiction and polemic than that between the professional qualities of the soldier and those of the cleric; a Joinville has the common sense and humanity of the soldier, Louis IX is remarkable because his clerical inclination dominates his kingly duty.

The contrast between poets and polemicists (homiletic, theological, belligerent), and that between clerics and laity, are reduced when it is a question of actual historical figures. One is common to all modes of writing — Salāh al-Dīn, Saladin, « tres preu, tres courtois et tres excellent prince » — « qui tant estoit courtois prince que nul plus » : that is his description in the eponymous prose romance of the second Crusade cycle, which dates from the fifteenth century, but his legend had been growing ever since the ransoming of the Frankish prisoners at the capture of Jerusalem in 1187. In the romance he travels to Europe, takes part in a tournament, pays his addresses to the Queen of France, crosses to England to attack King Richard. He is used in homiletic literature to shame the failure of Christians to obey the rules of their own religion. He was also remembered and used as a source of knowledge of Arab ways, as by Joinville, admirable representative of French feudal culture, receptive of what went on around him in ways that his master Louis was not. He cited the story, made famous in accounts of the Third Crusade, in which Salah refused Raynald of Chatillon a drink of water that he had offered to Guy of Lusignan, because he considered him a war criminal and meant to execute him, and so did so on the spot. More than half a century later Joinville used this in objection to the killing of Christians by Saracens, after they had been given food. If this was not quite realistic, it was not impractical; it is some measure of the quality of the chansons de geste that Joinville in some ways resembles Guillaume d'Orange. Joinville also quotes Saladin as saying that a bad Christian will not make a good Muslim or vice versa, and in this eminently sensible remark we can see the germ of the legend of Saladin as reprover of Christian shortcomings ⁽²⁾.

⁽¹⁾ *La Chevalerie Vivien, chanson de geste*, ed. A.-L. Terracher (Paris, 1923), cf. *La Chanson de Guillaume and Aliscans*, cited.

⁽²⁾ *Histoire de Saint Louis*, ed. N. Wailly (Paris, 1906), parag. 330 and 331 and N. L.

Corbett (Québec, 1977). *Saladin, Suite et fin du deuxième Cycle de la Croisade*, ed. L.S. Crist (Geneva, 1972), 1. xx. 51 and xxxi. 29. Cf. *La Fille du Comte de Pontieu, nouvelle du XIII^e siècle*, ed. C. Brunel, (2) 355, (1) 621 and (2) 821-5.

Why was Saladin singled out ? If we argue that his outstanding character and achievement single him out, why was it so widely recognised in the West ? Did he somehow stand for Arab society in the Frankish mind ? We shall return to this later. His is not the same case as the occasional appreciation of a Muslim ruler which lacks any legend-making quality. It is useful to compare the contemporary estimate of sultan Baybars, greatest of the Bahri Mamluks, by William of Tripoli. It makes a curious companion piece to the life of the sultan by his physician, ibn al-Nafis⁽¹⁾. Both admire him for his severity, especially in suppressing profligate indulgence, wine drinking, prostitution, homosexuality, for his personal asceticism and constant activity, and for the pitch of excellence to which he brought his troops. Tripoli is aware that there is a real difference between legal concubinage and polygamy, claiming that Baybars was opposed to the use of concubines; he shows pride that the sultan's fourth and favourite wife, who accompanies him everywhere, is a Christian Antiochene. Tripoli's ability to praise a dangerous enemy as an efficient soldier, his interest in doing so, and still more his recognition that a Muslim ruler may combine severity in sexual matters with the enjoyment of four wives, are remarkable. Probably without noticing that he does so, he has given away the argument that a false moral law corrupts Arab society. The praise alike of Salāh al-Dīn and of Baybars ignores the theological theory that wrong laws corrupt. In these cases political theory does not much extend beyond praise of an even-handed administration that is generous to Christian subjects; Tripoli's Baybars is not very different from the ideal pictures in *Foucon*, but they are both pragmatic.

The age was one of such faith in reason that it struck few people as necessary to relate reason to observation of fact, although the ambiguous and ambivalent clerical approach to any social analysis made some claim to be based on actual observation. Jacques de Vitry has given us one example of « observation » adapted to fit into preconceived theory, and in letters composed just before and during the Damietta expedition, he is again guilty of observing what it suits him to observe without reference to obvious parallels on the Christian side; thus he

⁽¹⁾ Tripoli, *de statu Saracenorum*, in Prutz, *Kulturgeschichte der Kreuzzüge* (Berlin, 1883), XXI; *The Theologus Autodidactus of Ibn an-Nafis*, ed. M. Meyerhof and J. Schacht (Oxford, 1968) 4. 3, 5, 7.

harps on dissensions among the Arabs, as though the Christians were united. Yet any claim, however unjustified, to actual observation is some small recognition of practical values, consorting incongruously with the usual attitude to dogmatic morals. I shall take one more detailed analysis of Christian weakness in the face of the Arab world in the last years of the Latin kingdom in the East ⁽¹⁾, and intended (like Humbert of Romans' account and reproof of the objections to Crusade) for the information of the Council of Lyons in 1274 (roughly contemporary with William of Tripoli). It typifies Christian thinking in its parallel approach to a criticism of the two societies, with Christian faults notionally balancing Muslim faults.

Fidenzio of Padua, the writer, slides rather easily, in his historical account of Palestine, over the Muslim conquest. Palestine belonged in turn, he tells us, to, first, a variety of different peoples, then to the Jews, then to the Assyrians and Chaldeans, then to the Romans, and then to the Christians, who emerge as Latins at an indeterminate time after Heraclius. The sixth possessors of the land are the Muslims, but they seem to be shown as only part owners, disputing possession with the Christians, who have lost and are still losing the Holy Land because of their sins (*infectio*), because of the diversity of their nations (Latins, Greeks, Jacobites), because of their effeminacy (*vilissimi in bellando sicut mulieres*), so that a few Saracens defeat many Christians; because of their imprudence and lack of judgement (condemned by an unnamed sultan, perhaps Baybars or Qalāwūn : « you Christians are exceedingly foolish and improvident, you don't know how to fight, or how to make peace, or when the time has come to run away »); and because of their divisions, their lack of leadership and their long lines of communication. It is clear that with the presumable exception of the first of these diagnoses, their opposites indicate the qualities of the Muslims. Muslim faults, on the other hand, are, first, unbelief in Christianity (they are described in the tradition which makes them a kind of heretic or failed Christian, falling short of Christian dogma, they fail to believe in the Trinity, that Christ is God, and

⁽¹⁾ *Liber recuperationis Terrae Sanctae* by Fidenzio of Padua in Golubovich, *Biblioteca Bio-bibliografica della Terra Santa* (Quaracchi,) vol. 2, pars prima, cap. I-XIII,

XV-XXI. Vitry, *Lettres de Jacques de Vitry*, ed. R.B.C. Huygens (Leiden, 1960), lettre II, cf. VI and VII.

so on); secondly, they are putrid with lust (*luxuria fetidi*). This is considered in two ways. The first is based on the Qur'ān, particularly suras 2 and 4, in Ketton's tendentious version. Broadly the author has the law of marriage, divorce and concubinage right in outline, and it is to any polygynous system, of course, that he objects. He also objects to the passage at 2.223 where husbands are encouraged to sexual acts in legitimate unions, because for him as for others religious endorsement of sexual pleasure, even legitimate, was shocking. He misunderstands the law of divorce in sura 2 as justifying fornication. Few authors are exempt from the tendency, not only to prefer theory over practice, but also the treatment of an inaccurate text as a verbally correct source for the theory. Really accurate texts in Latin were very rare. The writer's second aspect of *feditas* (sic) *luxurie* is an accusation of homosexuality, citing Romans 1.32 and referring presumably to 1.26-7; St. Paul is hardly evidence for Muslim law, but in this case even Ketton's text failed to show that Muslims approve sodomy, and the accuser was forced to fall back on an allegation of common practice. Here practice means gossip or rumour, though it is the fact that less social horror has been attached in Islam to the dominant partner in a homosexual relationship than was then universal in Christendom; but of course no one can begin to assess the difference in practice between the two societies.

Fidenzio's next point is to call the Muslims barbarous (*crudeles*), but the cruelties of which they are accused, of discrimination against Christians under their rule (Tripoli said the opposite of Baybars) are not only explicable in any war, but were precisely those of which Christians themselves as victors were guilty. Then come two accusations characteristic of any minority, that the Saracens exploit and overtax Christians, and are evilly cunning about it. They are intolerant, not allowing Christians to attack Islam (Arabs in Italy not only might not attack Christianity, but were compelled to listen to Christian preaching). Finally, they are changeable and unreliable. The writer, who had been superior of the Franciscans in the Holy Land, recounts two anecdotes of Baybars. The garrison of Safed (Templars and two Franciscans) surrendered on terms but, refusing conversion, were executed. In contrast, having given his word that the Christians of Jaffa should be safe, he executes an amir who has raped a Christian girl, on the mother's complaint and identification. Here, as in the poems, social criticism amounts to no more than an assessment of the virtues of the ruler.

Ricoldo da Monte Croce's *Antialcoran* is one of two or three traditional and derivative compendiums of medieval polemic against Islam, and of that sort a major work, but his Journey (*Itinerarius*) to Baghdad is, like the journey itself, altogether more original. Admittedly it includes a summary of the usual polemic (Islam is muddled, is secret, is most untrue, is contrary to reason, is violent) but when he comes to his own experience he gives us his unusual and spontaneous impressions. « For who will not be astonished when he seriously considers the care of these Saracens for studies, their devotion in prayer, their pity for the poor, their reverence for the name of God, the prophets and holy places, the dignity of their customs, their friendliness to foreigners and their harmony and love for one another ? » ⁽¹⁾. But Ricoldo says all this « more to confound the Christians than to commend the Muslims ». Sometimes he seems to go out of his way to confound the Christians, as when he strains our credulity by telling us that in several years he never heard a profane song. His almost excessive air of candour for purposes of homiletic adminishment is, however, original, and may have been made possible partly by his not belonging to a minority grouping in Baghdad (he did not feel at home with the Christians of the place). Fidenzio and Vitry and many others had belonged to a closely linked minority group isolated within the larger community, and constantly creating its own currency of sayings and rumours. Most « informed » local Christian criticism consisted of stereotypes used as defences against a dominant and exclusive outside world; is it surprising that the instinctive judgement of the poets sometimes seems preferable ?

The many ambivalences, parallels and divergences fall within an overall unity which is susceptible of definition. First, there is an ulterior purpose in all assessments of Arab society, to teach in the case of the apologists, to amuse in the case of the poets. These purposes dictate the nature and content of the two different assessments. The apologists' belief that there is a right and a wrong moral system, and that, that alone will determine the character of a society, goes with a serious concern about truth, but only because they thought it would prove

⁽¹⁾ *Itinerarius*, ed. cit., cap. xxii, cf. xxiii-xxix. *Antialcoran Machometi* (titles in British Library MS. Royal 13.E.IX) or *Disputatio contra Saracenos* (as in Paris, Bibliothèque

nationale MS. Lat. 4230) : no printed edition of original, but Greek translation by Demetrius Cydones, with Latin re-translation, in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 104,

their case, and they were reluctant to accept it whenever they saw it would not; the fact that their knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence was often viciously at fault only emphasises their polemic purpose. The faults of the poets were exactly contrary; indifference to the facts, frivolity and insouciance. Their travesty of Islam as a religion may be no more than a deliberate convention adopted as a joke, certainly a joke in poor taste, but one intended to heighten the excitement of the stories. Saracen «paganism» is a particularly absurd imputation which, when we examine it closely, turns out to reflect the character of contemporary Christianity, and in which, the familiar cult being addressed to the wrong God, a multiplicity of gods have different names but a single function. There is no knowledge of any known pagan cult. These two angles of approach, the furious attachment of the man of reason to his premiss when he claims that what should be, is, and the relaxed pragmatism of the romancer, interested, not at all in establishing facts, but very much in telling a good story, converge just where both derive from Christianity.

Christianity is the standard of comparison upon which polemic and fiction are alike based. That the poets saw Arab society as an aristocracy exactly like the one familiar to them at home hardly needs further demonstration, but the academic criticism of Islamic society would be equally meaningless without the Christian exemplar. First, Christians are being warned that their sexual pleasures will never be sanctioned by religion. Secondly, the choice of what to criticise is made solely on the basis of its relevance to Christian interests. Arab society is considered in no other connection. It is commented on simply as it rejects, questions or diverges from that Christian theory to which it is piously hoped Christians will one day conform. Turning on the other hand to the poets again, we admit that there were many more differences between Arab and European society than they knew or cared, but their refusal to recognise any was a thoroughly sensible assumption, because the two worlds did share ideals common to aristocratic societies, even those in other ways different. Saladin spans the theologians' and the poets' worlds, and in him they partly forgot their hostility to Islam, but not the sense of their rivalry with it. All the writers of this age saw the two societies as in some sense rivals, certainly in competition for lands and people, but this single fact was reflected differently in aggressive moral polemic and in stories of heroic warfare. The thought of the rivalry spurred the theorists on to new diatribes, and

it is the same thought that underlies their hostility and their apprehensions about Providential support. In the case of the poets, although hostility is their formal theme, it was in fact much less important than their sense of rivalry between equals, and in no way excludes the idea of mutual respect. It was their lack of interest in Arab society in itself that alone united all medieval writers.