

The Oriental Renaissance

To Chapter 29 Notes and References

At the very time the Portuguese were exploring the west coast of Africa, and then discovering Brazil and the Far East, the invention of printing was transforming the intellectual life of Europe. Though the growth of literacy represented considerable progress in a general sense, it also made it more difficult than ever for the Portuguese to keep to themselves the news of their momentous discoveries.

There seems little doubt that there *were* concerted attempts to keep the news secret. In the time of King John II (1481–1495), for example, the Portuguese Crown used oaths and all types of punishment, including death, to ‘dissuade’ people from leaking the news. In 1481, the Cortes petitioned the king to forbid foreigners – Genoese and Florentines especially – from settling in the kingdom because ‘they stole the royal secrets as to Africa and the islands.’¹ A little later, in 1504, King Manuel reaffirmed that complete secrecy be maintained in regard to south-eastern and north-eastern navigation – offenders would be put to death. ‘Thereafter, it would appear, all the charts, maps, and logs concerning the routes to Africa, India and Brazil were housed in the royal chartroom and placed under the custody of Jorgé de Vasconcelos.’² Several historians have argued that more than one official Portuguese chronicle of discovery was deliberately left uncompleted so as to preserve crucial information. Donald Lach, in his survey of Portugal’s control of information, says that a policy of suppressing news about African discovery and trade was almost certainly carried out by the Portuguese: ‘It is hard to believe that chance alone is sufficient to account for the fact that not a single work on the new discoveries in Asia is known to have been published in Portugal between 1500 and mid-century.’³

Such an embargo could not last. Portuguese cartographers peddled their services and their information on the overseas world, selling their inside knowledge to the highest bidders, as did navigators and merchants who had been on such voyages. Some people appear to have felt guilty about this and, very often, military details were omitted. But, gradually, as the sixteenth century lengthened, the discoveries became common currency. Tantalising hints were dropped in the general pronouncements of the Portuguese kings, who sent official communications to their fellow monarchs around Europe, and to the papacy. Another way information circulated was via the many Italian merchants in Lisbon, some of whom at least were Venetian spies. In this way, the route to India, although classified as a state secret, was the subject of several early accounts written by foreigners from inside Portugal. A general – if hazy – picture could be reconstructed by those interested in doing so.⁴ The Portuguese policy of secrecy, says Lach, was largely successful

for about fifty years, but broke down around mid-century, when it became clear that Portugal could not maintain a monopoly on the spice trade. After about 1550 there was a great vogue for travel literature and it was also about now that the Jesuits began publishing their famous 'letterbooks'. These provided the most comprehensive description of the Far East for many years.⁵

A series of papal bulls issued in the sixteenth century enabled the Portuguese Crown to create something that came to be called the *padroado* (not unlike the Spanish *patronato*). The Crown was granted the use of certain ecclesiastical revenues in Portugal for exploration and the right to propose to the papacy a number of candidates for the sees and ecclesiastical benefices of Africa and the Indies.⁶ In this way, in the Indies, Goa became established as the headquarters of Jesuit activity and, in 1542, four months after his arrival there, Francis Xavier addressed a letter to the father of his order in Rome in which he referred to Goa as already an 'entirely Christian city.'⁷ (Its original name was Ticuari, which meant 'Thirty Villages'.) With Xavier's arrival in India, the Jesuits became the acknowledged leaders of the Christian missionary effort within the *padroado*.

Each of the early explorations had included missionaries or ecclesiastics of one kind or another, and many of them had written accounts of their experiences. But it was not until the Jesuits became active in overseas missions that a comprehensive system for correspondence was established and the dissemination of information became virtually routine. Ignatius Loyola explicitly ordered members of his order to send letters to him in Rome. Important matters were to be sent in a formal letter, while less important or more private concerns were included on a separate sheet known as *hijuela*. All such correspondence was to be written out in triplicate and sent to Rome by three different routes.⁸ These reports were to be prepared with great thought and care, for they were to be used for the edification and guidance of the Society and for the inspiration of public interest in its far-flung enterprises.⁹ An office was established in Rome that was responsible for communicating with the missionaries and for receiving the incoming letters, editing and translating them and then circulating them throughout Europe. In this way information on the peoples and cultures and ideas of India were first spread. With Goa being used as the administrative centre, all information, wherever it was gathered – China or Japan, say – became known as 'Indian letters'. About this time, a Jesuit college was established at Coimbra in Portugal and this too became a repository and clearing house for Jesuit letters sent to Europe, and then passed on to Rome.¹⁰ There were five types of letter – the *hijuelas* already mentioned, hortatory letters, designed to stimulate interest in the East among the brothers back home, accounts for public distribution, which were more restrained in tone, personal accounts, and 'allied documents', in effect appendices, such as histories of specific tribes, or chronicles about specific matters or issues about which the missionaries thought that people back home would require further detailed knowledge.¹¹ Eventually, as the letters became stabilised, the Jesuits in Rome and Coimbra stopped translating them into all the different languages of Europe and instead published them in Latin, as *Epistolae indicae*.¹²

The writings of the Jesuits, unlike the secular authors, of whom there were several, were not concerned with trade. They do refer to military action, but in general they cover cultural matters, the ideas and practices, the institutions and customs of far-off peoples.

For example, in so far as Malabar was concerned (the Malabar Coast was the western coast of India, below what is now Bombay or Mumbai), the Jesuits reported the death of a ruler, showing how the mourners gathered in a field, for the cremation, how they shaved their bodies completely, 'saving only their eyelashes and eyebrows' and, after cleaning their teeth, refrained from eating betel, meat or fish for thirteen days.¹³ Their accounts likewise show how the administration of justice varied according to the caste of the offender, and how trial by ordeal was not uncommon, some offenders being required to plunge the first two fingers of their right hand into boiling oil. 'Should his fingers be burnt, the accused is tortured to force a confession of what he has done with the stolen goods. Whether he confesses or not, he is still executed. Should the accused's fingers not be burnt, he is released and the accuser is either executed, fined or banished.'¹⁴ Bengalis were described as 'sleek, handsome black men, more sharpwitted than the men of any other known race'.¹⁵ But they were also denounced for being 'overly wary and treacherous' and the reports noted that elsewhere in India it was an insult to call someone a Bengali. The accounts further report that the government of Bengal had been taken over by Muslims about three hundred years before the arrival of the Portuguese – substantially correct. And it was from Portuguese Jesuits that Europe first learned in some detail about the advent of the Mughals in India, and the struggle for supremacy between them and the Afghans.¹⁶

Most Jesuits realised that the key to understanding India lay in the mastery of native languages and in the exploration of the local literatures.¹⁷ In trying to root out Hinduism, certain sacred books were seized and sometimes translated and the translations sent to Europe. These included eighteen books of the *Mahabharata*. But in general the Jesuits learned little systematically about Hinduism, dismissing many of the legends as 'fables'.¹⁸ The names of the Hindu gods Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma reached Europe, and the fact that they constituted the *Tri-murti*, a form of Trinity, but here too the Jesuits treated such beliefs as 'hopeless superstitions'. The letters refer often to the *pagodas* of the Hindus, 'very large houses, all of stone or marble', which 'contain images of bulls, cows, elephants, monkeys, and men'.¹⁹ Some of the Jesuits, plainly impressed by the size of these monuments, believed they had been built by Alexander the Great, or the Romans. The Jesuits recognised that the Hindus had three types of priest – Brahmins, Yogis and Gurus. They observed and described the threads which the former wore over their shoulders from the age of seven on, each thread honouring a different god, and how the three threads were knotted together in places 'and thus they claim to have a Trinity like ours'. But in general the Jesuits had no respect for these ranks and were horrified that Hindu priests were able to marry.²⁰ They were fascinated by caste and by general marital practices, one observer noting that there were 'many people married to cousins, sisters and sisters-in-law'. This observer went so far as to use the Indian practices as an argument with the pope, to encourage him to allow marriage in Europe between the third and fourth degrees of consanguinity. But the Jesuits never acquired either a respect or a sympathy for native scholarship or Indian high culture. This is one reason why the Oriental renaissance, when it occurred, had the impact it did.

China, although furthest removed from Europe, nevertheless showed some curious parallels in the realm of ideas. At the end of the sixteenth century, for example, she experienced her own 'renaissance', an upsurge in developments in the theatre, in the novel, and in

philosophy. Many intellectuals belonged to a political and literary club, the ‘Society of Renewal’ (*fushe*). It was now, for example, that the influence of Zhan Buddhism began to grow and the concept of *liang zhi*, or ‘innate moral knowledge’. This, in a way, was a Chinese form of Platonism, which held that there is a principle of good inherent in the mind before any contamination by egoistic thoughts and desires ‘and which one must try to discover in oneself’. This school of ‘innate knowledge’ was highly controversial because its advocates denounced Confucius, arguing that he prevented thought, which was inherent in everyone.²¹ Another aspect of the Chinese renaissance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the growth of schools and libraries as China reacted to the discovery in the West of printing by movable type.²²

Other innovations at this time included the *Lu xue jing yi* (*Essence of Music*), by Zhu Zaiyu (1536–1611), who was the first person in the world to define the equally tempered scale.²³ Li Shizhen (1518–1598) produced *Ben tsao gang mi*, which described a thousand plants and a thousand animals with medicinal uses. He also mentioned, for the first time, a method of smallpox injection, much the same method as that which, in the West, later gave rise to the science of immunology. A primitive form of sociology was also introduced in China, by Wang Fuzhi. He conceived of societies as evolving by natural forces, and this was especially influential in the Chinese context because it killed off any hope – entertained by some – that there would be a return to a golden age, the time of the Han empire, when the old ways would be resurrected. Wang actually saw the distant past as ‘bestial’,²⁴ and insisted there was no going back, a particularly important (and unpopular) stance in China since it was branded as anti-Confucian.

As well as having its own renaissance of sorts, Ming China also had its own Inquisition. This grew out of the resumption of the official civil service competitions – the written examination – from 1646 onwards.²⁵ It happened because, in connection with these examinations, a vast number of private academies proliferated. And, since the dynasty kept a strict control over the curriculum for the examinations, they were able to control much of the thought of the people, and to curtail criticism. In the early eighteenth century this eventually led to more direct control and a device which, like its counterpart in the West, included an index of prohibited books: 10,231 titles were on the list at one point and more than 2,300 were actually destroyed. At the same time, action was taken against dissident authors – forced labour, exile, property confiscated, even execution in some cases.²⁶

As in England and France, the Chinese developed a taste in the early eighteenth century for encyclopaedias. One, printed in movable copper type, had no fewer than 10,000 chapters. In 1716 the famous dictionary, the *Gang hsi zi dian*, appeared – this was to serve as the basis for Western sinologists down to the twentieth century. Altogether, says Jacques Gernet, there was a canon of more than fifty ‘big publications’ in the eighteenth century, codifying Chinese learning and acting as a lively parallel to the enlightenment projects of Western Europe. The traffic in ideas wasn’t all one way of course, and the main influence of the Jesuits in China was in astronomy, cartography and mathematics. In 1702 the scholar Gangshi asked the Jesuit father Antoine Thomas to fix the length of the *li* as a function of the terrestrial meridian. This innovation was made after the mile but before the kilometre was settled in Europe in the same way.²⁷

As the eighteenth century wore on, China became the subject of great fascination for Europeans – at times it amounted almost to a mania. ‘Soon everyone was proclaiming the wisdom of Confucius, or extolling the virtues of a Chinese education, or painting in what they took to be the Chinese style, or building Chinese pagodas in gardens landscaped in the Chinese manner . . .’²⁸ In 1670 the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher had reported that China ‘is ruled by Doctors, *à la mode of Plato*’, while a second, Father Le Comte, in his book *Nouveaux mémoires sur l’état de Chine*, argued that China had practiced the Christian virtues for more than two thousand years.²⁹ For his pains, he was condemned by the scholastics of the University of Paris, who said he had made Christianity ‘superfluous’. Leibniz thought that in most matters of ethics and politics China was ahead of Europe and went so far as to suggest that Chinese be taught as a universal language. Voltaire agreed.

Chinese forms of beauty swept through Europe, and ‘all royalty joined in’. There was a Chinese pavilion at Sans Souci, a porcelain palace at Dresden, a Chinese park in Weimar and a whole Chinese village, named Canton, was built at Drottningholm, the royal summer residence of the Swedish monarch. There was another Chinese village outside Cassel and pagodas at Kew and Nymphenburg. The duke of Cumberland kept a Chinese yacht on the Thames, complete with a dragon, and Watteau and Boucher painted in the Chinese style. Everyone drank tea from Chinese porcelain cups.³⁰

The Islamic world of course came closer to home for European travellers than the Far Eastern civilisations. The first thing to say about Islam is that the idea itself had proved extremely successful. By the eighteenth century, the Muslim faith stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the South China Sea and from the Ural river almost to the mouth of the Zambezi. It was the dominant faith in lands which totalled at least three times the area occupied by Christianity.

Isfahan, in Persia, had emerged as a worthy successor to Baghdad and Toledo, as the focus of an Islamic renaissance in art, letters and philosophy. At that stage Persian was the *lingua franca* of the Islamic world, rather than Arabic. Isfahan was the capital of the Safavi empire, where there flourished a school of painters of miniatures, led by Bihzard, of carpet weavers, and of highly individualised writers of memoirs. The brilliance of Isfahan also attracted many scholars, in particular *falsafahs*, even though philosophy was still a dubious enterprise in the eyes of the orthodox. There was a renewed interest in Aristotle, Plato and ‘pagan’ values. Among the philosophers was Mir Damad (d. 1631), who held that the world consisted entirely of light, and Suhrawardi, a kind of Platonist who believed there was a ‘realm of images’ elsewhere. This ‘Persianate flowering’ also produced three great law-givers, new forms of literary biography, the idea of connoisseurship for both painting and calligraphy, and a new school of translation.³¹ The flowering has been compared with the Italian Renaissance in the sense that it was a ‘lyrical’ movement rather than a ‘positivist’ one.³²

Part of this ‘lyrical’, or Platonic, side to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Islam were Abulfazl’s innovations in Sufism. It is not strictly correct to call Sufism ‘Platonic’ or ‘Neoplatonic’, nor, according to some scholars, is it right to call it ‘mystical’. Nevertheless, this *is* how many people conceive of Sufism, as a very private form of Islam, an ascetic

search for the path to God, deep inside oneself, and of which, it is held, we all have an inkling in our inherent nature ('innate knowledge', as the Chinese put it). Sufis wear a woollen habit (*sufi* means 'wool') and sometimes form themselves into *tariqahs*, schools with their own distinctive approach to the path to God. Sometimes this involves venerating saints, as Sufis who have achieved closeness to God and are now in Paradise. Besides Platonism, there are overlaps here with Buddhism.

Abulfazl (1551–1602) wasn't based at Isfahan, but at Akbar's court in India and his book was called *Akbar-Namah*, the *Book of Akbar*.³³ The basic idea of Sufism, in Abulfazl's interpretation of it, as related to the organisation of civilisation, is the encouragement of a 'gentling' of relations between men and women – conciliation in all things. This is very different from many people's ideas of Islam (especially now, after 9/11) and, by the late eighteenth century, when a sizeable proportion of Muslims were crying out for reform of the faith, the corruption that had undoubtedly seeped into Sufism (which, again, recalls the corruption that infiltrated Buddhism in China in the Middle Ages) caused it to provoke a violent reaction. Muhammad bin Abd-al-Wahhab (d. 1791) took particular exception to Sufism, especially its veneration of the saints, which he felt smacked of idolatry and was, in effect, an abandonment of Muhammad. In orthodox law this was a capital offence and Wahhabi and his followers, who by then included Ibn Saud, a local ruler in Saudi Arabia, worked hard to establish a state based on their uncompromising principles. Then, to the horror of the Muslim world, they set about destroying many of the sacred sites, not just of Sufism but of mainstream Islam itself, because they too were tainted by idolatry. To cap it all, the Wahhabis massacred many of the pilgrims visiting those sites.

Eventually – and with difficulty – they were put down. But the Wahhabis would never go away completely. And in the short run their suppression raised a quite different issue, for they were overcome by a new kind of Ottoman army – one that used equipment and tactics that had been evolved in the West. This signalled a major change in thinking on the part of the Ottomans.³⁴ As we shall now see, Islam's relations with the West, and with Western ideas, was very chequered.

Despite its retreat in Spain by 1492 and its near-victory at Vienna in 1683, the Muslim world for a long time remained wary, even uninterested in what was happening, intellectually speaking, in Western Europe.³⁵ Bernard Lewis, the well-known scholar of Islam, writes that 'The great translation movement that centuries earlier had brought many Greek, Persian and Syriac works within the purview of Muslim and other Arabic readers, had come to an end, and the new scientific literature of Europe was almost totally unknown to them. Until the late eighteenth century, only one medical book was translated into a Middle Eastern language – a sixteenth-century treatise on syphilis, presented to Sultan Mehmed IV in Turkish in 1655.' This translation was no accident, says Lewis. Syphilis, reputedly of American origin, had arrived in the Islamic world from Europe (and is still known in Arabic, Persian, Turkish and other languages as 'the Frankish disease'). Even when major conceptual breakthroughs were made in the Islamic world, they were not always recognised. For example, William Harvey's *Essay on the Motion of the Heart and Blood*, published in 1628, was anticipated by the work of a thirteenth-century Syrian physician called Ibn al-Nafis. His treatise, which bravely argued against the traditional

wisdom of Galen and Avicenna, set out the principle of circulation but it remained unknown and had no effect on the practice of medicine. In a letter written in 1560, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, ambassador from the Holy Roman Emperor to the sultan in Turkey, had this to say: 'No nation has shown less reluctance to adopt the useful inventions of others; for example, they have appropriated for their own use large and small cannons and many other of our discoveries. They have, however, never been able to bring themselves to print books and set up public clocks. They hold that their scriptures, that is, their sacred books, would no longer be scriptures if printed; and if they established public clocks, they think that the authority of their *muezzins* and their ancient rites would suffer diminution.'³⁶

This can't be quite right, or it gives an incomplete picture. True, there are several accounts of the Ottomans feeling 'morally superior' to Europeans, showing a 'vanity' toward the infidel, 'glorifying in their ignorance', apparently convinced that nothing could be learned from the West.³⁷ But, from the sixteenth century on, more recent scholarship shows that the Turks did follow developments in the West, especially in the fields of war, mining, geography and medicine. Istanbul had its own observatory as early as 1573, where the chief astronomer, Taqi al-Din, had fifteen assistants, though it was demolished seven years later. Taqi al-Din developed a new method of calculation to determine the latitudes and longitudes of the stars. His method was more precise than any yet devised and he also invented new astronomical instruments.³⁸ Ottoman ambassadors visited observatories in Paris in 1721, in Vienna in 1748, and Italian and French astronomical works were translated into Turkish in 1768 and 1772.³⁹

Professor Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the Turkish historian of science, shows that the number of *madrasas* in the Ottoman lands grew from forty in the fourteenth century to ninety-seven in the fifteenth, and 189 in the sixteenth. Later still, the total grew to 665 in all the empire.⁴⁰ The Ottomans produced, in particular, many geographical books, and Kâtip Çelebi (1609–1657), the most famous of the Turkish bibliographers and translators of the era, provided for his readers a wide-ranging survey of European scientific and artistic institutions, giving the first indications (by implication) that the Ottomans were backward in the sciences.⁴¹ Çelebi's book *Kesfî z-zünun* provided a critical survey of Renaissance academies, and he also translated Mercator.

A concerted attempt at the translation of European works was begun around 1720, on the orders of Grand Vizier Nevsehirli Damat Ibrahim Pasa, during the reign of Sultan Ahmet III, a period known in Ottoman history as the 'Tulip Age'.⁴² This activity was reinforced by the embassies to Europe already referred to (there was one to St Petersburg, as well as to Paris and Vienna). Fatma Müge Göçek's account of the embassy to Paris, in 1720–1721, shows that the Turks brought military gifts while the French reciprocated with technological objects.⁴³ At that time, says Göçek, the medical schools were in decline in Turkey and the Ottomans were having a problem controlling untrained practitioners.⁴⁴ The French were told that although there were twenty-four public libraries in Istanbul at the time, 'books filled with "lies" (history, poetry, astronomy, philosophy)' could not be endowed or bequeathed to these libraries.

The picture that has therefore emerged from more recent scholarship is that the Turkish conquest of Constantinople/Istanbul, though it drove many Greek/Byzantine scholars west, with or without manuscripts, did kick-start a revival of Islamic scholarship, with an

interest in Western/Renaissance thought. For some reason, this interest declined in the seventeenth century, only to be renewed in the early years of the eighteenth.

Gradually, however, throughout the eighteenth century, the isolation of the Ottoman lands from Europe was reduced and there emerged a new category of visitor to Muslim countries. They comprised what we would now call experts, individuals offering specialist services to Islamic employers. This was true even of the Muslim countries further east, in Mughal India for example, where the Italian doctor Manucci was employed. This in time sparked a change in attitudes, which for many Muslims was shocking: one might learn from the previously despised infidel.⁴⁵ There was also more travel from east to west. In earlier centuries, only captives and a few diplomatic envoys had travelled in that way. After all, there were no holy places for Muslims to make pilgrimages to in Europe and in theory at least little to attract merchants interested in luxuries. (One exception was Evliya Celebi, who travelled in Europe in the second half of the seventeenth century, and left a fascinating record.) In the eighteenth century that began to change. As Gulfishan Khan has recently shown, there were many Indians – Muslims and Hindus – who travelled to Europe.⁴⁶ Now, not only were special envoys sent out in increasing numbers, with instructions to observe, but attitudes to foreigners softened. A mathematical school was introduced for the Turkish military in 1734, initiated by a Frenchman, and a printing press was started in 1729, under the guidance of a Hungarian. Still, the improvements were patchy. Bernard Lewis describes a Turkish version of one of Columbus' maps (now lost), prepared in 1513, which survives in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. It remained there, unconsulted and unknown, until it was discovered by a German scholar in 1929.⁴⁷

But travel from east to west did continue to increase. First the pasha of Egypt, then the sultan of Turkey, then the shah of Persia each dispatched students to Paris, London and other Western capitals. To begin with they were after military know-how, but this entailed learning French, English and other European languages and once they could do so, these envoys were free to read whatever came their way. Even here, however, they were in a sense handicapped. This was because Islam regarded Christianity as an earlier form of revelation, and it therefore made no sense to go backwards. Their chief interests in the West, therefore, lay in economics or in politics.⁴⁸

Islamic envoys in the western European countries were interested chiefly in two political ideas, the first being patriotism, coming from France and England in particular. This appealed especially to the younger Ottoman politicians, who realised that if an Ottoman patriotism could be fashioned, it might unite the very varied populations and tribes of the empire by means of a common love of territory, which would also mean a common allegiance to its ruler. The second idea was nationalism. This was more of a central and eastern European notion and referred mainly to ethnic and linguistic identities. The longer-term effects of this idea were far less successful, tending to divide and disrupt, rather than unify.⁴⁹

Outside politics, the topics which attracted most interest of the envoys were the status of women, science and music. 'Islam permits both polygamy and concubinage. Muslim visitors to Europe speak with astonishment, often with horror, of the immodesty and forwardness of Western women, of the incredible freedom and absurd deference accorded to them, and of the lack of manly jealousy of European males confronted with the