



The Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba in Spain
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Washington State University professor of history R. Charles Weller: **Western historiography just seeks to make the West look great** **1** PART

EXCLUSIVE



R. Charles Weller is associate professor of history at Washington State University, and author of 'Reason, Revelation and Law in Islamic and Western Theory and History', published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2021.

One of the more interesting notes in your book is the proposition that "various 'Western' societies are, in varying measure partly 'Islamic', and various 'Islamic' societies partly 'Western.'" Let's start by explaining this idea further for our readers – even though the latter seems almost obvious.

Yes, the first thing is the terminology. 'Western' and 'Islamic' are, of course, contested constructs. That's important.

So, for instance, you take Spain, or al-Andalus, as one of the classic examples. Here, al-Andalus is predominantly Muslim or "Islamic" for centuries. From the eighth century down to whenever you date the end, whether it was the capture of Toledo by King Alfonso in 1086 or the Reconquista or all the way down to the expulsion in the 1490s. So, from the eighth to ninth centuries down to at least the 11th or 12th centuries, if not the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries, you have a significant and dominant Islamic presence in Spain. Now, it's considered Western or European.

So, what do we mean by the West? What do we mean by Islamic? We create these constructs and then juxtapose them, one against the other, as if they're completely opposite and separate, when in fact, they're not. This is a part of my points. We create these men-

tal conceptual divides with our terminology. Then, we set them at odds and conflict, through that juxtaposition against each other as polar opposites.

The problem is how we conceive these constructs and conceive ourselves as us and them. A lecture, called 'Islamic Contributions to Western Civilization' that I've done many times in classes and public and love to do, covers the long history of these Islamic contributions in terms of medicine, science, technology, literature, art, poetry, language, linguistics, and law. But there's so much more across the entire history of that exchange, as I talked about in my article.

Now at this point, it's 1400 years of ongoing interaction and exchange. And that exchange is typically now framed in terms of a conflict between polar opposites, or societies that are completely different and allegedly incompatible, which is based on a 'Clash of Civilizations' model. When in fact, within that deeper, longer, more complex history is a great deal also of sharing, compatibility, co-existence at different times, borrowing, cross-cultural influence, and cross-cultural contact and exchange — as we say in world history studies.

I could give you a whole list of the details. But I'll just refer you to my recorded lecture. There, I go over

all of these different aspects of Islamic contributions to Western civilization that do not get attention in "the West". And there are reasons why they don't get attention and why these kinds of topics are not covered. It's because of political and religious reasons. It's because there are major groups that want to deny and suppress this kind of knowledge as this kind of knowledge is transformational.

The last thing I'll say is I refer to a book called 'The Role of the Arab-Islamic World in the Rise of the West' (2012) edited by Nayef Al-Rodhan. His subtitle for the book was 'Implications for Contemporary Trans-Cultural Relations', and that's what it's all about. It's the implications of this history. It's the implications of these facts that "the West" has been much more influenced by the Islamic world historically over 14 centuries than it wants to admit.

Some may grant that the Islamic civilization was a glorious thing maybe 500–600 years ago and actually provided Europe with the basis of their enlightenment, medicine, science, etc. and served as a buffer, taking from the Greek civilization and giving it back to Europe. But they may also argue that it stopped there, and for the past 400–500 years, the Islamic civ-

ilization or Muslim societies or the Muslim world didn't contribute much to the advancement of Europe, and Europe or "the West" has stood on its own feet. What would you say about that argument?

The answers that have been given to this all involve this debate over the idea of "the rise of the West and the decline of the east or the non-western world".

In historical studies, we talk about what's called the 'Long-decline Paradigm' (LDP), and that's exactly what it is. Basically, in western or European historiography, in particular, the West or Europe just wants to make itself look great, and so, it speaks about the rise of the West from essentially the time of the Renaissance, Columbus and the explorations, etc.

So, here we start to get the rise of the West and the ascendancy and the global dominance of the West eventually into the 1800s and the 1900s. This is the Western version of history.

At the same time, the West is allegedly rising to global dominance, the other societies are allegedly declining. This is how the story goes. And the decline in each of the "Civilizations" — the Chinese, Middle Eastern, African civilizations, etc. — is specific and unique to each society, but it shares things in common like a despotic rule, backward savagery,

primitive tribalism, etc. in Africa. In the Middle East, it's about despotic rulers with harsh severe law codes, strict control over society, lack of freedom, etc. that are supposed to be there. There are similar things in China and Asian civilizations that they talked about, which are supposed to be static. They are supposed to become static, no longer be progressive, hold on to traditionalism, etc.

But that interpretation and framing of history presume Europe as the model for "progress". Europe becomes the measuring stick and the standard by which other societies and European history are measured. So, the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, then modernization and "modern society", and the right to advance and to develop and to press with these ideas of civic society, individual rights, constitutional government, free market, economy, etc. are all considered to be fundamental to the West. Then, they find them lacking in the other parts of the world.

So it's this picture and paradigm which has been a bit painted in one way. As some people say, "Those who control history, control the future." If you can control how people think about history. So, some of the problems are in how the historical narratives have been framed and the ques-