

# September 11, 1683: Myth of a Christian Europe and the Massacre in Norway

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### ABSTRACT

This essay critically approaches the impact of September 11, 2001 attacks in galvanizing the myth of a Christian Europe, a myth that provided the ideological justification for the recent massacre in Norway. The myth making around the failed Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683, an event that provided the inspiration for Anders Breivik's fifteen hundred pages long anti-Muslim manifesto, *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, comes under scrutiny. The author argues that Europe has been, not only a Christian, but also a Jewish and Muslim continent for many centuries, using examples from the centuries-old history of Islamic civilization in France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Spain, among other European countries. The author draws attention not only to the total annihilation of historical Muslim communities in places such as Sicily and Spain, but also to the nearly total eradication of Islamic religious heritage and architecture in these countries.

The cause of Anders Breivik's massacre in Norway, which he stated rather verbosely in his fifteen hundred pages long manifesto, *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, was ignored in the media: The myth of a "Christian Europe" based on the identification of the European continent solely with Christianity. This is a malicious and mythical claim that has been calamitously employed throughout history in most episodes of ethnic cleansing against non-Christians in Europe, from the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain in 1492 to the genocidal campaign against Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s. Hence Breivik chose 2083, the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ottomans' failed siege of Vienna, and the beginning of 240 years of Ottoman retreat in Europe, as the title of his manifesto, which can be described as the *Mein Kampf* or the *Turner Diaries* of a European Islamophobe.

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Since the investigation into Breivik's massacre continues, we do not yet know whether he is connected with other Islamophobic terrorists. Even a country that has tried hard to suppress its right

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wing extremists such as Germany still boasts vibrant violent right wing groups as the recent arrests of members of a Neo-Nazi terrorist group with a long history of assassinations of immigrants demonstrated.<sup>1</sup> What these extremist groups share with many mainstream conservative politicians and intellectuals is the unfounded belief that Europe exclusively belonged, belongs, and will belong to, Christians, not necessarily to religious, practicing Christians, but to people of Christian origins.

The myth of a Christian Europe that motivated Breivik to undertake the "biggest massacre by a single gunman in modern times"<sup>2</sup> is unfortunately not the preserve of violent right wing extremists. This myth is supported by many mainstream conservative, Christian Democratic parties in Europe, and by many Republicans and conservative intellectuals in the United States. One of the consequences of September 11 has been the meteoric increase in Islamophobic pseudo-scholarly publications

on the theme of "Eurabia," referring to the imaginary takeover of Europe by Muslims, mostly written by Americans on the Islamic threat facing Europe.<sup>3</sup> Many of these works, in particular those of Robert Spencer and Bat Ye'or, are heavily cited in Breivik's manifesto as justifications for his mass murder against social democratic youth whom he blames for the alleged Islamic infiltration of Europe. However, the myth of a Christian Europe has a hold over much more mainstream figures and organizations other than the likes of Robert Spencer.

Let me give one example from Germany, the locomotive of European integration, and home to the second-largest Muslim minority in the EU. In March 2011, Germany's new Minister of Interior, Hans-Peter Friedrich, set off a controversy by declaring, "[t]hat Islam is part of Germany is a fact that cannot be proven by history."<sup>4</sup> He was joined by the leader of the Christian Social Union, the Bavarian sister party of the governing Christian Democratic Union. "Of course there are Muslims in Germany," CSU General Secretary Alexander Dobrindt stated. "But Islam is not part of the German *Leitkultur* [leading culture]."<sup>5</sup> Add to these remarks the attempts of the Papal authorities and their supporters among Catholic EU member states to enshrine a reference to Christianity in EU's constitution.<sup>6</sup> Protestant northern European states such as Sweden, and ardently secular Catholic-ma-

majority states such as France mostly oppose having references to Christianity in the EU constitution.<sup>7</sup> However, not only the conservative Catholic EU member states such as Poland and Lithuania, but also the largest and governing party of Germany, CDU/CSU, supports enshrining references to Christianity in the EU constitution.<sup>8</sup>

The sad truth is that most people on both sides of the Atlantic, including a large segment of the educated public, would agree that “factually” Europe was a Christian continent, where non-Muslims only recently arrived. But is that really true? Or is this a historical misrepresentation, a popular lie, which is at the very foundation of an age-old propaganda that produced hatred and violence against non-Christians in Europe for centuries? In the brief sketch below, I suggest that it is the latter, in the hope of convincing some among the Western educated public that Muslims and Jews have been “Europeans” for centuries, and that to claim otherwise may imply an intellectual kinship, however passive, with those who condoned mass murders of Jews and Muslims in Europe, symbolized by the mass graves of Auschwitz and Srebrenica.

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The siege of Vienna was indelibly impressed in my mind, not through my Turkish high school education, where this event is one of standard ritual mourning in history classes, but later when I left

Turkey for my undergraduate studies at the University of Chicago. By a fateful coincidence that Breivik would relish, my encounter with the siege of Vienna occurred in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001. I was in Vienna, where the University of Chicago had a study abroad program on “Western Civilization.” We had a thematic trip to a monastery during our week on the Middle Ages. It was hoped that we would gain a deeper understanding of Medieval Europe. We kind of did.

Our tour guide was an Austrian monk who spoke impeccable American English, since he was also a graduate of a leading American university. In the middle of the tour, he stopped in front of a cracked wall and told us that the wall crack was the result of the siege

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of Vienna by the “Turks” in 1683: A catapulted stone cracked the wall, and a frame was put around the crack as a constant “reminder to *us*,” he said, “of who the enemy of the Church *is*.” From the tone of his voice though, it did not sound as if he needed a reminder. He then dramatically concluded: “And this is the struggle we are still fighting today, with the September 11 attacks in New York.”

The Chicago professor on board for the trip quickly approached me, patted

me on the shoulder and joked, “terrible Turk,” adding that I should not mind what this ignorant monk was saying. Both of us being non-Christians, I thought the Christian bravado of the

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monk could also offend the professor, despite the “Judeo-” amendment sometimes affixed to the “Christian civilization” as an afterthought. Given his education, the monk was anything but ignorant. In Vienna of 2001, he was an erudite provocateur and falsifier of history at a sensitive moment. Jörg Haider’s right wing extremist Freedom Party of Austria, having won the elections in 1999 with a stunning 27% of the vote, was governing the country in a coalition with the conservative ÖVP. Turks being the largest ethnic minority in Austria, our American-educated monk was not making an innocuous remark at a time of interethnic harmony. Little did he know that a “terrible Turk” infiltrated what he thought of as the Chicago battalion of Western Christendom in his imaginary struggle against Islam.

Looking back at 9/11 ten years later, I see that one of its worst legacies has been to galvanize the myth of a “Christian Europe,” an age-old discourse of exclusion par excellence, which implies that non-Christians have no place in Europe because they are “foreigners.” In 1683, Europe was not only inhabited

by Christians and today’s Europe certainly is not. But this observation would not refute but rather incite the likes of Breivik. In order to demonstrate the fallacy of the Christian Europe discourse,

one needs to counter the historical claims of Islamophobes. Europe has not been only Christian but also emphatically Jewish and Muslim for more than

a thousand years. Even the siege of Vienna in 1683 was not the religious clash that Breivik thought it was. These malicious myths deserve to be taken apart separately.

Muslims ruled parts of Spain and Portugal for almost eight centuries, from 711 until 1492, giving rise to a dazzling Judeo-Christo-Islamic culture in the Iberian Peninsula. Completion of the *Reconquista* in 1492 and the Inquisition that accompanied it wiped out Muslims, Jews, and heterodox Christians, rendering the peninsula completely Catholic by 1500.<sup>9</sup> Thanks to a number of works such as Maria Rosa Menocal’s *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*, the Iberian story is better known than many other examples of Muslim heritage in Europe. The Grand Mosque of Cordoba (converted to a Church) and the Alhambra complex in Granada are two of the better-known architectural landmarks of the Muslim era that have not been demolished. From Ibn Rushd (Averroes) to Ibn Bace (Avempace), from Maimonides (Ibn Meymun) to Ibn



Photo: SETA, Ali Ünal

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Tufayl and Judah Halevi, a stellar array of Muslim and Jewish philosophers flourished in Islamic Spain.<sup>10</sup> Today, new Muslims of Iberia and Latin America are celebrating the Islamic heritage of Spain and Portugal as an antecedent of their existence as Latin Muslims.

Much less known is the Islamic heritage of Sicily, which had a Muslim kingdom from the conquest of Mazara in 827 until 1091. Muslim dynasts following Islamic law provided sufficient guarantees for the island's non-Muslims, so that Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and Orthodox Greeks lived side by side, a history of coexistence manifest in Sicilian tombstones in four alphabets associated with the four main religions: Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Muslims were not a tiny elite minority either. Thirteenth-century Muslim geographer Yaqut claimed that, "most of [Sicily's] population became Muslim,"<sup>11</sup>

and many places in present-day Sicily have names derived from Arabic.

In Palermo, Muslim traveler Ibn Jubair said, "there are so many mosques that they are impossible to count," whereas Ibn Hawqal, who visited Sicily in 973, claimed that there were three hundred mosques in Palermo alone.<sup>12</sup> Where are those three hundred mosques of Palermo today? "The Norman conquest of Sicily had a devastating effect on the Muslim population of Sicily in the late eleventh century," and "[t]he Greek, who formed a substantial population in the northern and eastern parts of the island...followed a similar course."<sup>13</sup> In 1224, Frederick II deported remaining Sicilian Muslims to Lucera, a "Muslim colony" he created in the Italian peninsula. This internment colony proved to be the penultimate step before the final eradication of Muslim presence in Italy. "[N]ot long

after Frederick's death, most of its [Lucera's] people were massacred. A few thousand, mainly women, were forcibly converted."<sup>14</sup> With the eradication of Muslims, Jews, and Greek Orthodox, the island became fully Catholic, foreshadowing the catastrophe that would befall Spain two centuries later.

Moving from Italy to France, perhaps *the* quintessential "Western" country, one encounters diverse religious groups, including Cathars, Waldensi-

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ans, Muslims, Jews, and Huguenots, and a history of their eradication. Jews were expelled from France at least four times, in 1010, 1182, 1306, and finally in 1394. Since it was "illegal" to be Jewish in France, when *conversos*, Jewish converts to Christianity, were expelled from Spain, those who immigrated to France had to live as Catholics in public, because "nowhere in the region was Judaism officially tolerated before the 1610s."<sup>15</sup> Crusades against Muslims were also an excuse for attacks against Jews as internal enemies. There were "internal Crusades" against heretics such as the Albigensian Crusade in Languedoc undertaken at the instigation of Pope Innocent against the Cathars, which lasted for twenty years. By the fourteenth century, the Cathar religion and people were completely annihilated. Waldensians, also known as the poor

of Lyons, met a similar fate, while the persecution of Protestant Huguenots is a well-known episode of French history.

The Muslim presence in France to present-day has a thousand year history. Muslims invaded France and clashed with Charles Martel's armies between Poitiers and Tours in 732, in what Edward Gibbon called "an encounter which would change the history of the world." Less known is the fact that a sizable Muslim population settled in

Fraxinetum in southeast France from 889 onwards, resulting in "Arab/Muslim control of the Alpine passes which connect Italy with the remainder of Western

Europe for a number of decades in tenth century."<sup>16</sup> "[The] discovery of *mihhrabs* in the walls of some churches in southern France, notably in Narbonne," suggests that "some present-day churches and cathedrals in the Department of the Var and the Rhone Valley may have originally been built as mosques and later converted."<sup>17</sup> Archeological, linguistic, economic, and ethnographic evidence points to Muslim settlements in the Alpine regions of France and Italy. Christian princes launched a major attack on Fraxinetum sometime between 975 and 983, and destroyed this Muslim colony that existed for a century.<sup>18</sup>

Europe was not home to Christians only, as the foregoing vignettes demonstrate, but nor were Christians and non-Christians necessarily allied against each other. A hard test for this claim is Breivik's favorite "Christian victory"

over “Muslims”: The failed siege of Vienna in 1683 by the “Turks, the enemies of the Church,” since this episode is a world-historical event that changed the fortunes of European Muslims decisively for the worse by beginning the retreat of the Ottomans from Hungary all the way into Asia Minor. One would think this episode could be easily characterized as a clash between Muslims and Christians, but in fact it cannot.

Timothy Snyder, renowned Yale historian of Eastern Europe, opened a major dent on the simplistic description of the Siege of Vienna as the defense of Christendom against Muslims by pointing out that Jan Sobieski’s Polish forces, which saved Vienna from the Ottomans, included a very large contingent of Muslim Tatars, who were crucial to the allegedly “Christian” victory. Moreover, “the very tactics of the Polish cavalry, regarded as the best in Europe at the time, were developed in contact with, and indeed copied from, the Tatars.”<sup>19</sup> Snyder’s comment reminds us yet another relatively unknown but significant autochthonous Muslim population that inhabited “Europe” for centuries: Known as the Lithuanian Tatars, these Muslims lived, and few of their surviving descendants still live, in present-day Poland and Lithuania, but one can find a Lithuanian Tatar mosque even in Brooklyn, New York, dating back to 1907.<sup>20</sup> Back to Vienna 1683: It now appears that thousands of fierce Mus-

lim warriors and their Polish imitators saved Christendom from the Islamic onslaught.

What about the “other” side? Was the Ottoman siege of Vienna a campaign inspired primarily by Islam and waged solely by Muslims? The answer to both of these questions is a definitive “no.” The political reason for the Ottoman campaign was to support a Hungarian rebellion against Austrian oppression, and the religious reason was to support Protestantism in Hungary against the Catholic onslaught of the Habsburgs. Imre Thököly, a Hungarian Protestant statesman, born and raised in present-day Slovakia, or “Upper Hungary,” called on his allies, the Ottomans, to

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organize a campaign against the Habsburgs, which culminated in the siege of Vienna. How would Breivik, the rabid Islamophobe and Norwegian Christian terrorist, receive the news that the Ottoman armies were trying to secure the religious freedom of Protestants against Catholics? How would the conservative European and American historians react to such a revisionist and “factual” re-reading of the Siege of Vienna?

Imre Thököly can be described as the Hungarian William Wallace. After his

father was killed in a rebellion against the Catholic Habsburgs, Thököly fled to Ottoman Transylvania to meet with independence minded Hungarian nobleman fleeing Habsburg persecution. Under his leadership, they rebelled against the Habsburgs in 1678, forcing the Habsburg emperor Leopold to restore Hungarian liberties in the Treaty of Sopron (1681), and recognize Thököly as the sovereign of Upper Hungary. Hostilities soon resumed and the definitive

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war over the independence of Hungary and the fate of Protestantism in Central-Eastern Europe began, when Thököly’s call for help was answered by the Ottomans and the Ottoman vassal states of Transylvania, Moldavia, Wallachia, and the Crimean Khanate, whose armies appeared before Vienna in 1683. It appears that a coterie of Muslims, Protestants, Orthodox, and independence minded Hungarians, laid siege to Vienna, which was rescued by the Polish king with the indispensable aid of Muslim Tatar warriors. This is hardly the picture of a clash between Islam and Christendom.

Thököly died in exile in Ottoman Anatolia, in Izmit (ancient Nicomedia), where I was born. I was born in Izmit, Turkey, but none of my great-grandparents were. All of my ancestors arrived in Turkey following the expulsion

of Muslims from Greece in 1924, in a “population exchange,” which witnessed 400,000 Muslims, more than a tenth of Greek citizenry, expelled from Greece to Turkey, and more than a million Christians expelled from Turkey to Greece. If Europe is a geographic and not a religious designation, then I count as a full-blooded European on account of all of my grandparents. Known as the *muhacirs*, these Muslims left behind ghost towns. Drama, the city of my maternal

grandparents, was once 80% Muslim. Around 1900, Thessalonica, the city of my paternal grandparents, was 40% Jewish and 35% Muslim, and

a significant number among the latter were *both*, that is, ethnically Jewish and nominally Muslim community of the *Dönme*, the descendents of Jews who, following their messiah Rabbi Shabbatai Tzevi, converted to Islam in 1666.

I visited Thessalonica in April 2011, 87 years after the expulsion of Muslims from Greece, as the first person in my extended family of several hundred people to go back to what is now Greek Macedonia. Mark Mazower’s brilliant book on the city is called *City of Ghosts* for a reason, because the city’s non-Christian communities are virtually non-existent today; that, I already knew. What I did not know but feared nonetheless was the fate of Islamic and Jewish heritage of the city.

Thessalonica was an Ottoman city for almost five hundred years (1430-1912). Muslims and Jews together constituted

around three quarters of its population. It was the intellectual center of the Empire: The Ottoman constitution was declared there in 1908, and Ottomanism, Ottoman socialism, and Turkish nationalism, along with the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, were born in this city. Having the largest Jewish population in southeastern Europe, it was known as the “Jerusalem of the Balkans.” Against this background, it was shocking not to find a single mosque in the city of my forefathers. Why is there such a persistent intolerance of Islamic religious architecture in Europe, I thought, thinking of mosques and *minarets*, thousands of which had been destroyed in the past and those that are being prevented from being built at present? Only two years ago Swiss voters were mobilized in a referendum *to amend their constitution* in order to prevent minarets from being built in Switzerland.<sup>21</sup> Neither did I see a synagogue in the city center, but I was informed that there are a couple tucked away somewhere.

The square where the Ottoman constitution was declared in 1908 and where Jews were gathered en route to Auschwitz, was being used as a parking lot. When Thessalonica was declared the “European Capital of Culture” in 1997, a small plaque was placed, commemorating the deportation of the Jews “by the Nazis.” I roamed around an intersection for half an hour to find the remains of an Islamic foundation, *Alacalı İmaret*, be-

cause there were no signs pointing at it. I finally found it locked up and covered in graffiti. A true foreigner, the proverbial “Martian,” visiting Thessalonica in 2011 would have no clue that this was an overwhelmingly Judeo-Islamic city in 1911. Ethnic cleansing is a sad

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phenomenon but the total destruction of architectural heritage adds much insult to injury.<sup>22</sup>

An entirely Christian Europe has been the aspiration of some political and religious ideologues for centuries but “factually” it was a historical aberration. Europe was religiously diverse until recently, with vibrant Jewish and Muslim communities. A well-nigh perfectly homogenous religious demography was achieved by 1945, after the Holocaust, a continent almost entirely “free” of Jews and Muslims, the culmination of centuries-long collaborative work of many states and peoples. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these European efforts at “cleansing” were epitomized in Auschwitz and Srebrenica. Sadly, Auschwitz and Srebrenica are factual proofs, if still needed, of Europe’s Jewish and Muslim history and heritage, because one cannot mass murder a people who do not exist.

It is misleading to think of postwar Europe only as one of religious diver-

sification and expanding tolerance: As late as in 1987 Muslims of Bulgaria were forced to take up Slavic Christian names. This led to the flight of 300,000 Muslims to Turkey in three days, once Bulgarian-Turkish border was opened, a

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spectacle that rivaled the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 1992 Slobodan Milosevic launched his genocidal campaign against Bosnian Muslims, only three hundred miles away from Vienna. The homeland of Muslims of Greece, bordering Bulgaria, was a military zone that outsiders could not visit without permission, "a state of exception" that Agamben would appreciate. Not for the first or the last time, Jews and Muslims were made into *homo sacer* in a deliberate pursuit of a Christian Europe.<sup>23</sup>

Back to Vienna 2001: The study abroad program on "Western civilization," with trips to Budapest and Prague, was a nice rebuttal of the monk's claim of a Christian-only European *us* against the non-Christian *them*. At that time, visiting Café Central, where Trotsky and Freud, Lenin and Herzl, none of them even nominally Christian but unabashedly European, were among the regulars, was more important to me than a failed siege my purported ances-

tors carried out centuries ago to capture this city. With Freud's house in Bergstrasse 19, Kafka's grave in Prague, the Dohany street synagogue and the Gul Baba tomb in the "mosque street" of Budapest, it seemed that non-Christian people existed in Europe for a while and contributed to the European civilization. Although one might forgive what happened in the end, one must not forget that Muslim peoples once flourished from Spain to Lithuania and from Hungary to Sicily, and that "factually" Europe was not only Christian but also Muslim in the past, as it is today.

## Endnotes

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