

Is there a world history ?

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A popular legend in medieval Europe told of a great king living in distant eastern lands even beyond Persia and Armenia, who was powerful, benevolent, and Christian. Believed to be a descendant of the three magi, it was hoped that he could aid in the holy war against the infidels. His name was Prester John. References to Prester John apparently appear first in the chronicles of the German bishop Otto von Freising from the twelfth century, the writings of Alberic de Trois-Fontaine in the thirteenth century, and of course, the memoirs of Marco Polo, who sought the king out in the course of his famous journey to Yuen China. Historians believe the legend was circulated first in relation to a battle in Qatwan, Persia, in 1147, where the Mongol forces of the Karakitai empire in Central Asia defeated those of the Seljuq Sultan Sanjar. In the early 1200's, reports also circulated in Rome about the defeat of muslims by the forces of a certain King David of India, who was said to be a grandson of Prester John. This King David appears to have been none other than the great Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan, whose personage was woven into the legend of Prester John through the combined effect of rumors based on actual Nestorians present at the Mongol courts, the lack of reliable information, and wishful thinking on the part of crusaders. Strange as it may seem to modern sensibilities, this little legend has perhaps something still to suggest about the complexity of the interaction between the East and West that has, after all, been characteristic of the many different stages of human development in the Eurasian continent, perhaps going back to the Trojan war and beyond, as they say, into the mists of time.

The American historian W. H. McNeill wrote in the 60's his acclaimed work 'The Rise of the West' with the memorable subtitle 'A history of the human community'. The obvious intention was to suggest that there is such a notion and even more, that isolated narratives are doomed to give an incomplete and even distorted understanding of the long and broad stream of events determining the destiny even of a small island off the western coast of Europe. Much attention is paid in that book to peoples with less of a conventional impact on the written record, e.g., nomadic peoples such as Mongols and the early Turks, and the great empires they constructed across the central expanses running through the Oxus and the Volga and the Tigris that ended up bridging the insular cultures hemmed in by traditions along the coastal areas of the continent. Through a mixture of brutal warfare and the opening of numerous trade routes, they carried the concentric waves of oriental influence to the remote regions of the west, brought to an end the first period of Islamic hegemony in the middle-east, overran Sung China, and set the regions lying to the west of the Urals on the trajectory towards an integrated civilization. These events were perhaps the latest prior to the twentieth century of mixing on a grand scale that led to a true closure of the Eurasian ecumene, whereby no small part of the land mass could be entirely unaware of any other.

So what then is a global culture? Is it the spread of higher education, enlightenment ideals, conservationism, and egalitarian principles? Probably, and much more. Obviously, I have no intention of answering any such question within the scope of a short note. The ideologues of the third world tell us that the soulless West is incapable of looking beyond its imperialist dogmas dressed in the paternalistic hyperbole of freedom, while those of Euro-America speak of democracy and human rights, and the sanctity of the individual, none of which can be found in durable form outside the western tradition. They are both right, of course. Perhaps a small suspicion I am willing to share is that the answers will not be clean. A united Europe followed by a united world that marches in step with the irresistible force of reason, a world where the main differences in ideas and values are ironed out before people can live together, is an antiseptic fantasy, I believe, as ripe for corruption as the more self-serving versions of communism and totalitarianism.

A few years ago, I traveled with my family in the course of half a year from France to Italy to Greece to Japan to Korea, imposing upon the gracious hospitality of several different academic institutions where, in departments of mathematics, dogmatic rationalists, eccentric muslims, and semi-autistic buddhists appear able to speak to each other for hours on end and year after year

on topics that would strike any person on the street as gibberish. During occasional forays into tourism, I enjoyed discussing with my young son the complex traditions emerging from the images in the museums. Walking through the Roman forum we discussed the brutality of the Caesars in the forests and marshes of Europe and in the deserts of Greece and the Middle East. And then how the contiguous political unit they created made possible the eventual dissemination of Christianity and the ideal of a universal religion that would bring with it classless, race-less compassion. And then how compassionate Christians could persecute and be persecuted, kill and be killed. We wondered together why the people of Moses and the people of Saladin still fight in Judea, when they are all children of Abraham. In Paris we danced with the Parisiennes on Bastille day and marveled at the jail cells, now turned into museums, where many had awaited their day on the guillotine. We sang together Heine's eulogy of Napoleon, and smiled at the Coronation hanging in the Louvre.

I remember how we stood at the Kyoto University bookstore for a while in front of a poster for an exhibit in Hyogo prefecture that we never got to see. It showed in the background a bust of Alexander next to a stone figure of a temple guardian from Sanjusangendo. 'East-West interaction in art, from Alexander to Modernity,' the poster said. Indeed, Alexander had stormed through half the continent on his remarkable wars of conquest only to find himself as a Persian king at odds with his Macedonian generals. He had left Hellenism in North-West India in the wake of his battles, the effects of which were carried with Buddhism to China, Korea, and Japan. Indeed many of the warrior gods in Kyoto are mysterious transforms of Laocöon and Hercules.

Should Turkey join the European Union, and under what conditions? As a scholar, I find that question curiously academic and devoid of authentic emotion. Perhaps comparable in flavor and scope to the question of whether or not the French revolution was good thing. Eventually, the decision will be made by the businessmen (and the businessman in each of us) who serve perhaps only Braudel's 'longue durée', and that is just as well.

I walked with my son along the beautiful philosopher's path in Kyoto, named after the one in Heidelberg because of Kitaro Nishida, a professor at Kyoto University. His was apparently one of the early attempts to bring the methods of western metaphysics to the analysis of Zen Buddhism, just around the time when Japan was tightening its imperial grasp around Asia and annexing Korea. It was autumn then. The pristine waters of the canal were disturbed only by the red and yellow maple leaves floating across the shimmering reflections of the clouds in the sky.