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A Crisis of the Middle Ages?
Deconstructing and Constructing European Identities in a Globalised World
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There can be no doubt that the historian's activity is not going to cease any time soon, for every new human generation is looking for its origins and its place in an ever-changing world. In Europe, historians are faced with two parallel developments, both of which seem unstoppable, despite some delaying factors: that is Europeanization and globalisation. While it may be premature to predict an end of national history, our conception of history is bound to change dramatically, and this change will affect our understanding of the Middle Ages. It is no exaggeration to speak of a crisis of the Middle Ages in our historical consciousness, to the same extent than some scholars have referred to a crisis of our modernity in an age of "multiple modernities".

In this context, I should like to distinguish between three ways of telling the history of the Middle Ages. There is, first, the history of medieval Europe as a specific and clearly identifiable entity. Secondly, there is the history of Europe as a diverse body during the Middle Ages; and third there is the history of a millennium or so in which different worlds co-existed, including one that linked Europe to Asia and to North Africa. In the first case, Europe is akin to Latin civilisation, the areas under the influence of the Roman-Catholic Church, the Occident or the West. Although these forms of identification have attracted due criticism on part of some historians, they are still the dominant paradigms of medieval history.

In a recent survey, a German historian (Egon Boshof) could still refer without caveat to the uniform culture of the Latin West, which he saw as built on a consensus about fundamental Christian values, while another colleague (Verena Postel) drew a line between the so-called origins of Europe and the present, and emphasised the abiding differences between Europe and the East: 'Europe', she wrote, 'that was the medieval world, as opposed to Byzantium and the Islamic world'. Yet attempts such as these to ascribe an unchanging

identity to Europe, which can be traced down to the Middle Ages, are hardly original. Europe has many fathers, it would seem, as it was deemed in some quarters to have been created by the Franks and, more specifically, Charlemagne and the dynasty that bears his name, while by contrast a British historian (Robert Bartlett) has dated the 'Making of Europe' back to the Crusades and the expansion of Latin Christianity during the Central Middle Ages. The thesis of the birth of Europe out of the Middle Ages has, however, been advanced with particular emphasis by none other than the French historian Jacques Le Goff, probably the world's most distinguished medievalist, who sees the Middle Ages as the most significant legacy of the past for today's and tomorrow's Europe. It is true, as Le Goff concedes, that Europe started as a figure of Greek mythology. Yet, despite her classical origins, Europe was shaped after the end of the Roman Empire, which was nothing more than a historical aberration and ultimately belonged to the history of the Mediterranean, according to Le Goff. The Romans were, however, responsible for the division between the Latin West and the Greek East, which would eventually gain such significance in Europe's history. This development would be reinforced by Christianity, which Le Goff sees as the most important religious and cultural innovation since the fourth century. The formation of a Latin and a Greek Christianity created a lasting divide between two cultures, a divide that would become entrenched following the creation of political borders. While the Baltic peoples, the Poles, the Czechs, the Slovaks, the Hungarians and the Slovenes were all included into Western Christianity, whose border ran from Scandinavia to Croatia, Russia and Greece were separated from her. Whereas the Greek Church ultimately escaped the domination of the Roman papacy, Latin Christianity was separated from Byzantium and the Orthodox world. This led, according to Le Goff, to the formation of the lavish Byzantine culture, the heiress of the classical Roman world, and the world of Rus, on the one hand, and the West, on the other. The latter was divided into a multitude of realms; it stood under barbarian influence; and it lacked the unifying power of a centre as the dominium over it was disputed between the pope and the emperor. Yet, as unlikely as it seems, it would experience an unprecedented economic, political and cultural take-off and expand beyond its boundaries. These developments and, hence, Latin Christianity were, again according to Le Goff, the defining moment of medieval Europe. Europe took shape through Christianity and the multiple realms into which her body was divided. This unity in diversity thus prefigured the modern "Europe of the fatherlands".

This view of the Middle Ages did not simply spring from Jacques Le Goff's Jovian brow; indeed he merely expounded upon, and underlined, a perspective that had a long

history of its own and had understandably from the very beginning attracted the critical attention of both the historians of Eastern Europe and the historians of Byzantium. These scholars stressed the shared cultural and religious traditions of Eastern and Western Europe and they even worked out a certain degree of overlap between the political structures of both parts of Europe. In a similar vein, it is easy to show that Le Goff has not thought of the place of Islam in European history in the Middle Ages. What he has to say about this topic is either contradictory or superficial. This is also true of his appreciation of the role of the Jews in medieval Europe. It is therefore not too surprising that some scholars have recently opposed any attempt to equate Europe with a form of Christianity, let alone Christianity itself, and have suggested that European history be distinguished from the history of the West.

If a critical tradition can be identified within twentieth-century historiography with regards to the equation of Europe and the West, it is also worth mentioning the role played in this context by a range of smaller disciplines that have historically rejected the exclusive status conferred to Latin sources by mainstream medievalists. Yet it is difficult to overestimate the role played by the European unification process in our reassessment of the medieval past, especially in the years following 1989/1991. While Eastern European states have one after another been joining the European Union, the question of the place of Muslim Turkey in Europe has prompted a heated discussion about Europe's borders and identity. In this context, historians have not tried to draw lessons from the past and to tell politicians what to do in the changed circumstances, but they have rather attempted to reassess history in the light of these new political developments. Whoever has tried to take into account the contribution to European history of different religious groups, such as the Orthodox Christians in the East, the scattered Jewish communities and, last but certainly not least, the Muslims in Spain, Sicily, Southern Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary and eventually also the rest of the Balkan Peninsula; whoever in other words did not confine their interest simply to the Latin West, has had therefore to abandon the illusion of European uniformity. The formula of the unity in diversity of Europe appears as such – a mere formula, that is – once historians have eschewed the idea of a Christian foundation of Europe, and have acknowledged the significant place and influence of that which has long been deemed alien to Europe in her history.

The historiographical and political requirement to think of Europe not as the West, but rather as a geographical entity inhabited by peoples with different cultures, entails the

renunciation of any quest for identity on the part of historians. As the French sociologist Edgar Morin put it some twenty-five years ago, thinking about Europe presupposes the ability to acknowledge her inherent complexity. Europe, therefore, is characterised by major differences, and, while those co-exist in a relative small place, they cannot be ignored. Conversely, Europe unites huge contrasts. Morin suggested that scholars abandon the idea of a unified and clearly defined Europe and look not so much for key-concepts, but focus instead on the dialectic of contrasting ideas that is characteristic of European culture. This "dialogical principle", as Morin called it, should be at the core of the historians' approach to European history. They should, in other words, aim to grasp and understand the productive process by which European cultures were able to accommodate their differences as well as the opposition, competition and complementarity between them. This European non-identity was also the starting point of the British historian Norman Davies's monumental survey of the history of the continent of 1996 – a work to date unmatched in its approach. Difference, as Davies put it, is constitutive of the relationship between all European states – in East and West. While Europe was an idea of the Enlightenment and has never been achieved since, her most distinctive character remains diversity.

Contrary to other parts of the world, Europe has never had a unifying myth of origins, nor does she share a vision of her purpose. However, since her unification is, despite the appearances, more advanced now than at any time in her history, European citizens are entitled to ask for new perspectives on her history. Historians who are, for the reasons that I have already mentioned, critical of any approach to European history that privileges a certain idea, or a certain narrative, will find it difficult to respond to this challenge. Their contribution has to be comparative. For only comparative history enables historians to take into account the role of the different cultures and countries in European history, and not to dismiss original contributions on the ground that they were insignificant in comparison to others that have been deemed more important. By comparing, historians are also seeing diverse cultures in relation to each other. They are, thus, overcoming their specific differences without denying their existence. A comparative history of Europe is bound to discover "the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous" (in the words of Ernst Bloch), or the similarity of diversity.

This history does not have any message to send, however, and it is doubtful whether such a situation can be sustained. Yet historians should bear in mind that any European

history with a clear message is only one among many possible histories. More to the point, the first and foremost purpose of any history of Europe should be to prompt a debate with other histories of this kind. It is with this prerequisite in mind that I suggested, in a recent monograph, that we shift the focus from a Christian to a monotheistic Middle Ages.

From the perspective of the history of religion, the Middle Ages appear as a very specific period. In the immediately preceding classical period, religion was characterised by polytheism. The confines of the classical pantheon were all but precisely defined. While the authorities expected the citizens to fulfil their religious duties, they never interfered with their beliefs. Accordingly, hardly any written record of classical *religio* has survived, let alone any theological treatise establishing a dogma. The Roman pantheon was open to new divinities, which entered a loose association with the Capitoline Triad around Jupiter. While the fate of their state depended on the cult of the gods, the Romans were not particularly interested in imposing their divinities and rites on conquered peoples. On the borders of the empire, Rome's soldiers and public servants met barbarians who too worshipped a multitude of different gods. North of the Alps, they encountered the Celts and the Germans.

These polytheistic religions were successful in integrating vast populations. For they were able to unite scattered local communities with their own rituals within bigger entities, while the local gods were at the same time absorbed into regional or supra-regional pantheons. The last attempt to unify a multi-ethnic realm in Europe by integrating diverse deities into one pantheon was made by Prince Vladimir of Kiev. When he realised that it had failed for want of acceptation by the elite, he changed policy and adopted Christianity in 988. Yet the Christianisation of the Rus entailed more than the renunciation of the worship of many gods; it also implied the acceptance by individuals of religious norms that were much more binding than any norm in the theologically neutral context of polytheism.

The Middle Ages therefore marks the end of ancient polytheism and the beginning of the monotheistic period of European history. If ever there was a defining moment for Europe in the Middle Ages, this was it. Yet Europe was not just shaped by one monotheistic religion, but by three of them. While Judaism and Christianity had expanded throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, Islam entered the stage in the seventh and eight centuries. The first monotheists to settle in Europe were the Jews. The presence of a Jewish community in Rome is attested before the birth of Christ. Whether the destruction of the Second Temple by the

future emperor Titus prompted a wave of Jewish emigration from the Near East into other provinces of the Roman Empire has been disputed. Spain can be considered the first centre of Jewish religion and culture in Europe and was followed in the third century by Southern France. In the early Middle Ages, large-scale Jewish migration took place as a consequence of the Muslim conquests of Palestine and Spain according to a recurring pattern. Yet Jewish settlements were by no means uniformly spread. Without a state of their own, Jews lived as minorities among Christians or Muslims.

The Christianisation of Europe can be traced down to the missions of the Apostle Paul to the Macedonian cities of Philippi and Thessaloniki and the Greek city of Corinth. From the South, Christianity expanded westwards, mostly through the conversion of polytheistic populations. This movement came to a close with the conversion of Lithuania in 1386, but the advance of Christianity had already stalled during the thirteenth century along its eastern borders, in Lapponia, Cumania and on the banks of the river Volga, following the invasions of the Mongols, a religiously multifarious or even indifferent people. This extended timeframe as well as the failures that accompanied this process hint at a strong resistance paired with an inconsistent support on part of the Christian bishops and missionaries.

When the Muslims first touched Europe, they hardly encountered any polytheistic population, but only Christians and Jews. Before they crossed the Strait of Gibraltar from North Africa in 711, they had already conquered Damascus, Jerusalem, Antioch and Egypt, starting from the Arabian Peninsula, yet they had failed to take Constantinople. In Western Europe, the Arabs and Berbers were able to destroy, in a wink so to speak, the Christian realm of the Visigoths and occupy nearly the whole of the Iberian Peninsula up to the Pyrenees (only a little later, they also conquered Sicily). The Asturias, however, resisted the Muslim conquest. From there, a movement of re-conquest of the lost territories would eventually start. The Reconquista was to last for centuries. The military victory of 1212 at Las Navas de Tolosa was, however, a turning point, for Muslim Spain would soon be confined to the Kingdom of Granada. At more or less the same time, the position of the Saracens in Sicily was weakened by the Normans, and ultimately they would be expelled or forced to convert by the Emperor Frederick II and Charles II of Anjou. During the late Middle Ages, however, Muslims made significant gains in South East Europe. While the realm of the Volga Bulgarians, who had adopted Islam in the 10th century, had been destroyed by the Mongols, the Great Khan, whose empire encompassed a large part of the Christian Rus, converted to

Islam. Yet the advances of the Muslim Turks at the expense of Byzantium and in the Balkans were more significant. With the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman Empire replaced the Christian Byzantine Empire. Despite the capture of Granada in 1492, Islam was able to re-assert its position in Europe until the end of the Middle Ages and beyond, even if it did so in areas which were different from the ones that it dominated in the early Middle Ages.

The monotheistic creeds were thus an unending source of conflict, even where Christians, Jews and Muslims did not co-exist or meet each other. For orthodoxy had to be asserted within each of the three monotheistic religions. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that schisms and heresies from the outset played an important role within them. Yet it would be misleading to assume that religious differences necessarily led to conflicts, let alone to wars of extermination. It is striking that none of the three monotheistic religions disappeared from Europe; on the contrary they tolerated each other both legally and practically. The three monotheistic religions' fight against their own heretics and apostates is altogether a different story, as is their common hostility to so-called paganism, which disappeared as an official religion. Since their members all believed in one God, who had created Heaven and earth, they could hardly be indifferent to each other, as polytheists had been. They rather had to be able to talk to each other, in a manner that was controversial to be sure, but which was also characterised by mutual respect. While monotheism thus favoured Europe's cohesiveness, it also, at the same time, threatened it through religious hostility. It is this tension between the shared belief in one God and the never realised claim to uniformity which gave medieval Europe her specific character. Medievalists have started drawing some conclusions from this fact. The history of medieval Europe has, in particular, been interpreted as an unceasing process of cultural integration and disintegration fuelled by religious differences.

If medieval Europe did not have a uniform culture, it is tempting to look for an identity that was shaped by the contact and interplay of different cultures. It may be argued that her dynamism was the result of the unceasing conflicts fuelled by religious differences. However, a number of objections can and should be made to this thesis. For not only medieval Europe, but North Africa and the Near East too, were shaped by multiple monotheisms. Monotheistic religions were no less dominant there than in Europe, yet Islam and not Christianity was the most important of them. It was only on the banks of the Indus, further eastwards, that the attraction of monotheism was countered by Hinduism and Buddhism, neither of which was ever seriously threatened by Islam, let alone Christianity. It

would therefore be more appropriate to speak of a monotheistic world, stretching from the Atlantic to the Arabian Sea, rather than from a monotheistic Europe. Yet even medieval Europe was not uniformly monotheistic, as polytheists, dualists and probably also atheists co-existed with Jews, Christians and Muslims. Finally, it ought to be said that it would be simplistic to draw cultures from religion alone and ascribe them to specific geographical areas.

As has become apparent, the difficulty with a comprehensive history of medieval Europe is in large part due to the absence of clear-cut borders to the East. Even nowadays, the question whether Russia and Turkey belong to Europe or not — geographically, economically, politically and culturally — remains unresolved. Yet globalisation is precisely the process by which borders lose significance. Globalisation, rightly understood, does not merely designate a form of universal inter-connectedness of people and areas, but it also entails the loosening of geographical borders. Political and geographical boundaries necessarily lose significance when networks of communication and trade span over the entire globe. In the same way in which people in Germany and Europe are called to reassess their place in a changing world, historians should seize the opportunity to think of the Middle Ages in light of the globalisation process of our time.

A global history in the age of globalisation has to place the relationship and interaction of peoples, cultures and religions at its core. Its purpose cannot be simply to study and compare the history of civilisations, as has recently been done. On the contrary, one should be reluctant to identify large cultural entities in terms such as 'Western Christianity' or 'the Islamic World from Spain to Iran', as this kind of identification rests on an ontological assumption, while cultures are imagined identities. Neither should global history be confounded, with traditional 'world history'. Its ambition is not to write an all-encompassing history of the world, nor even to concentrate on large-scale studies, but it is rather to focus on cultural contacts and interactions at the local or regional level. Global history considers any historical context in which cultures met or in which, more to the point, autochthonous populations encountered foreigners. Yet it also requires situating such a context in the greater scheme of things. Global histories of the Middle Ages are thus not only interested in cross-cultural contacts, but also, and even more so, in transcultural networks.

A global history of the period between 500 and 1500 is still wanting, despite attempts to fill this gap. We may only just have an idea of Europe's, and Germany's, place in this history. The first significant development that we have to consider while contemplating the prospect of a global history of the Middle Ages is that it marks the final stage of the spreading of the human species over the world. While *homo sapiens* had slowly radiated to continental land masses and islands near their shores, it was not until the Middle Ages that the most remote islands were reached thank to the progress of the navigation technique. This process can be observed in the Pacific as well as the North Atlantic Oceans. Starting in 600, the Polynesians spread from West to East until they settled in New Zealand, the last of the world's big areas to be populated, around 1280, as evidenced by the radiocarbon dating of rat-gnawed seeds and the bones of the omnivorous Pacific rat. A thriving trading network is attested for South East Polynesia for the period 1000-1450, but this did not, for example, include Easter Island, which lies 2,000 kilometres away from the nearest other settlement. There, a group of perhaps 15,000 people at the most was able to survive in complete isolation between the first settlement of the island and its discovery of by the Europeans in 1772.

At more or less the same time as Polynesians settled on the Easter Island, Iceland and Greenland were settled by Celts and, above all, Norwegians, i.e. a Germanic people. Shortly after the turn of the first millennium, Europeans tried to settle in North America, but they were expelled by Amerindians. The Vikings were not, however, the first people to settle in Greenland. Indigenous Americans, the so-called Dorset people, had settled on the world's biggest island as early as 800 BC, and they developed a culture that would last for more than a thousand years. Whether the Vikings met the Dorset people remains open. Around 1400, it was their turn to abandon Greenland, from where they had traded with Norway and the rest of Europe for generations. They may have been driven out by the Inuit. Historians are keen to stress that with the encounter between the Vikings from the East and the Amerindians from the West world migrations had come full circle. Such a view ignores, however, the instable character of both the early settlements in Greenland and Newfoundland and the transcontinental contacts. While the dispersal of modern humans across the world terminated in the Middle Ages, it would be misleading to assimilate this development to a form of proto-globalisation, because for this to be the case it would surely have entailed the creation of a worldwide communication network.

The different worlds of the medieval millennium were separated from each other in more than one respect. Not even the communication networks within them are well known. Mobility in the Americas was ultimately hampered by the lack of pack and draft animals such as oxen, camels and horses, even though the techniques of the wheel and the chariot was known. The so-called Hopewell Tradition in the North East of the modern USA had developed a common network of trade routes, now known as the Hopewell Exchange System. The Mississippian Culture of the central and late Middle Ages shows many traits, such as the maize-based agriculture and the development of cities, which may have been inspired from Mesoamerica. The Incas of South America built a dense network of roads with a total length of 24,000 kilometres, but this was limited to administrative, military and diplomatic uses, while long-distance traders relied, as in the case of the Maya and the Aztecs, on a maritime exchange system.

We know even less about communication networks south of the Sahel zone. The extent to which the spread of the Bantu languages from Cameroon over millennia is a reliable indicator of human migrations across the area is disputed.

Large-scale communication networks can only be observed for the Middle Ages in those continents that understood themselves as part of the *oikoumene*, that is Asia, Europe and Africa. The Latin *mappae mundi* drew them as separated from each other by waters: the Mediterranean between Europe and Africa and the Don and the Nile between them and Asia. These waters never constituted insurmountable hurdles contrary to the Ocean, which seemed to enclose the three land masses and was seen to separate them from the inhospitable world or from a fourth continent inhabited by monsters. As a matter of fact, the smallest of the three oceans, the Indian Ocean, was the best known at the end of the Middle Ages. The Atlantic was, if at all, being crossed on a regular basis in the North East only, while the most active sea route of the Pacific Ocean, which is bigger than the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans taken together, ran on its Sino-Japanese fringe.

The three connected land masses of the Middle Ages were tied to each other through a network of East-West routes between China and Western Europe. While long-distance trade took place on land, the bulk of trade used the sea routes connecting the northern Antipodes through the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Coastal cities, which became important stations on these trade routes, connected the long-distance trade with the hinterland by water

and road. Alongside the goods and people, new ideas, technical innovations and works of art from abroad could be taken on board. While differences of religion and life-style were not able to prevent the quest for knowledge, the curiosity at the unknown and the pursuit of wealth, pleasure or profit, those could only be hampered by power and violence.

The region where the continents met, that is the Black Sea and the Levant, was the axis around which the medieval world revolved. Accordingly, whoever controlled the passages between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean – Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf in the East and the Nile and the Red Sea in the West – held a crucial strategic position. The Persians, Alexander the Great and the Romans had all successively understood this before 'in the early eight century the Muslims acquired a core position from where they were able to link the two major economic units of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean'. Until late into the eleventh century, the Muslims controlled all the important trade routes on land and on sea. Western traders played an increasingly important role when the Italian coastal cities of Amalfi, Venice, Genoa and Pisa pushed into the Eastern Mediterranean and established colonies as far afield as the shores of the Black Sea. The rise of the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century, an empire which would eventually stretch from China in the East to Europe and the Near East in the West, reinforced the position of the Italian merchants who were now able to participate in the Central Asian exchange system. After the mid-fourteenth century, however, access to the Far East was blocked for Western Europeans.

The boldest approach to the global history of the Middle Ages has been taken by the American sociologist and historian Janet Abu-Lughod on the basis of commercial history. As early as 1989, she argued that a world-system which had developed between 1250 and 1350 facilitated commercial and cultural exchange in an area reaching from North West Europe to China. She thus contested the common assumption that such a world-system had not existed before the era of discovery from the sixteenth century onwards. According to Abu-Lughod, a series of isolated regional economic system became linked between the mid-thirteenth and the mid-fourteenth centuries, and formed a chain of interlocked regions. We should, therefore, not think of merchants travelling all the way from the Atlantic to the China Sea, but rather imagine a series of hubs through which their goods transited. Abu-Lughod distinguished three cultures, the East Asian, the Arabic and the Western, and no less than eight economic subsystems. The European sub-system was structured around the Champagne Fairs, the Flemish cities of Bruges and Ghent and the maritime republics of Italy, primarily

Genoa and Venice. This sub-system became interlocked with the Mediterranean sub-system during the twelfth century. Germany only took a marginal position in this world-system. It was connected through Cologne, where Flemish ships docked, and through the Alpine passes, which were used more intensively from the fourteenth century onwards by Venetian merchants. Anyway, it would be misleading to conceive of a system connecting all people and areas – a claim which is generally associated with our current globalisation. The thirteenth-century world-system rather consisted of spots of long-distance trade in an ocean of regional and local trade. The exchange between these spots was relatively limited and the network that they formed was still very thin. The most striking point, according to Abu-Lughod, was, however, that this system was balanced between East and West, and that any of its parts might have become dominant. The medieval world-system could thus have led to an era of Chinese hegemony, which would have hampered the rise of Europe in the early modern period. It was precisely the "worldwide" connectivity of the first world-system that prevented it from lasting, and from influencing modernity. For the Black Death pandemic that caused its collapse in the mid-fourteenth century spread along the very routes that had established it in the first place.

Historians have only just begun to embark on a global history of the Middle Ages. Yet it has hopefully become apparent that this new history is changing the way we look at the past. Europe seems to have been at the margin of the *oikoumene*, leaning as it was against the Atlantic, which her navigators only tentatively explored, while looking out at the East, at an area, that is, controlled by either Muslim or Asian traders. Even the Mediterranean had lost the overall significance that it had had in the classical period. Nothing prefigured Europe's hegemony over the world, nor was the West's later domination set in stone.

However important a history of medieval globalisation, or a global history of the Middle Ages, may appear, we should not forget that this is only one of many possible 'histories' of the Middle Ages. We may now be about to experience the end of the globalisation hype; and to rediscover that, as beings of flesh and blood as well as people endowed with reason and feelings, we make the biggest difference in the environment in which we actually live. A renaissance of neighbourhoods would thus ask for a different kind of historiography. It seems therefore that there can be no end in sight, either for history or for historiography.