

## Strumenti

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**AD EST DELL'EUROPA**  
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**TRA ETÀ MODERNA E CONTEMPORANEA**

*a cura di Giuseppe Motta*



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Mustafa Soykut<sup>1</sup>

## **Two Cases of Heresy: The Christianity-Islam and Brahmanism-Buddhism Relationships in Particular Comparison to Turco-Ottoman History**

There have been endless debates from a philosophical and a theological point of view around the theme, whether Judaism, Christianity and Islam form what we call the so-called Judeo-Christian or Abrahamic tradition and whether these religions are basically interpretations of the one and the same thing. Recent studies in the field of imagology through Renaissance sources on the cultural, civilisational and political aspects of historical “image formations” have shed light on aspects of history hitherto remained taken for granted in the conflictual relations between the Ottomans and the Europeans. The images here in question are not one merely thinks of something or a person, rather the partially deliberate and partially culturally formed ideas and mental attitudes towards a set of ideas represented by a religion or a group of people. In this sense the relations between Hinduism and Buddhism present us with an equally strikingly important and similar historical and cultural set of mutual images, which have had a tremendously important role in the history of the Indian sub-continent and still go on influencing domestic and international politics in the region.

Part of the material in the present paper pertaining to the images between the Ottoman world and Renaissance Europe comes from the Apostolic Library of the Vatican and St. Mark's Library in Venice, which was founded in the later 15<sup>th</sup> century by a certain Cardinal Bessarion, a native of Trebisond in modern day Turkey, who converted to Catholicism after the Ecumenical Council of Ferrara-Florence, who gathered all the possible remaining Greek manuscripts in Ottoman conquered Anatolia, to save them from the “barbaric other” who were the “enemies of Christ” and the “wrath of God on earth”, namely the

Muslim Turks. The material pertaining to the images created between Hinduism and Buddhism comes from the classical scriptures and writings of modern Hindu reformists as well as a research that I undertook in the month of August among the Hindus, and Newari as well as Tibetan Buddhists in Kathmandu Valley in August 2003.

### 1. The Problematique

Europe defined itself along the lines of Christendom, especially beginning with the conquests of Spain and Sicily by the Arabs in the eighth and the ninth centuries. As a result of the rapid Ottoman conquests in Eastern Europe, from mid-fifteenth century onwards, when thinking of Islam, what was in the European mind were the Ottoman Turks. While the image of Islam as well as that of the “Turk” served to define “Europeanness” as opposed to the “other”, this image gradually started to change towards the end of the seventeenth century with Ottoman decline. From the late nineteenth century onwards, with the new ideas of orientalism of the eighteenth century and romanticism of the nineteenth century, the Arabs were once again identified with the “other” representing the anti-thesis of the European, and now even that of the Western civilisation in general<sup>2</sup>.

The reasons for Europe to identify itself along Christendom, has a set of theological, philosophical, political and civilisational origins. The genealogy of image creation about Islam in Europe had three elements. The first was the military one; namely, the conquests undertaken by the Arabs in the Middle East, North Africa, Spain and Sicily between the seventh and the ninth centuries, in the lands that were considered to be the natural territories of Christendom. Due to these conquests, with the shrinking of Christendom to Europe came the conquests of the Ottoman Turks in Eastern Europe, starting in the late fourteenth century. The second element was the theological problems arising with the arrival of Islam, the last religion of the Abrahamic Judeo-Christian line, which claimed to revise and replace Christianity as a universal religion. The third one was the general lack of political unity in Christendom - which was now Europe - that coincided with



the apex of Muslim Arab expansion as well as that of the Ottoman.

As to the theological issues, the relations between Christianity and Judaism have been problematic from the very beginning. It was the claim of Jesus to be the awaited Judaic Messiah that caused the refusal of the new religion by the orthodox Jews. The relations between Christianity and Islam have been even more problematic. For it was the claim of Islam to perfect the divine revelation and to have replaced Christianity as the message of the last prophet, that caused the antagonism between the two religions.

On the other hand, the political structure of Medieval Europe was far from united. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, Europe had defined itself along the lines of *universitas christiana*, in other words, that of Christendom, first against the barbarian pagans, and later on against the Muslim Arabs. The *two-headedness* of the Holy Roman Empire - namely, the separation of the temporal and the religious authority in the figures of the Emperor and the Pope - who did not always agree with each other - if not much of the time in conflict, added to the political fragmentation of Christian Europe, excluding the territories of the Byzantine Empire in Eastern Europe politically from Western Christendom. In fact, it was the Byzantine Empire itself, which had been often accused of heresy for not recognising the authority of the Roman Church, as well as of the so-called "caesaro-papism"; that is, the Byzantine emperors' indulgence into religious affairs, and subduing the position of Patriarch of Constantinople almost to that of a serf. In other words, while Western Christendom was ruled by a loose political congregation called the Holy Roman Empire and feudalism, the East, on the other hand, was characterised by a somewhat more unitary political structure.

There are a few important milestone events and dates in the image-creation process between the Islamic and the Western civilisations. The year 1071 marks the victory by the Seljukide Turks at the battle of Manzikert (Malazgirt) against the Eastern Romans and their subsequent retreat and decline in front of the newly arising Muslim power. One year after this, in 1072, the city of Palermo in Sicily was

re-conquered by the Normans from the Arabs, after Sicily had been an Arab Emirate for three hundred years. The second milestone is the year 1492 which marked the discovery of America by the Genoese Cristoforo Colombo under the auspices of Isabelle of Castille, and the same queen's expulsion of the Spanish Jews following the fall of Granada in Andalucia, which was the last bastion of Arab Muslim presence in the Iberian peninsula after eight hundred years of co-existence with the Christians. The later half of the fifteenth century marks not only the peak of the Renaissance in Italy and the apex of the humanist movement, but also the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and that of Trebisond in 1461, the last house of Byzantine royalty in Asia Minor. Thus, in a sense, the Muslim power represented by the Arabs in Europe for eight hundred years passed into the hands of Ottoman Turks gradually, the process being accomplished by the fall of Constantinople.

### 1.1. The Buddhism-Brahmanism and Christianity-Islam Axis

As the relations between Islam and Christianity have not always been peaceful, the relations between Hinduism and Buddhism have also not been an easy-going relation right from Buddhism's beginnings. Although there are occasionally references in the original Buddhist sutras and scriptures to Hindu deities and *upanishadic* concepts, these have been considered as part of the Buddhist *upāya*, a device or "skill-full means" to make a greater appeal to the larger Hindu society where Buddhism was considered not only as an independent religion but also as the predominant religion of India for centuries after the Buddha's *mahāparinirvāna*. Among the supporters of this view is the renowned T.W. Rhys Davids<sup>3</sup>. An example of this is the mentioning of *ātman* or the self in the *Mahāparinirvāna Sutra*, by a religion that embraced the doctrine of impermanence and the rejection of an unchanging soul<sup>4</sup>. The so-called *upanishadic* debt of Buddhism lead many modern Indian scholars to claim that Buddhism is indeed an offshoot of Hinduism and that many of the ideas and the main message in Buddhism was