

# Colm Gillis: The West Owes “an Immense Debt to Islam”

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Dr. Colm Gillis

**Boris Johnson’s recently-unearthed observation** that Islam kept Muslims centuries behind the West prompted a series of letters to The Guardian taking issue with this, claiming instead that the West owed an “immense debt to Islam.”

[The first and most indignant letter](#), representative of many, was from [Dr. Colm Gillis](#), an “independent scholar” who appears to have no background in Islamic studies:

*Johnson is painfully ignorant of the immense cultural, economic, and scientific contributions of Muslims (Islam kept Muslim world centuries behind the west, Johnson claimed, 16 July). Western civilisation owes an immense debt to Islam, whether in the form of algebra, the saving of ancient Greek heritage or the free-market economics of Ibn Khaldun.*

Let’s start with “algebra,” which always heads the list of “Muslim” contributions to civilization. The word “algebra” comes from the Arabic “al-jabr.” From that we are expected to believe that “algebra” was first developed by Muslim Arabs. The word “sugar” also comes from the Arabic, (“sukkar”), but this does not mean that Muslim Arabs discovered sugar. Algebra

was not invented by Arabs or Muslims, but in India, by Sanskrit mathematicians. Muslims then translated and commented on these Indian works. The word “al-jabr” was first used in the treatise *Book on Addition and Subtraction after the Method of the Indians*, written by the 9th-century Persian mathematician Muhammad ibn M?s? al-Khw?rizm?. In the very title of his book we find acknowledgement of the Indian origins of algebra – “After the Method of the Indians.” But this information continues to be ignored by those who still insist on claiming that algebra was invented by Muslims.

Many of those who like to claim “algebra” for the Muslims also insist that “Arabic numerals” were invented by Muslim Arabs, but here, too, it is the Indian mathematicians who came up with these numerals. They were transmitted from India to the West by the Arabs – hence their misnomer “Arabic numerals.”

Often cited as examples of the inventiveness of Muslims are paper and gunpowder. But both were invented by the Chinese and then brought to the West by Muslims, who are often credited with inventing what they merely transmitted.

What about Muslims’ “saving of ancient Greek heritage”? That’s a fantastic claim. Muslim rulers, in Baghdad, Toledo, and Cordoba, commissioned the translation of certain Greek works – not the entire “ancient Greek heritage.” Works of rhetoric, poetry, histories, and dramas were not translated into Arabic, since they were viewed as serving political ends which were potentially dangerous in the eyes of such rulers. Instead, philosophical and scientific works were almost the entire focus of translation into Arabic. The translations were done not by Muslims, but by Arabic-speaking Christians (including Nestorian, Melkite, and Jacobite monks in Palestine and, later in Baghdad, and by Catholics in Cordoba and Toledo), and Jews in Cordoba, Toledo, and Baghdad. Al-Mansur, the 2nd Abbasid caliph, was the most important Muslim ruler to commission these translations. The most significant works that were translated were those of Aristotle – but not even all of his

corpus. The word “saving” implies that these Greek works from classical antiquity would otherwise have disappeared. But that misstates the case. Translation did not “save” that heritage, but made these Greek texts more accessible, for once they had been translated from Greek into Arabic (sometimes being put first into Syriac, and then from Syriac into Arabic), they were then made accessible to a large Arabic-speaking, but not necessarily Muslim, population. They could then be translated yet again, by these Christian and Jewish translators, from the Arabic into Latin, and these Latin texts would then be transmitted to the West. There was no “debt to Islam” for “saving ancient Greek heritage.” The debt was to those Christian and Jewish translators for first producing Arabic translations of Greek philosophical and scientific works, and then to still other Christians and Jews who translated those Arabic texts into Latin, thus making them more accessible to scholars in the West.

As for the third claim, so casually tossed-off, about the “free-market economics of Ibn Khaldun,” there are a handful of articles online – by Muslims – that describe Ibn Khaldun as an economist who prefigured Adam Smith’s “free-market” economics. But there is nothing in ibn Khaldun about the “free market” or the Invisible Hand; he did point out the economic benefits of the “division of labor,” whereby an item is most efficiently and inexpensively manufactured when each worker concentrates on manufacturing only one part. Ibn Khaldun took this observation and applied it not only to what went on in rudimentary factories, but also among countries: hundreds of years before Ricardo, Ibn Khaldun noted that if one country had a comparative advantage in producing a particular good, it made sense for it to specialize in making that good and for other countries to buy it from them. Ibn Khaldun also made some remarks about how increasing taxes could lead in the end to less revenues for the government; some may see this as prefiguring supply-side economics and the Laffer curve. But he did not, unlike Adam Smith, provide a unified and coherent

economic theory; his were disjointed observations. But most significant was that they had no effect in the West, were not part of any “debt to Islam,” because these economic observations found in his *Muqaddimah* remained unknown in the Western world and could not have influenced Adam Smith, David Ricardo, or any other classical economists of the 18th and 19th centuries. There is no “debt to Islam” in the West for Ibn Khaldun’s economic writings because they became known only long after Western economists had elaborated their own free-market theories. They made no use of, and therefore had no debt to, Ibn Khaldun.

Colm Gillis continues his attempt to eviscerate Boris Johnson for daring to suggest, 12 years ago, that Islam is the cause of Muslim lands falling behind the West:

*Johnson is correct that many Muslim-majority nations are beset by social and political problems. Yet the same holds true for numerous Christian-majority nations such as Russia, Honduras, Haiti and South Africa. He also makes a “false equivalence” argument in comparing stable western democracies to war-ravaged countries like Bosnia, seemingly blaming Muslims there for being attacked. Curiously, Muslim extremists promote the same arguments as Johnson, albeit for different aims. Neither depiction is true nor helpful.*

Gillis is ignoring the fact that it is not “many” Muslim-majority nations are “beset by social and political problems,” but almost all Muslim-majority nations that have been, and are now, beset with such social and political problems. There are civil wars going on in Syria and Yemen, Islamic terrorists are active in Somalia, Nigeria, and Afghanistan, sectarian warfare is going on between Sunnis and Shi’a in Iraq and Yemen, the Wahhabis suppress Shia in Saudi Arabia, the Sunni ruler of Bahrain suppresses the Shia majority, in Libya a “national government” based in Tripoli is fighting a militia based in Benghazi, there is political intrigue, social unrest, and

infighting in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia. In Egypt, the military regime remains engaged in suppressing the Muslim Brotherhood; in Tunisia, the secularists led by Caid Beji Essebsi are in conflict with the Islamists of Rachid Gannouchi and the Ennahda party; in Algeria, Berbers, having been suppressed for years, have been demanding that the ruling Arab junta recognize the Berber language and culture. In Nigeria, both the Muslim Hausa in Boko Haram and Muslim Fulani herdsmen continue to burn down churches, kill Christian villagers, kidnap Christian girls.

In Turkey, the Kemalists have been outmaneuvered and crushed by Erdogan, while the Turkish army continues the war against Kurdish insurgents of the PKK that it has been waging since 1978. In Iran, the majority Shi'a continue to fight the Sunni Baluchi minority in the east.

Yet this author claims, in a bit of *tu-quoque*, that there are Christian-majority nations "such as Russia, Honduras, Haiti and South Africa" that also are "beset by social and political problems." But this handful of Christian-majority countries – four in all – can hardly compare with the dozens of Muslim countries where strife – sectarian, religious, ethnic – is the rule. Russia has no internal conflicts of peoples; there are people trying to undo, through electoral politics, the iron rule of Vladimir Putin, but there are no armed groups fighting each other. Honduras has the highest murder rate in the world, but that's the result of gangs fighting for territory and control of the drug trade and other criminal activities; it has nothing to do with the sectarian, ethnic, and religious strife found in Muslim lands. It's the criminals versus the rest of society that is caught, literally and figuratively, in the crossfire. Haiti is still suffering from the effects of the 2010 earthquake, but also from a decades-old deforestation problem, overpopulation, a lack of sanitation, natural disasters (of which the 2010 earthquake was only the most dramatic example), and food insecurity. These problems, again,

are not akin to what plagues Muslim lands, which are conflicts among its groups. Haitians are plagued by environmental problems, some of them unavoidable (as earthquakes), while others are the result of bad stewardship of the land (as deforestation), and still others the consequence of poverty (as a lack of sanitation) and of overpopulation, for Haiti is unable either to sustain, or to contain, its current population.

*Another pathetic observation by the next British PM concerns the Ottoman empire. Johnson takes one oddity of the Turkish dawlah – the resistance to the printing press – and passes over achievements of the sultans such as religious tolerance and the architectural feats of Sinan. He claims this one act of backwardness negates the entire history of Islam, although resistance to technology is apparent even in British history, the luddites a classic case in point.*

The failure to introduce the printing press for Muslim use in the Ottoman Empire until 1727 was not an isolated “oddity” at all, but reflected a more general mistrust among Muslims, especially clerics, of innovation, or bid’a. Another example of this reluctance to innovate, in another domain, was the continued use by Ottoman armies of stone cannonballs, long after those made of iron had been in use everywhere else. Muslim clerics reasoned that if new ways of doing things, or thinking about things, were to be permitted, this could conceivably lead some Believers to question aspects of the faith.

Dr. Gillis then complains that Boris Johnson passed over the “achievement of the sultans such as religious tolerance.” The treatment of Christians, mainly Greeks and Armenians, was not what we in the West think of as “religious tolerance.” In the 19th and 20th centuries, a myth arose of “Ottoman tolerance.” This was akin to, and even perhaps prompted by, the myth of a tolerant “convivencia” (coexistence) in Islamic Spain that was

promoted by such writers as Washington Irving in *The Alhambra*, and by Chateaubriand in *Les Aventures du dernier Abencérage* here.