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Vasco da Gama, The Explorer: Motivations and Myths

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Abstract

The Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama (1460-1524), was the first European to sail from Portugal to India. The “da Gama epoch” refers to the era of European commercial and imperial expansion in Asia. The primary motivation for the 1498 voyage, however, was messianic, to ‘vanquish and subdue all Saracens (Muslims) and pagans and other enemies of Christ, to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to convert to Christianity,’ as declared in various Papal Bulls, together called “the Doctrine of Discovery.” The Church divided the world into Spanish and Portuguese zones, both to be part of the Papal Empire. Over time, the apocalyptic mission led to the Age of Discovery, followed by the Age of Colonialism/ Imperialism. Descriptions of the voyage, however, need to be tempered in light of several “myths” often associated with those accounts. Thus, the paper pursues two objectives: (1) discuss the messianic “Christianizing” motivation for the voyage, and (2) discuss the “myths” associated with the journey.

Introduction

The Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama (1460-1524), was the first European to travel by sea from Portugal to India. The term “da Gama epoch” is often used to describe the era of imperial expansion in Asia launched by “the outward-looking process by which Europeans sought to redefine the commercial and political

¹ The author is indebted to his colleague, Professor-Emeritus Nick Gier, University of Idaho, for arousing his curiosity on the Doctrine of Discovery literature. Also thanks to Prof. Dan Paracka for helpful comments and some editing; and to anonymous reviewers for their feedback.

networks of the early sixteenth century” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 368). In two voyages that spanned six years, Vasco da Gama would fight a running sea battle that would ultimately change the fate of three continents. The story has taken on mythical proportions in much of the literature. The Portuguese national epic poem, *The Lusíadas*, written in Homeric style by Luis Vaz de Camoes in 1572, celebrated his voyages. And among the numerous symbols of glory (including naming a crater on the moon), the most recent is the Vasco da Gama Bridge, linking Lisbon to Europe, inaugurated in 1998, in celebration of the 500th anniversary of the voyage. However, suggestions to celebrate the occasion in India and elsewhere were rebuffed.² Further, in an expedition to mark the 500th anniversary, a vessel from the da Gama armada, sunk in 1503 off the coast of Oman, was discovered in 1998 and excavated in 2013 (Lewis, 2016).

In September 1497, the young da Gama sailed from Portugal, circumnavigated Africa, crossed the Indian Ocean, and “discovered” the maritime route to the Indies and, thereby, obtained access to the fabled wealth of the East. It was the longest voyage known to history. The small ships were pushed beyond their limits, and their crews were racked by storms and devastated by disease. However, their greatest enemy was neither nature nor even the dread of venturing into unknown worlds: it was the “Islamic world.” The goal was to launch a “sweeping counter offensive against Islam and inaugurate a new era in which the faith and values of Europe would be exported across the earth” and “fighting the Infidel was the highest calling” (Cliff, 2012, p. 6).

With Crusader crosses emblazoned on their sails, the explorers arrived in the heart of the Islamic East at a time when, in the post-Islamic Spain world, the old hostilities between Christianity and Islam had risen to a new level of intensity. As an epic tale of adventure, greed, and messianic zeal, Vasco da Gama’s arrival in the East is seen as a turning point in the centuries-old struggle between Islam and Christianity. Vasco da Gama (and his archrival, Christopher Columbus) set sail with the clear purpose of launching a Crusade and spread Christianity; both were “obsessed with the idea of a Crusade against Islam” (Hobson, 2004, p. 136).

As we shall see, the “divine” sanction for these messianic explorations was grounded in Papal bulls, aimed at “universalizing” Christianity. More mundane goals for da Gama were to reach the Indies and seize control of its markets in spices, silks, and precious gems from Muslim traders (displacing the Muslims and Venetian middlemen) and to claim for Portugal all the territories they discovered and establish Portuguese hegemony over Oriental trade. Da Gama succeeded in his mission and drew a dividing line between the Muslim and Christian eras of history and thus began several-hundred years of European domination through sea power and commerce, and 450 years of colonialism in India.

² Suggestions to celebrate the 500th anniversary in India and elsewhere were rejected, however. In India, the idea was sucked into a whirlpool of controversy. Da Gama’s effigies were burnt, black flags were waved, and politicians angrily protested: “We can’t forget the Gama came to India with a sword in one hand and Bible in the other” (see Masih, 1998). Also, see “Crossfire: Claude Alvares and Sanjay Subrahmanyam debate on Vasco da Gama Quincentenary,” *India Today*, July 28, 1997.

In light of the foregoing, our purpose here is two-fold. First, this narrative will illuminate the foundational motivation for the da Gama epoch: several Papal Bulls, together, called the “Doctrine of Discovery.” While the essential cause was the pursuit of holy war against Islam, the eventual results were commercialism, colonization, and imperialism. What were those Papal declarations all about? Second, the paper will explain what some scholars have called the “myths” that surround the da Gama story. The argument is that da Gama is often “mythified” and “divinized,” and viewed as “emblematic of imperial aspirations, and, as such, an objective of reverence and opprobrium” (Russell-Wood, 1997, p.1). Such representations are said to be rather exaggerated. The paper will conclude with a brief contextualization of this history in reference to what seems to be an Islam-West “clash” environment presently.

The Doctrine of Discovery and the Christian Conquest

On June 18, 1452, a Papal Bull, *Dum Diversas*, 40 years before Columbus’ voyage and 46 years before da Gama’s mission, was issued by Pope Nicholas V and addressed to King Alfonso V of Portugal, declaring war against all non-Christians throughout the world, and sanctioning and promoting the conquest, colonization, and exploitation of non-Christian nations and their territories. Thus, “under various theological and legal doctrines formulated during and after the Crusades, non-Christians were considered enemies of the Catholic faith and, as such, less than human” (Newcomb, 1992, p. 18). Specifically, the Bull says:

We weighing all and singular the premises with due meditation, and noting that since we had formerly by other letters of ours granted among other things free and ample faculty to the aforesaid King Alfonso - to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens (Muslims) and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit. www.doctrineofdiscovery.org/dumdiversas.htm

Later, there were other Papal Bulls which further reinforced the basic mission - *Inter Caetera* (1456, by Pope Calixtus III; 1481, by Pope Sixtus IV; 1493, by Pope Alexander VI), and *Precise Denotionis* (1481). And there was *Romanus Pontifex* (1454) that specifically granted the same privileges to Portugal, as granted to Spain earlier.³ Some historians, to be noted, view these Bulls as extending the theological legacy of Pope Urban II’s Crusades to justify European colonization and expansionism, accommodating “both the marketplace and the yearnings of the Christian soul” (Bown, 2012, p. 75).

³ See www.en.m.wikidepedia.org for details. Also, see Haynes, 2003.

And the Crusade also included capturing Islam's second holiest site, Medina (where Prophet Mohammad is buried) and ransoming it for Jerusalem; this was also seen as the fulfillment of a prophetic "vision" that Columbus once had (Hamdani, 1994, p. 289; also see Delaney, 2012, Sweet, 1986; Watts, 1985). Columbus explains "his 'vision' in a book compilation of his biblical prophecies after returning from his third voyage to the 'New World.' He hoped that his prophecy would inspire King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to fund a fourth trip for him, one that would allow them to fulfill the millennial prophecy of becoming monarchs of the New Jerusalem" (West & Kling, 1991, viii). Further, Columbus' obsession also becomes evident from the fact that, on the day before he died (May 19, 1506), he stipulated an addendum to his will, originally drawn on February 22, 1498, that a "fund be set up for the purpose of liberating Jerusalem" (Delaney, 2006, p. 266). And "Columbus linked the crusading tradition to an apocalyptic vision of himself as messiah" (Phelan, 1970, p. 20; also see, Hamdani, 1994; Delaney, 2006, Watts, 1985). Indeed, for Columbus' pursuit of the crusading mission, his name was proposed, unsuccessfully, for canonization.⁴ To be sure, this was the era of medieval apocalyptic thinking - "the mother of all Christian theology" (Fried, 2000, p. 303). And the conquest of Jerusalem was not the ultimate end but beginning of the end, "the clarion call for the Second Coming and Last Judgment" (Cliff, 2012, p. 2). The pursuit of this endeavor was viewed as "God's work." The Crusaders "went into battle armed with an ironclad guarantee from Christ's representatives on earth: mass indulgences for those who died, which absolved them of doing penance for their sins and guaranteed immediate admittance to heaven" (Cliff, 2012, p. 26).⁵

In order to launch the Crusade, as declared in the Papal Bulls, King Manuel of Portugal commissioned Vasco da Gama in 1497 to seek and join hands with Eastern Christian forces. The King, like many Europeans, was under the impression that India was the legendary Christian kingdom of Prester John with whom to build an anti-Islam alliance. Manuel thought he "had inherited a sacred obligation," with his own "startling messianic streak." His "foreign policy" was based on "a divine mandate to fight Islam" to launch "a Last Crusade to recapture Jerusalem, the great event from which, the Scripture foretold, the Last Days of the world would follow as light follows dark" (Cliff, 2012, pp. 160-161). Thus, "soon, Mecca, the tomb of the Prophet, and 'the evil sect of 'Mafamede' would all be

⁴ Columbus was known as a pious man; he "never used profanity" and during the voyages, "the ships' crews observed religious rights." For having "brought the Christian faith to half the world, Irish and French Catholics argued (that) he should be named a saint. Though the move had the approval of Pope Pius IX (reign 1846-1878), Columbus was never canonized because he fathered an illegitimate child, and there was no proof he had performed a miracle" (Giles, 1991, p. 1).

⁵ Such "heavenly" incentives, as during the earlier Crusades, were the equivalent of the "72 virgins promise" to Muslim suicide-bombers in the current conflict-ridden Middle-East environment.

destroyed” (Cliff, 2012, p. 373).⁶ And he declared, “we will wrest new kingdoms, states and great wealth by force of arms from the hands of the Infidels (Cliff, 2012, p. 166).

Manual was convinced, da Gama was the one who would “negotiate alliances that would oust Islam and entrench Portugal as an Eastern Power . . . all before the Spanish arrived. He would inspire, cajole, and threaten, and if argument failed, he would have to persuade at the point of a gun . . . a Crusader fit to carry the standard of Christ” (Cliff, 2012, p. 161). Significant to his selection was also da Gama’s personality: “grim, cynical man, notoriously merciless, an expert at torturing prisoners” (Sheppard, 2006, p. 1). Further, he was known to have a “surly disposition; unlettered, brutal, and violent. For some assignments, he would have been useless, but for this one he was made to order. The work lying ahead could not be accomplished by a gentle leader” (Newell, 1954, p. 32).

Thus, da Gama sailed west across the Sea of Darkness in 1498, with the express understanding that he was authorized, as a sacred mission, “to invade . . . vanquish . . . and subdue all Saracens (Muslims) and pagans and other enemies of Christ . . . and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery . . . “ (*Dum Diversas*, 1452; *Romanus Pontifex*, 1455). By such means, declared the Pope, the “Christian Empire would be propagated” (Newcomb, 1992, p. 18). Together, the Papal Bulls served as the basis and justification for launching the global slave-trade of the 15th and 16th centuries, and the Age of Imperialism.

Later, however, a controversy arose between Spain and Portugal. The 1493 Bull, *Inter Caetera*, issued by Pope Alexander VI, granted to Spain the right to conquer the lands which Columbus had already found, as well as any land which Spain might “discover” in the future. The Portuguese sought the same privilege. So, as the Portuguese protested, the Treaty of Tordesillas was signed in 1493 and the Pope drew a line of demarcation between the two poles, giving Spain rights of conquest and dominion over one side of the globe, and Portugal over the other (see Bown for details). Thus, the Papacy aimed to become the global “spiritual empire destined to unite the world, with the Pope as priest-emperor and vicegerent of God on earth . . . it was the duty of Portugal (and Spain) to snatch them (the heathens) - however much they might resist—into the arms of Christ and His salvation” (Edwards, 1971, p. 171). Moreover, what is clear is that the Papal Bulls represented but two clear examples of how the “Christian Powers,” viewed indigenous peoples as “the lawful spoil and prey of their civilized conquerors” (Newcomb, 1992, p. 18). In fact, the Christian “Law of Nations” asserted that Christian nations had a divine right, based on the Bible, to claim absolute title to and ultimate authority over any newly “discovered” non-Christian inhabitants and their lands.

⁶ In 1513, Great Alfonso d’Albuquerque had planned an expedition to “disembark in the harbor of Liumbo (i.e., Yanbu), march rapidly to the temple of Meca (Mecca is confused with Medina) and strip it of all its treasures, for they were, indeed, many; taking as well the body of its false prophet and conveying it away, with a view to ransoming the holy temple of Jerusalem in exchange for it” (Livenmore, 1976, p. 142).

In sum, the Papal Bulls launched the “Age of Discovery” (Portuguese as well as Spanish), with the “divine mandate to fight Islam, and eventually to fulfill the call for the Second Coming and Last Judgment” (Cliff, 2012, p.2) By the time of Vasco da Gama’s second voyage in 1502, however, “there was no distinction between the trading mission and crusade against Islam, and da Gama proceeded with atrocious brutality to secure an exclusive market” for Portugal (Fleming, 2003, p. 305). More importantly, “It is essential not to confuse the cause with the result. The end result was colonization and a commercial revolution; the motivating cause was the pursuit of holy war against the Muslims . . .” (Hamdani, 1994, p. 277).⁷

Myths about the Vasco da Gama Epoch

It is often argued that the post-1492 era constituted the European Age of Discovery that ushered in Western-led proto-globalization. Or in the Asian context, there is the familiar depiction of Asian history between 1498 and 1800 as the Vasco de Gama epoch. Thus, John Roberts (1985) asserts,

One fact is so obvious that it is easily overlooked: the exploring was done exclusively by Europeans . . . It was only a comparatively small boast that the Portuguese king (Manuel) soon called himself “Lord of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia, and India” . . . The conquest of the high seas was the first and greatest of all the triumphs over natural forces which were to lead to the domination of western civilization of the whole globe . . . it is quite correct to put Europe at the center of the story in modern times. (pp. 175, 185, 194, & 201, quoted by Hobson, 2004, pp. 134-136)

However, there are others who have challenged such “facts” as part of the exaggerated “Eurocentric” view of history. A widely-acclaimed book by an eminent scholar of Indian history is described as “a startling new interpretation of the myth and the reality of the life of one of the great figures of the Age of Discoverers” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p.ii). This scholar argues that “while national heroes for some are objects of derision for others, there is considerable myth-building enterprise around Gama” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 360). Further, “Examples of mythmaking around Gama are still legion . . . Five hundred years from the voyage of the Sao Gabriel, the myth of Vasco da Gama has been successfully exported from Portugal through the entire world” (Subrahmanyam,

⁷ To be sure, at the initiative of various native-American scholars, supported by many mainstream churches, the Doctrine of Discovery was repudiated by the World Council of Churches in February 2012. The statement of repudiation rejected “the idea endorsed by the doctrine that the Catholic explorers had full and free power, authority, and jurisdiction of every kind . . . and duty to lead the peoples dwelling in those islands and countries to embrace the Christian religion . . . if they refused, the Vatican granted its envoys the authority to enslave and kill.” The statement argued that such positions are “fundamentally opposed to the gospel of Jesus.” See <http://www.danielpaul.com/DoctrineOfDiscovery.html>

1997, p. 363). A Portuguese scholar suggests a “contradiction arises” when we consider “the so-called glorious era of the Portuguese maritime enterprise, with the missing data generally obtained through a simplistic retrospective projection of known information. On the other hand, when the information is really obtainable . . . we enter the dark side of the Portuguese maritime history” (Domingues, 2003, p. 1; also see Alvares, 1997; Kalsi, 2016; and others). However, the succeeding discussion relies largely on John Hobson, who, in his widely-acclaimed book, *Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (2004), disputes assertions such as those by Roberts and others. Specifically, Hobson discusses six alternative propositions which, together, paint a different picture of this period.

Myth #1: Voyages Represented the Modern European Age of Discovery in Asia

The voyages were not the embodiment of a pioneering modern European age of discovery that demonstrated the signs of a unique “rational restlessness” or an impulsive curiosity, Hobson (2004) argues. Thus, “they were in fact the ‘last gasp,’ or the ‘second round,’ of the medieval age of Crusades - the ‘first round’ having occurred between 1095 and 1291. The immediate cause of the voyages was the Ottoman capture of the Byzantine Constantinople in 1453, which created a major crisis in Christendom. The Islamic ‘threat,’ along with the disunity of Christendom, caused the Catholic Church to react. For the Church, it was very much a matter of life or death; that is, the very survival of Christendom was at stake. As Pope Pius II proclaimed, “An unavoidable war with the Turks (Muslims) threatens us. Unless we take up arms and go to war to meet the enemy, we think all is over with religion.” Having granted legitimacy to Portuguese imperialism in the Indies, another papal bull (*Inter Caetera*, 1456) was issued, that granted “spiritual jurisdiction of all the regions conquered by the Portuguese now or in the future.”

Hobson (2004) concurs, however: “None of this is to say that economic motivations were unimportant. But economic riches would also be an important means to carry the war to the ‘infidel.’ Indeed, in 1457, the Portuguese mint issued a gold coin with the striking of *cruzado* (Crusade)” (p. 134).

MYTH #2: “Twin Myths of the Portuguese Age of Discovery and the Western Age of Proto-Globalization

According to Hobson, the Portuguese neither “discovered” Asia and the Cape of Good Hope, nor were the post-1497-98 “explorations” the first sign of Western proto-globalization. The fact is the Portuguese were the last to discover the Cape; various Eastern peoples had already reached it, if not circumnavigated, many centuries earlier. About 1450, the famous Arab navigator, Ahmad Ibn Majid, sailed westwards to the Cape and then up the west coast of Africa (see Lunde, 2005). Moreover, the Chinese Muslim admiral, Cheng Ho, sailed up the east coast of Africa at the very beginning of the 15th century, some even earlier. Numerous Eastern traders had already made their way across to the Cape and up the east, if

not the west, coast of Africa, well before Vasco de Gama. And for centuries, Persian and Arab sailors and navigators had traversed these waters and were more advanced in their skills than their European counterparts

Further, another dubious assumption is that Indians were an hitherto “isolated” and “primitive” people. The fact is that India, and the rest of Asia, for that matter, had played a crucial role with the Afro-Asian-led global economy for many centuries earlier. As to Indians being “primitive,” here is the contradiction. When da Gama met numerous rulers en route, especially in India, the gifts he offered as the best of Europe, partly to seek trade, were usually rejected as inferior.

In sum, Hobson insists, neither the rounding of the Cape nor the Portuguese arrival in India constituted the label of a “pioneering” discovery (p.140). To the Africans and Asians, it was merely a footnote.

Myth #3: European Ingenuity in the Portuguese Voyages

The Portuguese arrival in Asia was not the sign of a unique European ingenuity, Hobson argues. Rather, it was only made possible by Europe’s assimilation of superior Arab/Asian nautical technologies and scientific ideas. Had it not been for the diffusion and absorption of Islamic knowledge as well as navigational and nautical technologies, da Gama would not even have reached the Cape, let alone India. The Portuguese borrowing of this knowledge began in the 12th century, through translations from Arabic and contacts with Muslims during the Crusades (see Ghazanfar, 2006).⁸

Oceanic sailing presented new challenges to the Portuguese in terms of shipping design and navigation; and they turned to the Easterners, especially the Muslims via the Jews, to solve these challenges. There was the challenge of strong winds around the Cape, solved in the 1440s by the construction of caravels, a design that, going back to the 13th century, originating with the Islamic *qarib* (Arabic for caravel). There were also features of the ship design (the stern-post rudder, lateen sail, and the all-important triple-mast system) without which the voyages of discovery would never have occurred. Such design features had long been common in Islamic and Chinese shipping (Clowes, 1927, p. 216).⁹

⁸ Like Spain, Portugal, part of Islamic Spain from 711-1249, also bears the legacy of Islam, in terms of language and other socio-cultural dimensions, including numerous historic sites. See Salloum, 2002.

⁹ “The Islamic influence affected many subjects which relate to seafaring—geography, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. The transcription of Arab manuscripts in the 13th century left many of these philosophies at the seaman’s dispense. Many devices, such as the astrolabe, compass, and sextant were applied to seafaring in innovative ways. Now that European nations were immersed in these philosophies spread by Muslims, many people became frightened of Muslim influence. Consequently, this resulted in a demand to increase the centralization of Christian kingdoms, which helped unite Europe. This collaboration influenced shipbuilding and led to a fusion of ideas, theories, and methods that became more and more widespread.” See

Another challenge was the need for accurate navigational charts than those available already. While some have suggested that da Gama had a “good grasp of astronomy,” that is another “myth” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 62). It was Islamic astronomy that provided knowledge of the lunar cycles, enabled calculations of the size of the earth, and by using degrees, enabled recording of the distances travelled. Another important instrument available was the astrolabe, which had been perfected by Muslims and passed onto Europe via Islamic Spain in the mid-tenth century. The Portuguese also needed various other pieces of knowledge to be successful and these were available only because of the breakthroughs in Islamic science upon which the Portuguese voyages depended.

But the Islamic influence did not end here. Once da Gama reached Malindi below the Horn of East Africa in April 1498, the next challenge was how to venture out onto the Islamic waters, heretofore uncharted by the Europeans and onto broad expanse of the Indian Ocean without a seasoned navigator. Arab sailors were already masters of the Indian Ocean. Fortunately, he found in Malindi the most illustrious Muslim navigator of the time, Ahmad ibn Majid, who had sailed the Indian ocean from shore to shore (see Lunde, 2005).

Da Gama found Ahmad ibn Majid willing to help, as he had done for numerous Arab and African merchants, and offered his nautical knowledge to the Portuguese sailor. Even in far off Europe, they had read Ahmed ibn Majid’s *The Advantages of Knowing the Sciences of the Sea*, an internationally celebrated sailors’ handbook; now the author was aboard da Gama’s flagship. He plotted for de Gama the route between Malindi (now Kenya) and Malabar (India), and on May 20, 1498, Vasco da Gama’s fleet reached the Malabar Coast, a feat that would have been impossible without the help of Ahmad ibn Majid (see Lunde, 1962).

Myth #4: European Maritime Superiority in Asia

This claim is perhaps the weakest - that the European maritime power was superior. As noted earlier, the Chinese Muslim admiral, Cheng Ho (1371-1434), had traversed the Indian Ocean and landed on the east coast of Africa decades before da Gama, albeit in reverse. And a comparison of the size and dimensions of his fleet can only cause embarrassment for the Portuguese and the Europeans. The largest of Cheng Ho’s ship was 500 feet long and 180 feet wide, compared to da Gama’s longest about 85 feet. And da Gama’s four ships and 170 men paled in comparison with several ships and 28,000 men of Cheng’s 1431-33’ voyage. Another striking fact is that the number of men carried on some Chinese voyages exceeded the size of even the largest armies of European powers at the time. The crucial point is that Asian - Chinese, Arab - were militarily sufficient to hold their own against European ships. Even after 1434, the superiority of Chinese navy continued for several decades.

Obviously, the Portuguese eventually succeeded in colonizing the Indies. It was, however, more a function of their ability to play off rival factions in the region. Among the many, two are noteworthy. First, he took advantage of the conflict between the Sultans of Mombasa and Malindi. The Malindi ruler was also aware of da Gama's destruction in the southern coastal areas of eastern Africa; he decided to cooperate and allow da Gama to establish trading posts. And, second, the enmity of Zamorin (ruler of Calicut) and the ruler of Cochin enabled the Portuguese to gain a foothold in Calicut.

In sum, says Hobson, the fact is that the Portuguese (and their European successors) did not have the military or manpower to go into Asia "all guns blazing" and force the Asians into submission in the three centuries after 1498 (p.148). That the Portuguese had to rely more on luck, manipulation, and deviousness is hardly surprising.

Myth #5: The European Trading Monopoly in Asia

Another common myth is that the Europeans dominated Asian trading system and that by 1500 (i.e., with the Cape route available) the Islamic heartland of the world economy had just about faded, as the declining Ottoman empire was replaced by the all-conquering Europeans. In this portrayal, it is as if the European creation of a new route dried up the old Muslim routes and Portuguese flow via the Cape became prominent.

Hobson identifies several problems with this claim, one being that the Portuguese were mainly joining the trade that was dominated by the Ottoman Muslims. Second, the Cape route was unprofitable for the Portuguese because of prohibitive transport costs. Third, far more trade passed into Europe via the Levant and Venice, which in turn arrived via the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and overland caravan routes. Indeed, until 1585, over three times more trade to Europe took place via the Red Sea and overland than via the Cape. Fourth, before 1650 far more of Europe's bullion exports to the East went via the Ottoman and Persian empires than via the Cape (Pearson, 1987, p. 44). Finally, the Portuguese dominance is falsified by the simple fact that in the 16th century only 6 percent of total shipping tonnage employed in the Indian Ocean trading system was Portuguese (Hobson, 2004, p. 152; see Hobson, for additional details).

Myth #6: European Political Dominance in Asia

Finally, if military power could not secure a European trading dominance, how then did the Europeans secure their modest prominence in the Asian trade zone? The Europeans (Portuguese, followed by the Dutch and English) were compelled to collaborate, cooperate with, and sometimes cajole the stronger Asian rulers and merchants. Despite the initial proclamations of "death to the (Islamic) infidel," when the Portuguese arrived in the Indies, they also entered the domain of hegemonic Islam and had no choice but to cooperate (Hobson, 2004, p. 154).

There were several aspects to this partnership. First, Asian rulers granted the Portuguese a limited form of extra-territoriality that extended to Macao in China and to the eastern coasts of India. Second, given their lack of financing, the Portuguese had to rely on local sources of financing, especially the Indian money-lenders. Third, there was considerable intermingling of Portuguese and Asian traders, sometimes humiliating for the Portuguese (and the Dutch and English), but advantageous nevertheless. And, finally, the Portuguese had no choice but to rely on local sources of knowledge - language, guidance concerning trading logistics and dealings, etc. Hobson (2004) writes, "Help, collaboration, collusion, coexistence, symbiosis - all these became necessary as time went by" (p. 155).

In sum, Hobson concludes, the greatest legacy of the Portuguese (as well as the Dutch and English) seaborne "empire" was not how much but how little things changed concerning Asia's dominance of the global economy between 1500 and 1750/1800. Hobson (2004) maintains, "The conclusion is hard to avoid: the 'European age' or the Vasco da Gama epoch of Asia turns out to be but retrospective Eurocentric wishful thinking" (p. 156). The fact is that until about 1800, the Ottoman and Persian empires were economically and politically strong enough to resist the European incursion. Yet, King Manuel I boasted to the Pope in August 1499 that he was "Lord of Guinea and of the Conquests, Navigations, and Commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia, and India" (Hobson, 2004, p. 156). The claim might well have impressed the Pope, but it was entirely pretentious. Far nearer to truth was the claim of Ottoman emperors. In 1538, the Ottoman Sultan, Suleyman (known as "the Magnificent" in Europe), pronounced: "I am Suleyman, in whose name the Friday sermon is read in Mecca and Medina. In Baghdad I am the Shah, in the Byzantine realms the Caesar and in Egypt the Sultan, who sends his fleets to the seas of Europe, the Maghrib and India" (Hobson, 2004, p. 157).

Elsewhere, while discussing the "discovery" of America (what he calls the "Myth of 1492"), Hobson (2004) observes, "suffice to note that Christopher Columbus, like da Gama and the Spanish monarchy, was obsessed with the idea of a Crusade against Islam" (p. 163). With respect to reliance on appropriated knowledge, an eminent historian emphasizes the point, "as the Spanish would later do in Spain and Peru, so the Portuguese encountered indigenous knowledge of the past in Africa and the Indies that was difficult to reconcile with the Christian notions of world history or their overwhelming sense of boundary between myth and 'facts,' but which they were often obliged to use in the absence of alternative sources" (Woolf, 2011, p. 236). Hobson (2004) is a bit more blunt, however, in that "the irony here is that while da Gama sought a Crusade against Islam, it was the passing of Eastern - especially Islamic - 'resource portfolio' via the Islamic Bridge of the World that had enabled him to undertake his journey in the first place" (p. 144; also see Ghazanfar, 2006). Similarly, another author argues, "the pursuit of holy war against the Muslims" was launched by "using, at the same time, much of the Muslim enemy's knowledge and expertise gained by virtue of medieval Christian Europe's crusading contacts with the Middle East and through the extensive translation of Arabic works into Latin undertaken in Spain, Italy and France during the 12th and 13th centuries" (Hamdani, 1994, p. 277).

Conclusion

While acknowledging the Vasco da Gama epoch as historical in terms of linking the three continents, the preceding pages have discussed a relatively unexplored perspective about this historic figure, based on a review of the substantial literature.¹⁰ Both the Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus voyages were fundamentally driven by the messianic zeal, “the divine mandate to fight Islam,” as dictated by various Papal Bulls. Beginning in 1452, the “divine mandate” subsequently mutated into the Doctrine of Discovery that merged into the Age of Discovery and was soon followed by the Age of Imperialism/Colonialism. As for the Islamic world, it was an early “clash of civilization” that seems to resonate in the present-day Islam-West relationship.

Moreover, there are scholars who point to the exaggerated glorification of da Gama - a national hero for some, but an object of derision for others, with considerable “European myth-building.” The preceding pages have identified several such “myths,” which together suggest a less flattering historical legacy for da Gama. Perhaps more importantly, da Gama’s image becomes considerably tarnished in light of the brutalities inflicted during his voyages upon those vanquished--a topic not pursued in the paper, though abundantly documented in the literature (Cliff, 2012; David, 1988).¹¹

Relevant to the “Islamic problem,” over 900 years ago, in 1095, Pope Urban II launched the First Crusade and the two great religions clashed with each other

¹⁰ Interestingly, Vasco da Gama had an older, “illegitimate half-brother, with exactly the same name as he,” whom his father, Estevao da Gama had “fathered when still single” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 61).

¹¹ Forced conversions were a common practice, the alternative being the same fate as under Spanish Inquisition. David (1988) writes, “The Jesuits staged an annual mass baptism on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, and in order to secure as many neophytes as possible, a few days before the ceremony, the Jesuits would go through the streets of the Hindu quarter in pairs, accompanied by their Negro slaves, whom they would urge to seize the Hindus. When the blacks caught up with a fugitive, they would smear his lips with a piece of beef, making him an ‘untouchable’ among his people. Conversion to Christianity was then his only choice” (pp. 18-19). Da Gama “would be very cruel to Muslims who didn’t listen and would often use torture” (Sheppard, p. 5, NewWorld). Similarly, Jews also suffered the wrath of the Inquisitors. There is plethora of literature that documents the details of brutalities associated with Vasco da Gama and his predecessors/successors. For example, Alvares (1997) says, “Da Gama would take captives, chop off their limbs and string them in pieces on the masts of his ships to intimidate others” (p. 2). See Alvares, 1997; Cliff, 2012; Goel, 2010; Hall, 1998; Jayne, 1910; Masih, 1998; More, 2013; Priolkar, 1961; Subrahmanyam, 1997; Ullattil, 2011; Warrior, 2013; and others; also see Meri massacre, Cliff, 2012, pp. 309-313; Subrahmanyam, 1997, pp. 204-207; and “Plunder and Massacre of the Meri,” <http://historicalalleys.blogspot.com/search?q=story+of+miri+ship>. Also, there is a recent Indian movie (*Urimi*) on this subject; see “Vasco da Gama - Urumi: history from the vanquished eyes,” <http://www.news18.com/news/india/urumi-history-from-the-vanquisheds-eyes-365070.html>; and “Vasco da Gama’s atrocities now on screen,” <http://www.newindianexpress.com/entertainment/telugu/article304465.ece>.

not just for the soul of world, but also its resources. Both Christianity and Islam were nurtured by the same soil, and both claimed to possess the ultimate truth. Driven by an ironclad certainty that they were destined to spread the true faith, by cannon-power as well as by systematically taking advantage of local conflicts, the Portuguese changed the course of history. Then there was the “accidental discovery” of America. Two centuries later, humanists such as Adam Smith lauded the consequences in a secular way as the “two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind . . . and it was long apparent that for the West to be won, the East first had to be overcome” (Cliff, 2012, p. 419).

Da Gama’s arrival in the Indian Ocean also sparked Europe’s belief that the global balance of power had shifted its way. New mental as well as geographical horizons opened up, and the Islam’s supremacy no longer seemed unassailable. The Age of Discovery, or the Age of Exploitation as the “discovered” choose to call it, enabled vast wealth in natural and human resources to fall under Christian control. The world order founded in the wake of colonialism is viewed by some Muslim true-believers as an ongoing Western plot to impose an alien way of life - the Crusades in a subtler form.

There is another way, however, as history informs us. There were the Muslims of Cordoba and Baghdad, the pioneers of explosions of cultural interaction - and the Christians of Toledo and Sicily, who carried on the progressive tradition. There was Frederick II, who negotiated a lease on Jerusalem with a Turkish sultan. There were the Ottoman Emperors, who “turned Istanbul into an international melting pot” and who, in the wake of Spanish Inquisition, “rescued Jews and Muslims alike . . . , welcomed refugees to Istanbul as full citizens, threatened with death any Turks who mistreated a Jew” (Cliff, 2012, p. 146). Like the early Crusaders, there were also Europeans who were enamored by the ancient cultures and went native, albeit at times to the horror of their compatriots back home. That mutual history along with renewed emphasis on shared understanding and respect for cultural diversity and religious pluralism provides reason for some optimism for the future. Certainly, if the “age of exploitation” was founded on religious intolerance, then the development of an “age of peaceful coexistence” must be grounded in religious freedom.

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