

# **Noel Malcolm's Useful Enemies: Islam and The Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450-1750**

**Oxford University Press, 2019, 487 pages**

**Reviewer:** Omer Merzić

From the conflicts the Greek city states had with Darius I, Alexander the Great's conquest in the East, to the Muslim capture of the Iberian Peninsula and the subsequent Crusades on the Holy Lands, the West and the East have been at conflict with one another. This conflict has further extended with the arrival of one small beylik on the world map. This beylik grew into the future Ottoman Empire, which would become one of the major threats to Christian Europe for several centuries. From the times of the Greek city states to the Ottoman Empire and even today, the East-West divide and their cultural differences have been used as a driving force, whether to conquer the so-called barbarians' and bring culture to them or to convert the likewise so-called infidels and



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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.51331/B007>

Journal of Balkan Studies, 2 (2), 2022

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bring them to the right way of living. Both sides have used different narratives and developed their discourse to further their agenda. In the book *Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450-1750*, Noel Malcolm explores and contextualizes the different narratives and discourses created by diverse groups of intellectuals and other individuals in Christian Europe, which had anti-Ottoman and anti-Muslim sentiments at its heart.

The author of this book is Noel Malcolm, senior research fellow at All Souls College, Oxford. He specializes in intellectual history of the early modern period and remains keen to study the history of Southeastern Europe. This book in particular expresses Noel's proficiency in his area of study, due to him having taken up the challenge of telling a story that lasted for three centuries, from the fall of Constantinople up until the 18th century. Because the theme of the book relies on telling and observing the evolution of Western thought regarding Islam and the Ottoman empire, that the book is arranged chronologically is only logical. This means that the chapters are arranged sequentially, going from one period to another and rarely skipping more than a few decades. For the most part, the chapters are focused on a movement or an idea dominant at a single point in time. Of course, a few chapters occur that do not follow this paradigm, and these chapters are usually only focused on one specific thinker and philosopher. For example, the Italian diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli, the Italian theologian Tommaso Campanella, and the French philosopher Montesquieu each receive their own chapter. Why these latter two philosophers were given their own chapters while leaving out other noteworthy authors is rather unclear. Nevertheless, *Useful Enemies* gives a rather extensive view on the topic, often providing ample room to some philosophers that are usually overlooked. This means that the book has a sizable bibliography mostly based on primary sources. On one hand, this gives the book much more content that is rarely available anywhere else and transforms this work into a sort of index of authors and their works. On the other hand, this makes the book somewhat overwhelming, especially to non-academic readers, as all of the footnotes referencing the original primary sources are in their original language, most commonly Latin or French.

As previously mentioned, *Useful Enemies* starts with the fall of Constantinople and its impact on Western countries and the Church. The hostile approach towards Islam and the Ottoman Empire was at an all-time high in this era. This hostility was supported by two connected factors. The first one was the astronomical rise and expansion of the

Ottoman Empire into Europe and its conquest of predominantly Christian countries, and the second was the way Christian theology greatly assisted anti-Ottoman sentiments. As the author points out, the theological and philosophical works created by Western thinkers contained some generally truthful notions but also encompassed numerous unsubstantiated rumors and stories. The fall of Constantinople only exacerbated the situation regarding the Western view on Islam and the Ottoman Empire, which at that time was viewed as a punishment sent by God for their wrongdoings. Some Western sources even give a positive view of the Ottoman Empire, but Malcom attributes this to a criticism of Christians by Christian theologians by means of elevating the Ottomans who were perceived as barbaric. This meant that Christians who had the God-given right to rule were being corrupted to the point where so-called non-believers had become better than them. After this, Noel deals with the relationship between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans. This relationship was beneficial to the Habsburgs, hence the name of the book "*Useful Enemies*," even though the two empires would be entangled in numerous conflicts that would last for almost four centuries. During this time the Habsburgs used and often exaggerated the Ottoman threat to their advantage to better control the situation in their own empire. Of course, this approach by the Habsburgs and other Western empires and thinkers was prevalent during the height of the Ottomans, and as soon as they started to decline so did the paradigm change.

Some changes in the approach to the Ottomans came sooner than later once Protestantism began to take hold in Central and Western Europe. This new threat to the Catholic Church viewed the Ottomans more favorably than the Pope in Rome. Even Martin Luther saw the Ottomans to be more preferable than the Church, at least until the Ottomans besieged Vienna, after which Martin Luther perceived the Sultan as the devil incarnate. The author points out that the propaganda the Catholic Church made against the Ottomans was also used by the Protestants and aimed at the Catholic Church itself. The next chapter of the book deals with the alliance between the Ottomans and Christians, more specifically between France and the Ottoman Empire. This chapter is quite interesting, as Noel displays the different ways French scholars defended the alliance, which was not only politically but also culturally beneficial, due to authors from the West having had gained more opportunities to examine and study the Ottomans.

These new insights led to novel approaches to the Ottomans, most evident by the aforementioned Machiavelli and Campanella. Both sought to utilize the best qualities of

Islam and the Ottomans in the West's fight against them. This in fact resulted in the view on Islam and the Ottomans became more positive in some circles over time and to no longer only be shown as barbarians and savages, but rather as respectable advisories who every so often were better than several Christian rulers. Nevertheless, the notion that the Sultan was a despot who ruled not only his people but also had absolute control over their property and lives was established and lingered on for quite some time. This sentiment was carried by numerous authors up until and even during the Age of Enlightenment. The last pages of this book deal with Montesquieu's views and criticisms of Sultanic despotism, as well as Voltaire's disagreements with Montesquieu's views.

In the end, Malcolm concludes that "To study the history of Western ideas about Islam and the Ottoman Empire in this period may help us to understand some of the origins, or at least the development, of Western prejudices that have had long subsequent histories." The Western thinkers as well as early modern Europeans approached Islam and the Ottomans with a range of sentiments, "from fear and fierce disapproval to fascination, admiration, and envy." For many Western thinkers, the Ottoman Empire and Islam were useful not only as enemies or as others to be put in a subordinate place, but also as allies and a mirror to be used to self-criticize the West. In the end once the Ottoman threat started to diminish, another discourse in the form of Orientalism began to emerge.