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**William E. Watson**, *Tricolor and Crescent: France and the Islamic World*. Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2003. Perspectives on the Twentieth Century. xiii + 295 pp. Photos, documents, notes, bibliography and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-275-97470-7.

Review by Charles D. Smith, University of Arizona.

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*Tricolor and Crescent* appears in a new Praeger series titled "Perspectives on the Twentieth Century." William Watson envisions this study as an explanation of why France, "alone among the Western nations (Spain, Russia, and Italy) having sustained contact with Islam, has never been fully conquered by Muslim arms during the lengthy period of cross-cultural contact and conflict" (p. xi). The book itself totals one hundred fifty pages of text and fifteen documents occupying a further eighty-eight pages. An ambitious undertaking under any circumstances, Watson's attempt to adequately grapple with the issues is conceptually unsuccessful and replete with errors of fact, as seen in the above-quoted statement; neither Russia nor Italy was fully conquered by Muslim arms. As will be seen below, Watson's apparently propagandistic intent in writing the book carries serious implications with respect to the independence of historical research on France's relations with Islam.

Watson begins with a chapter entitled "Three Legacies: Charles Martel, the Crusades, and Napoleon." He next discusses France's creation of its trans-Saharan empire and conquest of North Africa during the nineteenth century, followed by a chapter on France's dealings with Ottoman Turkey and the eastern Mediterranean for the same period through World War I. Other chapters treat French colonial activity during the interwar years, World War II and its impact on the empire, and the post-war period, including the Cold War and gradual decline of the empire, referring to Vietnam as well as Morocco and Tunisia. A separate chapter is devoted to "The Algerian Crisis," with a final consideration of "The Aftermath of Empire."

Watson argues that modern French attitudes and actions toward Islam were formed by "three legacies from the past." One was "a siege mentality and sense of superiority over Islam gained from the battlefield victories of Charles Martel, Pepin, and Charlemagne over Muslims in France and Spain in the eighth and ninth centuries" (p. 15). This assumption of superiority spurred French involvement in the Crusades as well as predominant French settler activity in creating crusader states, the second legacy. Finally, these assumptions created a belief that the French could "transform the Islamic world, not by crusader conquest, but by Enlightenment-era reforms promulgated by a secular administration and army" (p. 16). It was France's confrontational behavior toward Islam that apparently enabled it to evade the so-called "conquest" by Islam that Russia and Italy supposedly experienced along with Spain.

Watson's approach appears to reflect Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory characterizing current relations between the Western world and Islam, which Watson extrapolates to depict "the millennium of conflict between France and the Islamic world since Charles Martel, and the diametrically opposed claims of supremacy of the West and the Islamic world that gave rise to those numerous wars between Frenchmen and Muslims" (p. 131). Consequently, his detailed and occasionally accurate discussion of specific developments mirrors these assumptions with virtually no reference to peaceful interactions between France and the Islamic world. Moreover, his treatment of specific events contradicts his thematic approach. For example, when discussing Napoleon's desire to take Egypt, he correctly notes Napoleon's imperial ambitions and hopes to challenge British interests in the Middle East and possibly India. His comments on the French invasion and conquest of Algeria show no evidence of French eagerness to spread "Enlightenment-era reforms."

Watson's survey of France and the Islamic world, though supposedly focusing on the twentieth century, is governed by a vision of mutual conflict that has lasted from the eighth century to the present, with no serious attempt to introduce alternate perspectives arising--as in the case of Algeria--from over a century of brutal colonial rule or, generally, in the context of native nationalist resistance to imperialism. Instead, such resistance is usually characterized as Islamic and identified with terrorism. Although Watson's discussion of specific developments can be accurate, he appears unfamiliar with the Middle East and the Islamic world in general, and his immersion in

details without regard to any framework other than French-Muslim hostility leads to numerous factual errors as well as misrepresenting the nature of numerous contacts.

For example, when discussing the Frankish period, he refers to the “Arab-controlled slave and fur trades of northeastern Europe [which] passed through the Frankish kingdom en route to Andalus” (p. 3). There is no evidence that the Arabs “controlled” these trades of northeastern Europe, and Arab Muslims in Spain were not alone in trading in slaves--all kingdoms did, Christian as well as Muslim. In fact, slaves from eastern Europe were often transmitted to Spain by Franks across Frankish territory; they were also brought later by sea on Venetian ships. Watson ignores the extensive trading networks established between Muslim and Christian lands that included slaves, creating the impression that the relationship was solely one of hostility and conflict and that only Arabs or Muslims engaged in the trading of slaves. Similar treatment appears in Watson’s discussion of Islamic Spain in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. One would never know that intellectual interaction between Islam and Christianity, including the transmission of Greek philosophy, occurred during this period. Nor would a reader be aware that the knights of the first crusade massacred Jews in Jerusalem, not only Muslims (p. 7). That would challenge the image of a consistent Christian-Muslim hostility.

With respect to factual errors, Serbia did not gain independence in 1829, but autonomy (p. 38). French ships may have assisted in defeating the Turkish attack on the Suez Canal in February 1915, but they did not “repulse” the assault--that was done by British troops (p. 46). The French general heading the Army of the Levant following World War I was named Gouraud, not Gourand (as repeatedly spelled). Gamal Abd al-Nasser took over the Egyptian government in 1954, not 1956 (p. 104). Much of the account of the Suez Crisis of 1956 is misleading, as is Watson’s discussion of key elements of the Algerian revolt against the French (p. 119-120), and the Algerian elections of 1991 (p. 141). Most embarrassingly, the film, “Battle of Algiers,” was not made in the 1950s to gain support for the revolt; it was made after Algeria achieved independence in 1962, first appeared in Europe in 1965, and then in the U.S. in 1967 (p. 122). Linking FLN and French behavior to his theme of a millennium of conflict, referring to French torture of Algerians and Algerian massacres of *colons*, Watson states that “the war was conducted with equal brutality by both sides, as in the days of jihad and crusades” (p. 126). As for the 1991 Algerian elections, the results were not “overturned.” They were two-stage elections; the authorities canceled the second stage when it became clear that the Islamic front party would win. In the introduction to his document on the mandates, Watson incorrectly states that the British were awarded a mandate for Kuwait in addition to Iraq and Palestine (p. 204). Finally, Watson frequently misstates the titles of individuals, for example “Bey Moncef” instead of Moncef Bey (p. 96). Many of these are fundamental errors for which an undergraduate paper would be penalized.

More generally, Watson interprets Middle East history, especially (but not only) Lebanese, in light of his theme of ongoing Muslim-Christian hostility. The Arab revolt in Egypt in 1882 is interpreted as one of “traditionalist Muslims” versus European control of the Suez Canal (p. 31). In fact, it was a proto-nationalist revolt against foreign domination led by an Egyptian Muslim that had no significant religious implications. Because Watson’s source is Lord Cromer’s *Modern Egypt* (1908), written to justify the British imperial venture in Egypt, he ignores numerous surveys of Egyptian history as well as specific studies of the period.[1] Watson also uses extensive excerpts from *Modern Egypt* as a source to depict, in Watson’s words, Cromer’s “perceptions of the differences between French and British imperialism in the Middle East” (p. 161). In fact, the first selection actually serves as a vehicle for Cromer (and hence Watson) to inveigh against their shared view of the stereotypical Egyptian as a “semi-educated Oriental,” whose “remarkable capacity for assimilating to himself the worst, and rejecting the best arts of any European civilisation with which he may be brought in contact” is due to the fact that these “Orientals” adopt French culture, not British. These are British imperialist perceptions of Egyptians, not of differences between British and French imperialism as such, and recall Edward Said’s discussions of Orientalism far more than any scholarship on the comparative nature of imperialism.

Finally, there is Watson’s discussion of modern Lebanon and the Maronite Catholics. Watson privileges the Maronites while acknowledging their eagerness for ties with France and French sponsorship of their primacy in Lebanon; he appears to assume, wrongly, that all Lebanese Christians were and are Maronites. It is not true, for example, that Arab reformist organizations in Paris before World War I were “dominated by Maronites” (p. 41). Some Maronites were involved, but so were other Christians (Greek Orthodox) and Muslims.

This treatment becomes more specifically propagandistic in discussion of the 1975-76 Lebanese civil war (pp. 138-140). Contrary to Watson's view, the power-sharing arrangements established under French rule in Lebanon did not work that well for three decades after independence; Watson ignores the civil war of 1957-58 as well as the 1932 census that created justification for Maronite control of the government and Christian dominance in administrative and legislative posts. Moreover, the demographic balance had shifted in favor of the Muslims long before the Palestinians arrived, but the Maronite-controlled government refused to take another census. Syria did not simply side with the Muslims in Lebanon; Hafiz al-Assad allowed the Maronites to defeat the Palestinians in 1976. The Lebanese situation was not one where Muslims "despised" Israelis, and Christians presumably liked them. Many orthodox Christians resisted the Maronites and an Israeli occupation which was often indiscriminate in its taking of casualties--Palestinian or Lebanese, Christian or Muslim; indeed, the two most active Palestinian terrorist organizations were led by Christians, not Muslims.

It was this naive and erroneous treatment of a complex series of events that first aroused my interest in a question of bias in Watson's account. Watson lists three sources by Daniel Pipes, only one of which, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition*, is relevant to Watson's subject.[2] Pipes' importance comes from the fact that he, with like-minded allies, has energetically propagated these simplistic impressions of ongoing Muslim-Christian conflict in the American and Israeli press. Pipes has encouraged an alliance of right-wing Israeli/Likud backers with American Evangelical Christians and far right Maronite Catholics to foster anti-Islamic sentiment in general and hostility to Palestinians in particular. Representatives of these groups are in the Bush administration--some from a group with the web address "freelebanon.org," which lists among its "Golden Circle" Likud sympathizer Douglas Feith (the third highest-ranking official in the Pentagon), Elliot Abrams (in charge of Middle East matters on the National Security Council), Richard Perle (former head of the Defense Policy Board), Pipes, and Maronites linked to the Gemayael Phalange that took part in the Sabra-Shatila massacres of Palestinians in 1982.

In addition, Pipes founded "Campus Watch," a group that monitors the teaching of Middle East history and politics on campuses to call attention to criticism of Israel, and has backed the passing of a bill now pending in the Senate to establish a government advisory body to oversee the teaching of Middle East studies in the United States; the bill has already passed the House. Although the declared rationale for the bill is to promote "diversity," its backers are all identified with the neoconservative movement and with Likud expansionist aims in the occupied territories.

How does this background apply specifically to Watson's treatment of his subject in this book? This book's numerous errors suggested to me that there was little if any editorial supervision (there are duplications of subject on consecutive pages and contradictory sentences), and that the press had not sought external scholarly review of the manuscript. However, when I went to the web site of Greenwood Press (which includes Praeger) and accessed *Tricolor and Crescent*, I discovered a blurb from Daniel Pipes praising the manner in which "Watson tells the history of this [French-Muslim] encounter with accuracy [*sic*] and verve." Pipes concludes with the provocative remark that "although France failed to transform the Muslim world, might the opposite yet occur?" It would appear that Pipes served as a "scholarly" reviewer for the manuscript.

Inasmuch as Watson provides no evidence that France's imperial venture sought to transform the Islamic world, Pipes' concluding statement aptly mirrors Pipes' and Watson's more general goal of creating the impression of lasting Muslim hostility and current threat to Christianity and the West. That Watson apparently believes this personally can be seen on the Campus Watch web site where he praises Pipes for seeking to prevent the spreading of false information by "politically-radical ideologues . . . [who spread] apologetics for anti-Western Islamic terrorism" in courses on the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid (d. 809), and the Ottoman Sultan/Caliph Sulayman the Magnificent (d. 1566). This will come as news to those who teach such courses. But Watson's labels serve his purpose; in his book he does not present the Christian crusaders or later imperialists as "terrorists", only the Muslims who resist them. It appears that it is precisely Watson's lack of concern for factual accuracy in his book and in his praise of Campus Watch that has encouraged Daniel Pipes to praise such work, which complements his own conspiratorial efforts. Indeed, Pipes has recently published an op-ed suggesting that a decadent Europe could be overrun by Islam, apparently a spin-off from Watson's book.[3]

In short, Watson's mission to reduce his subject to the current neo-con vogue of irreversible Muslim-Christian hostility appears motivated more by partisan political goals than scholarly concerns. While some of Watson's treatment is good, notably that on French relations with the Ottomans, it is a pity that he did not stress French

economic and cultural domination throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, including Egypt under British occupation; the work of Jacques Thobie would have been especially useful for the late nineteenth century.[4] And even here, he attributes earlier French economic treaties with the Ottomans to French success in war against Muslims, despite the fact that his evidence shows the nature of diplomacy at the time and the French-Ottoman alliance against the Hapsburgs.

Watson's bibliography is extensive and his footnotes suggest that he consulted a wide range of sources, but the book does not qualify as a work of scholarship and should not have been published. That it was published apparently had more to do with the current attempt to propagate anti-Islamic sentiment in this country and politically-motivated control of intellectual discussion in the name of "diversity" rather than for scholarly enlightenment.

The appearance of this book in the realm of French history, with Pipes' imprimatur, suggests that current efforts to have the U.S. government establish oversight of scholarship and teaching with respect to the Middle East could extend to the teaching and writing of French imperial history as well, especially the history of France's contacts with the Islamic world.

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#### NOTES

[1] Evelyn Baring, *Modern Egypt* (New York: Macmillan, 1908).

[2] Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); and *The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, the Ayatollah, and the West* (New York: Birch Lane, 1990).

[3] Daniel Pipes, "Civilizational Senility," *Jerusalem Post* online edition, [www.jpost.com](http://www.jpost.com), May 11, 2004.

[4] In particular, Jacques Thobie, *Intérêts et imperialism français dans l'Empire Ottoman, 1895-1914* (Paris, Harmattan, 1977).

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