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Oriens nobis sublatus est: Pius II and the East. Paper presented at the Seminar: Gespräche zwischen Morgen und Abend. Kulturkontakt und -konflikt zwischen Orient und Okzident im 15. Jahrhundert, 25. April 2024, Zoom, 14.00-17.30

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**Oriens nobis sublatus est :
Pius II and the East.**

**Paper presented at the Seminar: Gespräche zwischen
Morgen und Abend. Kulturkontakt und -konflikt zwischen Orient und
Okzident im 15. Jahrhundert, 25. April 2024, Zoom, 14.00-17.30**

by

Michael von Cotta-Schönberg

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1. Introduction

East-West relations in the Renaissance and Pius II's role in them were part of a long history of a dichotomy that is still highly - and even sadly relevant today. I shall not try to sketch this history but only give some examples that illustrate its persistence throughout centuries.

But first three caveats:

- 1) Firstly, the terms "East" and "West" have changed meaning over the years.

Today, USA, Canada and Australia are integral parts of the Western World, but they were, of course, unknown to Europeans before the 16th century. And the Far East and Southeast Asia were not really part of the (European) concept of the East in the Middle Ages.

- 2) Secondly, the East-West dichotomy expresses various kinds of diversity: cultural, economic, political, military and religious/philosophical.
- 3) And thirdly, the context has moved back and forth along a spectrum between negative and positive.

To Westerners, the "East" was not always an enemy. There were times when the East intensely fascinated Westerners,

- its art and literature were highly prized,
- and religions like Buddhism and Hinduism had many Western adherents and admirers, including the ubiquitous celebrities.
- To not talk about food!

Today, however, the East-West divide is often used to express political and economic opposition. In my youth, there was much talk about the *Yellow Danger*, a racist colour metaphor that depicts the peoples of the Far East and Southeast Asia as an existential danger to the Western world. The sinologist Wing-Fai Leung explained it this way: *The phrase "yellow peril" (sometimes yellow terror or yellow specter) ... blends Western anxieties about sex, racist fears of the alien Other, and the Spenglerian belief that the West will become outnumbered and enslaved by the East."*

And many of us have lived part of our lives in the shadow of the great *Ost-West Konflikt* that opposed the Communist Soviet Union and the Western world, and today has become sadly acute with the Russian war in Ukraine.

The East-West dichotomy in a negative sense has deep roots. Pius II might have said that it goes as far back as the Persian attempts to conquer Greece, Alexander's conquest of the East, and the Romans seizing Asia Minor, and their permanent conflict with the Parthians.

It has been tempting to many historians to see the Muslim Conquest of the Iberian Peninsula and the medieval crusades against the Arabs and the Turks as an expression of an East-West conflict. And, as you all know, the Renaissance humanists took an active role in the attempts to mobilise the European rulers to resist the Turkish invasion. Leading scholars today have shown considerable interest in this subject, such as Robert Schwoebel, James Hankins, Margaret Meserve and Nancy Bisaha, who is with us today.

2. Pius' use of the word East

2.1. Direction

The first sense, in which Piccolomini used the word "East", is simply one of the four directions, as in:

- *Germany is the most convenient and accessible location in all Christendom, for there, if you look at it rightly, you will find the navel and the centre of Christianity, between the Rhine and Austria. To the west, it reaches to Spain; to the east, to Greece; to the north, to Norway; and to the south, to the farthest peoples of Sicily* (ORA, 15, 21).

2.2. Part of the world

The second sense in which Pius used the word East is as one of the parts of the world, and he often mentioned it as such in his writings.

Some examples:

- *Alexander, son of Philip, was only lord of Macedonia when he invaded the East with [just] 32.000 soldiers and reached as far as India* (ORA, 21: 12).
- *Also the Venetians and the Genoese were forced to make peace with the Turks lest they lose their cities in the East* (ORA, 22: 38).

Pius uses the West in the same sense:

- *If only bad advice had not prevented the noble Duke Philippe of Burgundy from coming! Indeed, the whole West would have gone to war with this great prince who had promised to accompany Us* (ORA, 76: 3).

There were, naturally, four parts of the world, East, West, South and North, but the two most important parts of Pius' world were the East and the West, and he sometimes used these terms juxtaposed to designate - I believe - the whole civilised world. Some examples:

- *The anchorage [at Genoa] is safe for the ships, and many lie there tall like mountains, both galleys and countless other seafaring vessels. They come and go all the time, some from the East and some from the West, so that every day you see various races of men, and unknown - even uncouth - manners, and merchants arriving with all kinds of merchandise (EPI, 6: 1).*
- *[Genoa,] the city whose constant revolutions are an object of amazement to both East and West (EUR, 48: 174).*
- *[On Charlemagne]: His star is known to all, it shines in the East and the West (ORA, 65: 12).*

And then there is this interesting passage, where Piccolomini imagines nothing less than a global world system, open to trade ... and tourism!

- *If travelling were safe, and the seas not infested by pirates, and forests and fields not beset by brigands, the Italians would often go to Germany, and the Germans to Italy. All necessities of human life [produced] in the East would be brought to the West, and likewise, the Westerners would not refuse to send their wares to the East. The whole world would become one community, and it would be pleasant and delightful to visit now one region, now another (EPI, 202: 2).*

This passage is important since it appears to reflect Pius' fundamental view of a connected world.

2.3. Empire of the East

Whereas the first two senses of the term "East" in Pius' writings were geographical, the third was political, as in "The Eastern Empire." The Eastern Empire was the continuation of the classical Roman Empire, from which - for Pius - the law, legitimacy and authority of the successor states derived.

According to an historically inexact narrative deloped by the medieval Papacy, the pope, in the year 800, translated the imperial power from the Greeks in the East to Charlemagne in the West.

- *The Roman Empire was vested in the Greeks in the East, but when they were asked for help against the Lombards and did not send it, Pope Stephen - or was it Hadrian? - transferred it to the Germans in the West (ORA, 20: 24).*

Charlemagne, however, accepted the existence of a separate Eastern Empire so that the Christian world would henceforth consist of two empires: the Western and the Eastern Empire.

- *[The pope, in 800] did not create two empires, of which he granted one to the Franks. No, the Empire was transferred [to Charlemagne] entire and undivided. It was Charlemagne himself who shared the Empire, first with [the Greek Empress] Irene, and afterwards with ... Emperor Nicephorus. Thus, Charlemagne kept only half of what he had received as a whole [from the*

pope], leaving the Eastern parts to the Greeks and keeping the Western parts for himself (ORA, 52: 18).

So, in Pius' vision of things, the Eastern Empire was, together with the Western Empire, the legitimate continuation of the Roman Empire and formed the other half of the Christian world.

The seat of the Eastern Empire was glorious Constantinople:

- *The royal city of Constantinople ... pillar and head of the whole East, seat of patriarchs and emperors, unique home of Greek wisdom and learning, where there were so many magnificent temples, so many chapels, so many palaces of princes and noble mansions of citizens, so many public and private works built at such immense cost and with such great labour that foreigners coming there would admire the splendid city and said it was the home not of mortals, but of heavenly beings ... that city, which once gave laws to the whole East (From the bull *Vocavit nos Pius* (EPI, 29: 5).*

2.4. The Church of the East

The other great institution of the East was the Eastern Church. This venerable Church, together with the Western Church, formed the whole Christian Church:

Despite the differences between the two churches, the Eastern Church was to be treasured and protected as an integral part of the Christian Church, which - as Piccolomini told Pope Nicolaus V - was the reason for the Crusades:

- *When the Eastern Church was persecuted by the pagans, and the Saracens crushed Jerusalem, your predecessor Urban was moved to act by the entreaties of [Emperor] Alexius, who held Constantinople, and of other Christians, living under the Turks (ORA, 19: 17).*

2.5. The lost East

Already in 1446, seven years before the Fall of Constantinople, Piccolomini said in an oration to Pope Eugenius IV:

- *Formerly, Asia believed in the crucified Christ and stayed, together with the Western peoples, in the Ark of Faith. And so did Africa. But today, oh misery, the whole East is separated from us. ... In Europe, too, there are many conflicts: one region is occupied by the gentile Teucrians [the Turks], another by the Saracens, and yet another by schismatics infected with various heresies. Our Christianity has been reduced and pressed into a corner (ORA, 10: 2).*

(In parenthesis, Piccolomini did not himself invent his famous concept of Christendom being reduced to a corner of Europe but borrowed it from the historian Flavio Biondo¹).

With the conquest of Constantinople, capital of the Eastern Empire, in 1453, the Turks achieved the subjugation of the whole East under Islamic rule.

In one of his great crusade orations, in 1455, Piccolomini thundered:

- *But see now the reduced circumstances of our Faith: Jerusalem, where Our Lord first made an appearance, where he effected our salvation, and where his tomb is shown, is occupied by the Saracens, and we only have access at their pleasure. Antioch, where the name of Christ was first heard, is now a stranger to our religion. Alexandria, initiated into our Faith by Mark, taught by the great Origenes, and confirmed in the faith by Saint Athanasius, now hears the fables of Muhammad. Carthage, which followed the great Augustine and Saint Cyprian, has been destroyed, and in its place has come Tunisia. The whole of Egypt is ignorant of Christ. The whole of Libya is estranged from us. The whole East reviles the cross of Christ (ORA, 23: 57).*

Christendom had lost the East:

- *Oriens nobis sublatus est (EPI, 400: 1).*

2.6. The East to be recovered

Lost to the Islamic Turks and Arabs, the East was waiting to be saved by the West:

- *The old East that once gave us [in the West] the light of the true Faith now expects light and salvation from the West (ORA, 27: 3).*

In his first great crusade oration, the “*Quamvis omnibus*” delivered at the Diet in Regensburg in 1454, Piccolomini gave as the program for the crusade:

- *to not only defend what remains of Christianity but even to recover what has been lost. (ORA, 21:42).*

At that stage, he apparently considered that the crusaders should not only 1) defend the West against further Turkish attacks, but 2) also recover Constantinople and Greece, and 3) retake the Holy Land with Jerusalem. Hopes were indeed high, as Piccolomini told Pope Callixtus III:

¹ Cf. Flavio Biondo: *Historiarum ab inclinatione Romanorum Imperii decades*, II, 3 [Im. 75]: *per cujus [Europae] omnes provincias et regiones nomen floruit Christianum. Quod nomen nostris temporibus ad parvum orbis angulum coangustari et quotidie de excidio periclitari videmus*

- *Our age trusts that the Eastern realms will return to Christ, the true and one God (ORA, 24: 4).*

And in February 1459, Pius even wrote to King Enrique IV of Castile that

- *the Christians will exterminate the members of the Muhammedan sect, miserable enemies of the Faith, from everywhere both in the East and the West (Annales Ecclesiastici, ad annum 1459, nr. 24).*

However, despite this bold papal declaration, Piccolomini had already by 1456 realised that there could be no reconquest of the Holy Land, whereas the recovery of Constantinople and Greece was still part of his crusade program. That year, he said, in an oration to King Alfonso V of Naples

- *we must expect that you will with a great and powerful fleet ... sail to the East in order to avenge the injury to God and Our Saviour, recover Constantinople, and restore the whole of Greece to the Christian name (ORA, 27: 3).*

Now, not one word about regaining the Holy Land and Jerusalem!

Later still, the ambition was further reduced to only defend the West from future Turkish attacks, and there was no longer any talk of retaking Constantinople and Greece.

During the Congress in Mantua in 1459, it became painfully obvious that the European princes had no enthusiasm for a grand medieval-style crusade, so, at the end of the congress, Pius said - forgetting his own previous ambitions:

- *When We heard that Greece was lost, that the Christian people were under daily and increasing pressure from the Turks, that our holy places were being profaned, and the sacred Gospel trod underfoot, Our intention was neither to drag Muhammad away by his beard, nor to take the Turks and the Arabs away in chains, nor to reclaim Jerusalem and Constantinople - for We are not that headstrong and conceited - but to safeguard what was left of the Christian name (ORA, 54: 2).*

2.7. Preliminary conclusion

The present study has only retrieved two passages, where Pius applies the term Eastern to the Turks:

The first is in a letter to the pope in 1448 about the Second Battle of Kosovo, where he wrote:

- *In the meantime, the Turk, with Eastern cleverness, had not been idle (EPI, 228: 7).*

The second is in a letter to a Sienese friend of September 1453, after the Fall of Constantinople:

- *[Mehmed] has chosen to pass over from Durazzo to Brindisi. This is where Pompey and Caesar once crossed over to Greece; this is where the Latins often passed over to subjugate the kings of Asia. So, it is quite appropriate that, in our time, Eastern armies should take passage in the opposite direction to destroy the Latin troops. All things fluctuate; no power remains forever. Once, the Italians were the lords; now the Turkish rule begins (EPI, 382: 7).*

(Note that Piccolomini here came close to sketching a pendulum theory of the power shifts between East and West).

A preliminary conclusion of the present study is that to Pius II, the East was an integral part of the Christian world, which consisted of both the Eastern Empire and Church and the Western Empire and Church, with Rome and Constantinople as the two eyes of Christianity. One eye may have been plucked out, and the East may - for the time being - have been lost to the Turks and Arabs, but it was still rightfully ours.

3. Some reflections on Pius II and the Turks

3.1. The Turks as a mortal danger to Europe and the Papacy

Pius was convinced that the Turks constituted a mortal danger to Europe and the Papacy. The Turkish sultan, Mehmed II, wanted to destroy the European powers and Christianity:

- *The Turks, mighty enemies of the lifegiving Cross fight us on land and at sea, and not content with having conquered Constantinople, they also want the West and endeavour, with all their might, to destroy the Law of Christ and the Gospel (EPI, 465: 2).*

Mehmed was not just fighting the Christian religion; he wanted to conquer the European realms, as Pius warned the Congress of Mantua:

- *Trust Us: ... Unless we go against them, they will come, the Turks, they will come, and take our country and people. (ORA, 45: 18).*

In sum:

- *Having conquered the Eastern Empire, Mehmed now seeks to take the Western (ORA, 71: 1).*

Pius' conception of the Turkish danger was not the feverish imaginings of a fearful mind but a realistic, objective assessment of the situation as he knew it. This is confirmed by modern scholarship.

In his great biography of Mehmed the II, Franz Babinger wrote:

- *Welche Absichten der Staatenlenker Mehmed II. mit dem Abendlande hatte, steht ausser Zweifel. Wie einst Alexander der Grosse gegen Osten zog ... so plante Mehmed II den Westen als Ziel seiner Angriffe und Eroberungspläne auszuersuchen* (Babinger, pp. 539, 571).

And Alfred Strnad confirmed it:

- *Wie er [Pius] uns in seinen "Commentarii" erzählt, fürchtete er mit vollem Recht, dass sich die Osmanen mit den bislang eroberten Gebiete bei weitem nicht zufrieden geben würden* (Strnad: *Johannes*, p. 77).

3.2. A balanced view

So, Pius rightly considered the Turks as the main enemy of Christian Europe. He himself was the Christian protagonist. James Hankins called him *the greatest crusading pope of the Renaissance*.

In his crusade speeches, Pius used his consummate oratorical skills to play on the emotions of his listeners and inspire them to go on a crusade by painting before them the image of Turkish barbarity and atrocities.

He was, he admits, inspired by the example of his predecessor Urban II, in Clermont in 1095, whose oratory convinced the assembly to eagerly accept a crusade. Pius was understandably disappointed not to achieve the same success at the Congress of Mantua!:

- *Oh, if only Godefroy was here now ... and the other mighty men who in former times passed through the armies of the Turks and regained Jerusalem with arms. They would not let Us speak so many words, but would rise up and shout, loudly and enthusiastically: 'God wills it!'" God wills it!' as they did once, before Our predecessor, Urban II. But you are waiting silently for the end of this oration, and you seem quite unmoved by Our exhortation* (ORA, 45: 41-42).

However, Pius' view of the Turks was, in fact, more balanced than the savage and primitive barbarians we meet in his crusade orations and some other texts.

Firstly, from his extensive historical studies, Pius knew well that barbaric tribes had ever so often invaded the Roman Empire and become assimilated into it, like the Franks. They even, in the case of the Goths, whose history he himself compiled, become the recognised rulers of Italy and Rome. The Turks were just the latest wave of Asian invaders, though just as dangerous.

And secondly, Pius was apparently aware that Turkish rule was quite lenient and might actually be welcomed by many Christians, as he told Pope Callixtus III in 1455:

- *Many taxes, many extorsions of money, and many robberies burden the Christian people, and many are the abuses of our princes, not to say tyrants, against their subjects. Therefore, I*

greatly fear that when the Turk comes and lightens the burdens on our peoples, they will willingly submit to the Turk, especially if he grants freedom of faith - for he is a clever enemy (ORA, 26: 23).

3.3. Religious toleration

Moreover, Pius, a humane, cultured and broadminded humanist, had a degree of religious tolerance that was remarkable for the West in that age. In this, he was inspired by Juan de Segovia's ideas on a peaceful dialogue with Islam, and Nikolaus von Kues' "*De Pace Fidei*", in which he coined the phrase: *Una religio in rituum varietate (One religion in a diversity of rites)*.

Inspired by such views, Piccolomini proposed to solve the Hussite schism by having the papacy recognise the Bohemian rite of communion under both species (bread and wine). He did not pursue this policy when he became pope, but that was not due to the ritual issue itself but because the Hussites staunchly maintained their position that communion under both species (bread and wine) was necessary for salvation. This meant that the Catholic Church had, for centuries, condemned its own believers to Hell by denying them the communion of the chalice (the wine) - a view that was naturally totally unacceptable to the Church.

Apart from his tolerance in ritual matters, Piccolomini did not believe in converting people (in this case the Bohemians) by war. As he told Pope Callixtus,

- *What is bought by human blood is far too expensive. A soul is not acceptable to God if it only adores the crucified Lord because it has been coerced by war. The Bohemians who survive the war may be forced to accept our rites, but they will not do so voluntarily. They will accept our faith through fear alone and not with their hearts. They will always be thinking about how to escape servitude (ORA, 28: 22).*

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This common sense and tolerance is also shown in Piccolomini's reaction to the pogrom against the Jews in Wroclaw in 1453, where he did not buy into the hysterical accusations of Jewish sacrileges but drily commented:

- *In Wroclaw, all Jews have reportedly been cast into chains because they are said to have blasphemed against the Lord's sacrament. *I think* this is an invention to extort money [from the Jews] for the new king (EPI, 326: 2).*

Which all means that for Pius, the crusade he preached, was not an aggressive war of religion against the Turks - like a Christian Jihad - but a necessary defence of Christian Europe against the Turkish invasion.

3.4. The peaceful solution

Piccolomini was an experienced diplomat who preferred peaceful solutions to military ones, and one of his axioms was that the outcome of war is always doubtful. Moreover, as we have seen, he had come to the conclusion that the Europeans could only defend themselves against further Turkish incursions into the West and should not try to regain Constantinople and the Holy Land by military means.

So, it is not strange that at one point during his pontificate, he imagined a peaceful settlement with the Turks.

In his famous *Letter to Mehmed*, he wrote:

- *If you want to extend your empire to the Christians and make your name glorious, you will need money, armies, and fleets. However, one small thing can make you the greatest, the most powerful, and the most noble of all who live today. You ask what it is? It is not difficult to find, and it is not far away. Indeed, it is found everywhere. It is simply a little water with which you are baptised and come to the sacred rites of the Christians and belief in the Gospel. If you do that, no prince on Earth will surpass you in glory or equal your power. We will give you the title of Emperor of the Greeks and the East, and what you now occupy by force and hold unjustly, you will possess by right. ... Your authority, greatness of soul, and success in war are admired by all who follow Muhammad. If you join us, the whole East will return to Christ (EMA, 9:1-9:3).*

The baptism of Mehmed was not a solution invented by Pius for this particular case. Indeed, there were eminent precedents for the baptism of pagan rulers. In the letter, Pius mentions Wladislaw II, who was baptised in 1386 to become King of Poland. He could also have mentioned Clovis, King of the Franks, baptised in 508, and Harold Bluetooth, King of Denmark, baptised in 960.

The peaceful solution proposed in the *Letter to Mehmed* would actually have been a translation of the Eastern Empire from the Greeks to the Turks, following the precedence of the translation of the Empire from the Greeks to the Franks performed in 800 by papal authority - at least according to papal tradition.

But there was a difficulty, of course: Mehmed did not have the slightest inclination or motive to become a Christian, and he wanted to possess the West by right, not by papal right, but by his own right, the right of conquest. Pius knew this, and the letter was presumably never sent.

So, it was a beautiful dream, an intellectual exercise, or a piece of papal propaganda destined for European consumption, but it does show Pius' broadness of mind and the fact - important in our context - that he would not give up on the East.

4. Conclusion

Based on my present research, my view is that for Piccolomini/Pius - and I speak only of him, not of other humanists of that age - the great geopolitical divide in the world, as he knew it, was between Christian Europe and the Islamic Turks and Arabs. It was not between East and West, for in Piccolomini's mental construct of the world, the East and the West were two intimately united parts of the same whole: the civilised, Christian world, with the East being the fountain of Faith, a legacy from venerable Antiquity, and a source of imperial legitimacy. Had Pius lived much longer, his conception would probably have changed to fit a new, permanent reality, the Turkish, Islamic East ... but he did not!

EPI = Piccolomini's letters. The numbers refer to my edition/translation, *Collected Letters of Enea Silvio Piccolomini*, available in HAL Archive.

ORA = Piccolomini's orations. The numbers refer to my edition/translation, *Collected Orations of Enea Silvio Piccolomini / Pope Pius II.*, available in HAL Archive.