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Monotheisms and Inter-Faith Conflict Precipitated the Rise of Western Europe

A Review of War, Peace, and Prosperity in the Name of God: The Ottoman Role in Europe's Socioeconomic Evolution by Murat Iyigun (University of Chicago Press, 2015)

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Seshat: Global History Databank

This recent contribution by noted economic historian Murat Iyigun explores the important role that the three great monotheistic faiths have played in the history of western Eurasia from the Medieval period to the present day. This effort is in large part a summary and synthesis of Iyigun's earlier work. It nevertheless provides a refreshing and fairly novel take on many important issues. Iyigun offers broad historical overview along with some quantitative material to demonstrate the critical and lingering impact that violent confrontation between religious groups had on the social, political, and economic developments in western and central Europe, the Near East, and North Africa. Iyigun adeptly traces how conflict, especially between the Muslim Ottoman Empire and the various Christian states of Europe during roughly the 15th–19th centuries CE, catalyzed these groups, each in response to the perceived existential threat from the other. For the European/Christian world, the Muslim threat helped to ease intra-faith tensions (between Catholics and Protestants) and stabilize institutional structures within states, encouraging the remarkable economic development the region enjoyed from the 17th century onwards. In the Near East, this same competition similarly helped to ease tensions between different Islamic sects, at least for a time, and likewise caused a coalescence of institutional structures, though these turned out to be less economically beneficial than those in Christian Europe. Thus, the so-called 'Great Divergence' of the 16th and 17th centuries, where Europe began to distinguish itself from the rest of the world in economic and political development, concludes Iyigun, owes much to the violent history between these religious groups.

War, Peace, and Prosperity is organized into 4 parts. The first consists of only one Chapter, an introduction to the book's central themes. Part II offers 2

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Chapters describing the historical developments of the three major monotheistic faiths in the Medieval period. Part III has 4 Chapters; the first provides the book's most detailed description of Iyigun's conceptual approach. The other 3 Chapters resume the historical synopsis, explaining the Ottoman Empire's rise to power as well as the growing tension between Protestant and Catholic groups in western Europe. Part IV is perhaps the most interesting in the work, featuring 4 Chapters that blend qualitative historical summary with some quantitative time-series data concerning the number and location of intra- and inter-faith conflicts over the course of the Medieval period.

There is much of interest in this work for historians of the Middle Ages and the early modern world, scholars of religious history, political scientists, and economic historians alike. The primary appeal of *War, Peace, and Prosperity*, though, is its grand scope and ambition. It is well worth the read for scholars engaged with quantitative history and cultural evolution, though many will find the analyses somewhat lacking. Reaching beyond the narrow lens of traditional, local histories, Iyigun persuasively advocates for the importance of taking a more sweeping, comparative approach to the subject at hand than traditional work on Medieval history. His engagement with quantitative historical data is likewise a welcome addition to the field, although the limited amount of data and the somewhat rudimentary analyses offered here raise as many questions as they answer (more on this below). Encouraging also is Iyigun's effort throughout the work to bring the issue of cultural values and within-group dynamics into an historical period that has typically been explained entirely on political, economic, or religious grounds. Iyigun notes that a deeper understanding of the way that cultural norms and expectations influence people's behavior and percolates into these broader areas is needed to address some of the great lingering historical problems, including the Great Divergence, an important and largely unresolved topic of much recent research (Pomeranz 2000; Broadberry 2013; de Pleijt and van Zanden 2013).

While Iyigun's approach presents some intriguing bits for proponents of cultural evolution and cliodynamics, neither the quantitative analyses nor the engagement with evolutionary theory fully satisfy. At points, it seems as though he is headed in the direction of some recent work in cultural evolution and cliodynamics (Boyd and Richerson 2004; Mesoudi 2011; Richerson and Christiansen 2013; Turchin 2014; Grinin, Markov, and Korotayev 2013). Indeed, the central thrust of the work is the idea that "monotheisms possessed advantages that enabled them to survive and spread over the course of history and that, once they were pitted against one another as a consequence, *differences between* them were strong enough to typically trump and relegate *disagreements within* them" (p.153). This comes tantalizingly close to multi-level selection

models of cultural evolution (Wilson 2002; Bell, Richerson, and McElreath 2009; Turchin et al. 2013). Iyigun's explanation for the interactions between Muslim Ottomans and Christian Europe is particularly reminiscent of the theory that within-group cooperation is fostered at 'meta-ethnic frontiers' where two radically different groups compete against and threaten each other's existence (Turchin 2003). Iyigun's thesis in essence is that the lingering existential threat the Muslim Ottomans posed to the Christian world—the international level—exerted a strong enough force to override the pressures of intra-Christian competition (namely, the divide between Catholics and Protestants), selecting for norms and institutions that favored intra-group cooperation among the various states of Christian Europe—the regional level. For Iyigun, this dynamic is *the* key factor in the development of northern Europe. He contends that this intra-group solidarity helped to resolve collective action problems, coordinate activity, and allowed various institutional features (especially the management of property rights and allowing individuals the freedom to conduct commercial transactions) to stabilize and flourish; the 'Socioeconomic Evolution' of the book's subtitle. This institutional stabilization and the freedom afforded by the now (relatively) peaceful Christian world, thus, explains for Iyigun how certain states in northwestern Europe could devote their energies and resources to pursuing commercial and industrial development. The seeds of the great Divergence, then, were sown by intense inter-faith competition.

Again, the use of the 'Evolution' in the subtitle and Iyigun's focus on the interplay between inter- and intra-group competition and on the way that cultural norms developed and spread over time make *War, Peace, and Prosperity* at once both absorbing and frustrating for readers interested in a quantitative, evolutionary approach to historical topics. A few select evolutionary scholars are cited at one point in the work (p. 63–4), but in the main Iyigun relies on more traditional economic models, notably game-theory and new institutional economic theory along with his own historical intuitions to account for the complex interaction—the conflict and the cooperation—within and between religious groups during this period. While the general outline of the argument is somewhat compelling, one misses more sustained and detailed reference to theories on cultural evolution. Additionally, and more essentially, the work is in need of further direct testing of the factors that Iyigun presents as causal to northwestern Europe's ascension at the end of the Medieval period. Iyigun's game theoretic approach is quite clear regarding the way that the existential threat from the Islamic world encouraged the resolution of conflict between Protestant and Catholic groups in Europe as well as the knock-on effects of their peaceful coexistence on the region's subsequent political and economic development. Yet, he largely punts the issue of why this same competition did not have similar effect

for the Ottomans. The factors that he cites as causal in the early modern ascent of northwestern Europe are not directly tested against the alternate experience of Muslim groups in the Near East and North Africa. Moreover, Iyigun accepts at face value the standard new institutional economics notion that northwestern European states had 'favorable' institutions like clearly defined property rights and relatively well-developed financial mediation (North 1990; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012) without fully exploring how exactly they provoked 'modern' economic growth, where they came from to begin with, and why other states throughout Europe, the Near East, or North Africa failed to develop similar ones. More explicit testing of the predictions of the model, especially looking at some alternative cases to the central, positive examples of northwestern Europe, are wanting. Such testing would help to explain both the evolution of separate institutional systems and cultural norms in these different regions as well as the overall divergent developmental paths taken by Europe and the Near East and North Africa from the 17th century on; as it stands, Iyigun only really accounts for Europe ascension, not the Muslim world's apparent stagnation or decline.

Here too a deeper sense of history may help. *War, Peace, and Prosperity* is a remarkable work surveying a huge amount of material, bridging the histories of disparate regions over a 500 year time span. Still, at parts an even wider scope seems necessary. Iyigun makes much of the different institutional systems in place in the Christian and Muslim worlds, adeptly noting how religious-based cultural differences greatly affected the way that people interacted with these institutions and, therefore, their wider impact on sociopolitical and economic affairs. One often gets the impression while reading, though, that these institutions arose out of thin air sometime in the 15th century. There are occasional mentions to the early spread of Christianity (e.g. p.28-32) and later the rise of Islam in the first millennium (e.g. p.50-2), but an account of the institutional pedigree left behind by the great Empires of antiquity—the Roman and Parthian Persian—could go a long way to explaining the subsequent institutional developments both within and between these regions that Iyigun's analysis leaves ambiguous.

There are a few other matters to quibble over as well. Chapters 8 and 9 deal with the way that the religious and ethnic makeup of modern countries in central Europe is largely owing to the heritage of these Medieval conflicts; very interesting discussions to be sure, but it is at times challenging to follow the logic behind Iyigun's arguments and how they relate to the overall themes of the book. Further, at several places, the reader is promised more complete presentation of the data used in the quantitative analyses in an online appendix, though no such resource is accessible. The charts and maps presented in the Book (in Chapter 8

especially), moreover, are impossibly small and crowded, making it frustratingly difficult to assess Iyigun's analyses critically.

Continued work is needed to clarify some of the critical issues raised here, expanding study both further back in time and taking a wider geographical frame to offer a more thorough testing of the conclusions presented here. Still, Iyigun's work is a very welcome addition to the 'Great Divergence' debate, an effective call to increase scholarly appreciation of the role that culture plays in sociopolitical and economic development, and a novel account of the general history of these great Eurasian powers during the still poorly understood Medieval period. In all, *War, Peace, and Prosperity* is a well-researched and innovative historical study, an intriguing set of arguments concerning group competition and the impact of culture on economic development, and a prodigious jumping-off point for future study.

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