

Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

Volume 21. South-western Europe (1800-1914)

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Enrico Cerulli

DATE OF BIRTH 15 February 1898
PLACE OF BIRTH Naples
DATE OF DEATH 19 September 1988
PLACE OF DEATH Rome

BIOGRAPHY

Enrico Cerulli was one of the most outstanding Orientalists and Africanists of the 20th century. Son of a lawyer in Naples, he graduated in law from the University of Naples. His thesis on the customary law of the Somali Majeerteen clan was part of a larger work which he published when he was still a student. At the same time, he studied Arabic and other African and Oriental languages at the Regio Istituto Orientale (later Istituto Universitario Orientale, now Università di Napoli 'L'Orientale').

In 1920, he entered the employment of the Ministry of Colonies and held positions of political responsibility in Somalia from 1920 to 1925. Transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he worked at the Italian Embassy (Legazione d'Italia) in Ethiopia from 1926 to 1931. During his time in Addis Ababa, he completed two seminal ethno-linguistic missions in Harar (1926-7) and western Ethiopia (1927-8). Returning to Italy, from 1932 he resumed his work in the Ministry of Colonies and undertook several diplomatic assignments. From 1937 to 1939, he was in Ethiopia as vice-governor general of Africa Orientale, and from May 1939 to June 1940 he was governor of the Province of Harar. Tensions with the viceroy, Amedeo di Savoia, Duke of Aosta, prompted Cerulli's removal from office and his return to Italy. Between 1943 and 1945, he lived in Vatican City as a refugee. His diplomatic career resumed from 1950 to 1954, when he was ambassador to Iran. Up to 1968, he held the office of Consigliere di Stato and from 1973 to 1975 he was the president of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei.

His intellectual output includes some 300 titles ranging from the ethnography of the Horn of Africa to Islamic studies, from African linguistics to Semitic philology, from the history of the Christian Orient to European relations with Asian and African cultures in the Middle Ages and modern times.

Cerulli died in Rome in 1988.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*La questione del Califfato in rapporto alle nostre
Colonie di diretto dominio*

'The question of the caliphate in relation to our
directly controlled colonies'

DATE 1917

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Italian

DESCRIPTION

Enrico Cerulli presented this paper at the 'Convegno Nazionale Coloniale', held in Naples on 26-8 August 1917, when he was only 19 years old. Only nine pages long, it deals with the problem of the relationship between political power and spiritual supremacy within Islamic thought, and consequently with the issue of the religious freedom of the peoples living in the Italian colonies. Summarising the first steps in the development of Islamic ideas, the paper explores two central points: first, the overlaps between the political and religious dimensions in the thought of the Prophet Muḥammad, and second, the original role and limited functions of the caliphs as his successors. Cerulli criticises the decisions of the Treaty of Lausanne (1912), in which the Italian government acknowledged

Mehmet V (r. 1909-18), the Ottoman sultan, as caliph, that is, as the spiritual leader of the Islamic peoples of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Since Islamic jurists never separated the political and the religious prerogatives of the leader of the *umma*, in doing this the treaty implicitly acknowledged the sultan as a political landmark for the peoples of North Africa as well. Cerulli argues that this was a mistake made by the Italian delegates to the Lausanne negotiations. Even though they wanted to separate the political from the religious aspects of the argument, by considering the Ottoman sultan as the caliph, they accidentally confirmed his position over the Libyan peoples as their foreign and distant political leader.

SIGNIFICANCE

During his fourth term as prime minister, Giovanni Giolitti declared the so-called Italo-Turkish war on 29 September 1911 as an expression of his colonial plans. The conflict brought about the Italian occupation of the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in present-day Libya. On 18 October 1912, the Kingdom of Italy and the Ottoman Empire signed a peace treaty in Lausanne. This established the transfer of the civil and military administration of the two North African provinces from the sultan to the Italian government, but declared that Turkey maintained juridical and religious sovereignty through the presence of a religious representative of the caliph in the two provinces. This diplomatic formula was aimed at satisfying Mehmet V, who still considered himself the spiritual leader of the Muslims living in the territories once under his rule. Yet according to the Muslim principle of non-separation between political and spiritual authority, it confirmed the caliph in his role as sultan (political leader) in the eyes of the common people.

In his arguments, Cerulli was supporting the religious independence of the Muslims of the Italian colonies from the caliph, with the stated aim of creating a Libyan partner to Italy, under the authority of Idris I (r. 1951-69), leader of the Sanūsī Islamic brotherhood (*al-ṭarīqa l-sanūsīyya*). In this diplomatic position, Cerulli was trying to find a compromise between Italian colonial interests and 19th-century European principles of national self-determination.

PUBLICATIONS

- E. Cerulli, 'La questione del Califfato in rapporto alle nostre Colonie di diretto dominio', in *Atti del Convegno nazionale coloniale. Napoli, 26-28 aprile 1917*, Naples, 1917, 3-12

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E. Cerulli, 'La questione del Califfato (1917)', in E. Cerulli, *L'Islam di ieri e di oggi*, Rome, 1971, 83-7 (abbreviated version)

STUDIES

Review in *Journal of the Royal African Society* 17 (1918) 243-5; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/715790>

Gianfrancesco Lusini