

Euro-Mediterranean Partnerships:

Europe has recently begun to reconsider the situation of its Muslim minorities with enhanced intensity. However, this is not an intensity rooted in the familiar, necessary precautions and preventative measures being taken to ensure that the tragic wreckage violent, radical jihadists leave behind them does not occur again. Rather, there is also an increasing undercurrent of critical thought that is fast proposing a revisionist view of the ways in which West and Middle Eastern cultures can profitably interact, or have fruitfully encountered one another, in the past. This revision suggests that contemporary efforts at cross-cultural ideational reconstruction may lead to popular and policy pathways that will help avoid continuing confrontation.

To a great extent, a countervailing mood was signaled by a Saudi proposal at establishing an ongoing dialogue among representatives of the world's major monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. (1) Dialogues based on differing historical interpretations and definitions may well avail themselves of the long-awaited publication of Turkey's 24 volume 'Encyclopedia of Islam,' which is scheduled to appear translated into English and Arabic. (2) These events are occurring against a background discussion on the part of Islamic scholars, who underscore the growing alienation of radicalism from religious teachings and traditions and point as well to the inherently moderating influences that guide and lend order to an ancient way of life. (3) Acting to dampen a West-Middle Eastern cultural divide is the EU's expansion of its Barcelona Process, free trade projects, along with those that will stimulate an inter-cultural dialogue and response with many participating Islamic nations. (4) European and Middle Eastern efforts at creating cross-civilizational approaches and alliances to counterbalance otherwise confrontational contemporary trends are also being accompanied by current research tendencies in intellectual history that are clarifying what is often viewed inaccurately as an historic and static struggle between West and East.

Anyone who seeks an alternate ideational trajectory might look at Hugh Kennedy's comprehensive study of the Muslim conquests of Islam's earliest years. Notable is the fact that conversion, or adoption of the Muslim faith, took place during a period of three hundred years, or before the 12th century, and was a relatively peaceful adaptation on the part of multi-ethnic and linguistically diverse peoples that involved joining what was perceived as a "self-confident culture" which offered relatively well-defined geographic frontiers and security given the fragmentation of the Roman Empire. (5) This was, in short, no early nomadic or desert kingdom, but rather a complex administrative apparatus with an expansionary and sophisticated bureaucracy that provided the type of negotiating and consultative techniques that permitted a growing, variable, and demographically widespread population, the tools of absorption into the common norms of a unitary religious tradition.

Those who wish to disestablish a seemingly inexorable image of historic military conquests from religious paths might also look at George Saliba's analysis of the rise of Islamic science from before the first millennium to the 17th century. (6) It was not as Europe considered this enterprise, underdeveloped or derivative, a veritable step-child of European thought, but rather indigenous in its growth and a mighty contributor to European Renaissance thinking in almost all areas of scientific inquiry, including astronomy, geometry, and medicine. What has been lacking are analyses of the documents and commentaries of both Middle Eastern and Western translators. These make clear that first, there was a vital and active exchange in ideas surrounding the scientific enterprise in both areas. And second, that the superiority of Western science only began, and Islam's formative contributions became largely forgotten, with the West's discovery of the New World and the rise of scientific institutions that contributed a knowledge-base that underwrote exploration, trade, commerce, and the safety of sea crossings in mathematical modeling and improved cartography.

Such revisionist studies might add to the bridge that is already being created by the prospect of a Euro-Mediterranean partnership. Yet they also provide a cautionary note, for they also make clear that in the past, just as is often the case today, the exchange of knowledge, at its best and at its worst, is often subject to the activities of the relative few. The manner in which this knowledge is broadened and shared in the future, through suggested dialogues as well as policy partnerships, may have a determining role in whether the cross-civilizational approaches the EU seeks with the Islamic domain remain in outline those of incomplete understandings, or whether the West-Middle East divide will continue to be as it was before the historians' most recent contributions, the unfortunate "stuff of legends." (7)

"Saudi King Calls For Dialogue Among Different Religions."

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