

The Little Known Tolerant and Humane Aspects of Muslim Civilisation

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THE LITTLE KNOWN TOLERANT AND HUMANE ASPECTS OF MUSLIM CIVILISATION

Muslims, as a minority in Western societies, have come under severe strain since September 11th, 2001, in particular. The Italian Prime Minister, just like the deceased Dutch right winger Pim Fortuyn and scores more in their wake, have engaged in open diatribes against Islam, labelling it a faith of darkness, a negation to civilisation and progress; intolerant and in-humane, and so on and so forth; a language reminiscent of that thrown at the faith in the 19th century just prior to, and in the wake of, the occupation of Islamic lands. Occupation which then was justified as a civilising mission for the good of Muslims.

Today's media and numerous and rapidly expanding web-sites keep adding to the stream of similar derogatory terms. Some writers and sites are more virulent than others. Of course, other than cheap and aggressive slander, the position of the Muslims within European society is becoming increasingly more tenuous. A recent 'Special Report on Islam in Europe' in Time¹ magazine has caught some of the many woes lived by Muslims, which vary from the French banning Muslim women from wearing the scarf in public schools to the high unemployment rates amongst Muslims of over 30% in Belgium. There, just as in many Western countries, was the election of an extreme right wing party 'Our People First' which won one third of votes in October 2000. The magazine also recognises how since September 11th, 2001, all Muslims have been deemed guilty of terror by association. This point was underlined by a guest on a recent 'Question Time' on the BBC.² He specifically noted how, when children in the UK today are asked what is a Muslim, the answer virtually from all is a terrorist! Hence courtesy of a largely targeted media campaign combined with the eagerness of politicians, whether left or right, seeking the oxygen of self publicity, there is a perception that behind every Muslim name there must be a potential terrorist.

Media bombardment, especially in 'democratic' countries, encouraged by many politicians with their own self serving agendas, has culminated this year with even Eid and Haj, two central events of the Islamic calendar, being made into occasions for claims that they might be scenarios for fuelling 'Muslim terrorism.' The BBC on 19 February 2003 came out with the nearest to portraying a monstrous Muslim menace threatening the West. On the 'Newsnight' programme of that evening, Islam was equated with fanaticism and terror whose aim is to build its huge web of violence all over the peaceful West. There was absolutely nothing new in the programme to justify such dramatic images; just the usual recycled material from nearly two years from the usual 'experts on terrorism'.³

The way anti Islamic sentiments are stirred by politicians of most hues, not just the right wingers, might trigger wider, and violent anti Islamic reactions, whose consequences will be beyond future control. Violence with ethnic Bosnian style cleansing could very well be encouraged to find roles in the West's supposedly civilised societies.

Of course, in many minds, the Muslims deserve such an end since it is too often believed that Islam is a basically backward and intolerant faith. This, of course, is what by and large the current media stance and most of the academic writing have made of Islam and Muslims, drowning out the otherwise very few voices such as those of Prince Charles, who has always tried to be objective in his views on both Islam and Muslims.

Yet, although demonised, painted as the followers of a faith of darkness and intolerance, Muslims are in fact, the followers of an intrinsically just faith. Even apparently Islam-hating historians seem to accept it (although in their case attributing such a tolerant and humane side to the circumstances of the time).

The Myth of Islam as a religion of the Sword

Qu'ran III, 128: God has said *".... and those among men who pardon others, and God loves those who act rightly."*

Aggression or violence by the use of the sword and Islam are nearly always depicted as co-existent. History though, reveals the complete opposite. From the early stages of Islam and during the whole of history of the Caliphate, it has usually followed the Sunnah policy of general leniency, to all, especially the defeated. Hence, the entry of the Prophet (PBUH) in Mecca was followed as Scott says: *"with a magnanimity unequalled in the annals of war, a general amnesty was proclaimed and but four persons, whose offences were considered unpardonable, suffered the penalty of death."*⁴

Davenport narrates how in the early stages of Islam, the Prophet (PBUH) sent a messenger to the governor of Bossa, near Damascus, who was taken prisoner and murdered by the Christian leader. Three thousand Muslim men were duly equipped for retribution. The Prophet exhorted them to display their courage in the cause of The Most High. At the same time, however, he enjoined them to collect their booty not from the ordinary people, but from the public treasuries of the conquered state:

"In avenging my injuries, said he,

*"Molest not the harmless votaries of domestic seclusion; spare the weakness of the softer sex, the infant at the breast, and those who, in the course of nature, are hastening from this scene of mortality. Abstain from demolishing the dwellings of the unresisting inhabitants, and destroy not the means of subsistence; respect their fruit trees, do not injure the palm, so useful to Syria for its shade and so delightful for its verdure."*⁵

The first four caliphs after the Prophet (PBUH) followed exactly these precepts.

"Be just", ran Caliph Abu Bakr's (632-4) proclamation;

*"Be valiant; die rather than yield; be merciful; slay neither old men, nor women, nor children. Destroy no fruit trees, grain, or cattle. Keep your word even to your enemies."*⁶

Under Caliph Omar (634-44), Syria was conquered by the Muslims. One day, probably early in September 635, as Glubb narrates, the Muslims flooded into Damascus at dawn. The Byzantine governor surrendered on terms that all non-Muslims were to pay a poll tax of one dinar (approximately equivalent of one pound sterling or two US Dollars and fifty cents) per year and a measure of wheat for the maintenance of the army. The cathedral was divided in half by a partition wall, the Muslims in future praying in one half, the Christians in the other. There was no killing or looting. These terms can be seen to have been of extraordinary generosity. Cities taken by storm were, in Europe, liable to be sacked, even as recently as the Napoleonic Wars.⁷

The Muslims had first hand experience of such a fate when their towns and cities were taken by the Crusaders with many instances of the slaughter of Muslims who were given no quarter. Thus, in 1098, during the first crusade (begun in 1096), when the Crusaders took Ma'arrat An'Numan, the slaughter never stopped for three days so that the Franks killed more than 100,000 people.⁸ Quoting Robert the Monk, following the taking of Ma'arrat:

*"Our men' said the pious and charitable chronicler (Lebon's words) 'walked through the roads, places, on the roofs, and feasted on the slaughter just like a lioness who had her cubs taken from her. They cut into pieces, and put to death children, the young, and the old crumbling under the weight of the years. They did that in groups... Our men grabbed everybody who fell into their hands. They cut bellies open, and took out gold coins. Oh detestable cupidity of gold! Streams of blood ran on the roads of the city; and everywhere lay corpses. Oh blinded nations and destined to death; none of that multitude accepted the Christian faith. At last Bohemond brought out all those he had first invited to lock themselves in the tower of the place. He ordered that all old women be put to death, and also old men, whose age had rendered useless; then all the rest he ordered to be taken to Antioch to be sold as slaves. This massacre of the Turks took place on 12 December; on Sunday; but on this day not all work could be accomplished; so the following day our men killed all the rest.'"*⁹

Radulph of Caen said how:

"In Maarra our troops boiled pagan adults in cooking pots; they impaled children on spits and devoured them grilled."

To avoid such a fate, many Muslims were said by a Christian writer to have jumped down wells to their deaths.¹⁰ And what happened at Ma'arrat happened in every single town and city taken by the Crusaders. And yet, even when Muslims were slaughtered en masse, still they found reserves of unequalled humanity. Finucane tells how in 1221, the defeated Christians were visited by their (Muslim) enemies, who brought them food to save them from starvation. Such stories of Christian Muslim cooperation, no matter how transient, humane or justified the relationship, Finucane also notes, were usually received 'with incomprehension in Europe.'¹¹

Forster in his criticism of Joseph White Bampton's lectures for distorting facts to comply with his preconceptions, notes how such lectures repeat (just as today) that the nations that have embraced Islam are universally distinguished 'by a spirit of hostility and hatred to the rest of mankind'.¹² Yet, Forster adds: 'The zeal of controversy seems equally to forget the exemplary humanity of the Saracens in Spain and the merciless barbarities of the Spaniards in South America, and of the Portuguese in India.' Even during the Middle Ages, Islam, he adds, 'was distinguished by a spirit of charitable and courteous beneficence. The treatment of Christians of Jerusalem by the generous Saladin may be cited as a memorable example.'¹³ And there was the same contrast of attitudes in other places, whenever devout Muslims led the fight of resistance. Hence during the French onslaught on Algeria, little mercy was shown by them towards the indigenous population. A French officer recounts:

"Order was given to deliver a war of devastation. So our soldiers acted with ferocity... women, children slaughtered, homes burnt down, trees razed to the ground, nothing was spared... Kabyle

women wore silver bracelets to the arms and around their ankles. Soldiers cut all their limbs, and they did not always do it to the dead only."¹⁴

And yet, when Emir Abdelkader (who led the resistance against the French), freeing his French prisoners said to them: 'I have nothing to feed you; I cannot kill you, thus I send you back home....' The prisoners, full of admiration for the Emir, had according to the French general St Arnaud: 'their minds diseased,' and had been, 'brainwashed.'¹⁵

Toleration of Difference

In the words of Daniel: 'The notion of toleration in Christendom was borrowed from Muslim practice'.¹⁶ And Davenport puts it:

*"As nothing in the world can cause an Osmanli to renounce his religion, so he never seeks to disturb the faith of others.... To the Muslim doctors (of the faith,) conversions of souls belong to God."*¹⁷

During the Muslim advance, there were hardly any examples, as was the case elsewhere, of forceful conversion, even in regions such as North Africa, which is often argued as a case of conversions by force of the sword. Forster¹⁸ pointed out, that in North Africa, Islam flourished apart from reliance on 'political domination' and that its 'votaries' were 'unshackled' by restraints of a Muslim government'.¹⁹ Equally, Voltaire, although no friend of Islam, still recognised that 'it was not by the force of arms that Islam established itself in half of our hemisphere, but instead did so through enthusiasm and persuasion.'²⁰

Glubb finds that in religious toleration, 'the Muslims of the seventh century had abstained from persecution and had permitted Jews and Christians to practise their own laws and to elect their own judges. Yet nearly a thousand years later, people in Europe were still being tortured and burned alive for their faith. And in general, the Ottomans continued the policy of religious toleration which they had inherited from the Arabs.'²¹

This toleration was also practiced in Muslim Southern Europe where the existing religion was scarcely interfered with. No counts, landed gentry, were appointed to govern or oppress the conquered, Scott points out.²²

In North Africa, seat of the supposedly fanatical Berber as many Western historian have labelled them, the same tolerance was shown. During the year 1233, which followed the death of Al Mamun, and the advent of his son al-Rashid, Pope Gregory IX wrote to the local Emir thanking him for his goodness towards Agnello, the Vicar of Fez, and for other Minor brothers living in his states. After a few years, under the same ruler, the Pope congratulated himself and the faithful of Mauritania for the 'advance made by Christianity in the country'.²³

As for the survival of Christian and Jewish minorities under Islam which contrasts with the disapproval of Muslims in Western Christendom, Lewis observes:

"Muslims were willing to tolerate significant differences in practice and even belief among themselves; they were also willing to concede a certain place in society to other, approved religions ... There is no equivalent to this tolerance in Christendom until the Wars of religion finally convinced Christians that it was time to live and let live. During the eight centuries that Muslims ruled part of the Iberian Peninsula, Christians and also Jews remained and even flourished. The consequences of the Christian re-conquest, for Jews and Muslims alike, are well known."²⁴

Araya Goubet, too, notes how

"Religious tolerance, Islamic inspiration, permitted the harmonious coexistence of Christians, Moors, and Jews until the end of the fifteenth century. The dominance of the Christian clergy led to the gradual exclusion, subjugation, and expulsion of the other religious groups, starting in 1492 but culminating in 1567 when Philip II published a decree forbidding Moriscos [Christianised (ex) Muslims] from using Muslim names and the Arabic language. The Moriscos were finally expelled in 1609. Ultimately the history of the Iberian people can be summed up as 'living togetherness' until its breaking apart beginning in the fifteenth century."²⁵

As for the Ottoman's so-called barbarism and inhumanity, Glubb has noted how modern writers in the West have lavished criticisms on the Ottoman Empire, normally basing their remarks on its condition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is only just to record, he says, that until the seventeenth century at least, it was so much in advance of most European governments, and during the reign of Sulaiman the Magnificent (1520-66), Glubb adds, the Christian villagers of Southern Greece preferred Turkish rule to that of the Venetians. Some Christian villages in Hungary voluntarily chose Turkish government in preference to that of their fellow country-men.²⁶ The Turkish leader Osman (1281-1326), the founder of the Ottoman dynasty, gained the reputation of a ruler who might be safely followed, and under whose protection Christians found security both from other Turks and from the exactions of their own Emperor.²⁷ Succeeding him, Orkhan (1326-1359) had to rule over large numbers of Christians, and many of the peasants from neighbouring territories sought his protection, for, as the Greek writers record, his Christian subjects were less taxed than those of the Empire.²⁸ He saw that it was wise to protect these rayahs, leaving them the use of their churches, and pursued a policy of reconciliation during all his reign.²⁹ When they reached the Orient after conquering the Balkans, the Ottomans strengthened confessional dialogue allowing a revival, as unexpected as spectacular, of Arab Christianity.³⁰ The Ottomans tried to control not to possess, or to demean, say Courbage and Fargues.³¹ And as soon as they entered Constantinople, they recognised the collective existence of religious minorities, instituting them into nations, giving them the autonomy on religious, judicial, cultural, and health issues.³² Following the taking of Constantinople, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch was established as the head of the first of the Christian Millet of the empire with his spiritual and temporal authority effective on all the Orthodox of the Empire which stretched from the Adriatic Sea to the Persian Gulf.³³ Unlike the period under the Byzantines, the Patriarch was no longer a humble servant of the Emperor, but a recognised and respected member of the Sultan bureaucracy, with all powers over his faithful.³⁴ The Ottomans sought the participation of their former enemies; officially Muslim, the Empire transformed itself, into a Greco-Turkish diarchy which was to last until the rising and the independence of Greece (1821-1830).³⁵ The famed Janissaries were recruited from amongst the Christians of the empire, and some military corps were entirely in the hands of Christians whether Greeks, Armenians, Serbs, Bulgars or others.³⁶ A century of Turkish Muslim rule made Istanbul not just the first metropolis in the world, 700,000 inhabitants,³⁷ but also, paradox of history by being one of the three largest Christian cities. In Istanbul,

and in an Anatolia profoundly Islamised, the Christian and Jewish populations emerged very strongly. Christianity experienced a revival from 8% in the censuses of 1520 and 1570, to 16% in the nineteenth century.³⁸ Moreover the Christian and Jewish religious authorities had the exclusive control of their followers, schools and judicial system.³⁹ Until the First World War, Istanbul had about 40% non Muslims, Christians and Jews.⁴⁰ It was amongst the Turks that the Jews found not just acceptance, but even promotion (similar to that of Muslim Spain's history), and more importantly for them, asylum after being expelled from Spain in 1492.⁴¹

Even Christian pilgrims confirmed this openness. A fourteenth century account by the Irishman, Simon of Semeon and his companion Hugh the Illuminator, who was destined to die en route in Cairo, set out from Ireland in 1323.⁴² In Alexandria Simon noted that 'Saracens, Christians, Greeks, Schismatic (Copts) and 'perfidious Jews' dress all much alike.'⁴³ A cursory reading of the Saint Voyage by Ogier and his fellow pilgrims travelling in the same century, will reveal that the Muslim rulers were not at all hostile to the pilgrims who came in large numbers to Palestine and Cairo.⁴⁴ Ogier and his company passed freely through Palestine at a time when the Turkish sultan received notice that the Christians of the West were assembling their forces in Hungary against him with the conquest of Jerusalem as one of their eventual objectives.⁴⁵ As long as Christians paid the tax and did not quarrel amongst themselves, as their various sects were always on the point of doing, and did not sully the shrines of Islam, Savage states, pilgrims worshipped in peace while using the full rites of their perspective churches, coming and going as they pleased.⁴⁶ Bertrandon de la Broquiere, who was sent by Philip of Burgundy in 1432 to study the situation for a Crusade, wrote his impressions.⁴⁷ Passing through Turkish territory and through Serbia, he noted the prosperity and good cultivation of the land; while noting that towns and cities had a mixed population of Greeks and Turks, the latter being described as thrifty, clean and hardworking.⁴⁸ Sixteenth century travellers also commented upon the prosperity and peacefulness of Ottoman society. Christian peasants in the conquered lands were not dispossessed of their lands since their rights and privileges were protected by Ottoman laws.⁴⁹ 'All religions are to be found side by side in the vast pacific dominion of the Sultan, and Catholicism is freer in Constantinople and at Smyrna than at Paris and at Lyons; no law restraining its outward practice'.⁵⁰ And it was the same in the late seventeenth century as observed by the Frenchman De la Croix, an interpreter at Constantinople, who witnessed none of that barbaric cruelty associated with the Ottomans.⁵¹ De La Croix recognised in his unpublished Memoires, how the Ottomans allowed the same freedom of worship for Christians just as it could be found in France; and that Christian ceremonies were unhindered by the Turks. Equally, De La Croix was impressed by the treatment of slaves, noting that their spiritual needs were not at all neglected, with chapels inside the prisons where they were able to pray. He even noticed three Roman Catholic churches.⁵² He adds that:

*"We should agree, it is better to fall in the hands of the worst Bey's (Turk) galley, than in the hands of the Viceroy of Naples."*⁵³

Indeed, so it seems in this respect from a variety of contemporary sources such as Emmanuel d'Aranda, a student from Flanders, who was caught at sea in 1640, and remained captive in the Regency of Algiers for two years (1640-2), and who narrated his experience, telling of the exceptional humanity of the Turks.⁵⁴

There were many examples of tolerance, notes Davenport, yet just as today, he asked himself:

“yet, how many people in France believe, upon the faith of the Augsburg Gazette, and the Athens Observer, that in Turkey they every day torture and impale those “dogs of Christians”, as they believe on the faith of the writers of dramas and comic operas, in the handkerchief thrown by the Sultan to his favourite slave, or in the women sewn up alive in sacks and thrown into the Bosphorus.”⁵⁵

In the weariness of intolerance which affected northern Europe during and after the wars of religion, Daniel concludes, it was the Muslim example which showed that the idea of toleration was practicable.⁵⁶

Islamic Civilisation and Race

With respect to the Islamic view of ethnicity, it can safely be said that no other faith can show as equal a sense of brotherhood regardless of an adherent's origins. It sufficed for the intending Muslim to make the profession of faith to compel equality of treatment from other Muslims. This was a consequence of the Quranic injunction that piety, conformity to Qur'anic rules, was the only criteria for the evaluation of a person. Moral differences between humans were assessed clearly in terms of their deeds irrespective of their original cultures. It seems significant that the first appointed caller to prayer in Islam was black. Moreover Islam called for the freeing of all slaves and indicated that all creation was to be treated with justice and hence care.

Notwithstanding, Channel Four in its ongoing television programme on Empire seemingly to ignore or discount a mass of historical evidence, by using the accounts of Livingstone, a demonstrably anti Muslim missionary who only referred to the Prophet in abusive terms,⁵⁷ as valid proof that the worst of African slavery originated from Islamic customs.⁵⁸ Indeed Livingstone's accounts of Muslim slavery are refuted by nearly every other observer, as noted by Smith.⁵⁹ Most accounts from the rest of Africa deny the excesses and horrors as painted by Livingstone. The individual slave traders from the East, Smith notes, had strayed from the Islamic faith, which opposes the trade, as Smith stresses.⁶⁰ Still, the programme's presenter, possibly failing to evaluate other accounts, preferred to focus on the horrific image painted by Livingstone.

In Islam, simply, and for fourteen centuries, no person was stigmatised for their colour. The offspring of a non-white mother and white father was entitled and admitted to full equality,⁶¹ and was not excluded from high office. From 946 to 968, Egypt was governed by Kafur, a Negro born in slavery.⁶² Whether in tenth century, or today, says Levi Provencal, there is no lack of coloured people in the ranks of aristocracy or the merchant classes: this has always been an essential feature of Muslim worldview.⁶³ The Negro Shuubiyya emphasised the hospitality enjoyed by the first Muslim emigrants to Abyssinia. The Prophet, visited by an Abyssinian was asked: ‘You Arabs excel us in every respect; you are more shapely, and of more gainly colour; also the Prophet has risen amongst you. Now, if I believe in your mission shall I be awarded a seat in Paradise alongside of the believing Arabs?’ ‘Yes,’ the Prophet assured him. ‘And the black skin of the Abyssinian will spread splendour at a distance of a thousand years.’⁶⁴

Racial differences have never played the sort of role in Islam that they have elsewhere, Van Ess notes. Minor forms of discrimination erupted for a while at times but Islam has never employed deliberate racism, which factor is one of the reasons Van Ess identifies as to why it has had ‘an easier time proselytising in Africa’.⁶⁵

It is significant that throughout the centuries that acceptance of Islam, paying zakat, performing prayers and the hajj and observing the obligatory rules of Ramadan applied absolutely without restriction as to the participant's origins or circumstances. Malcom X during his Hajj seems to found this to be overriding feature, remarking on. '...the colour-blindness of the Muslim world's religious society and the colour blindness of the Muslim human society: these two influences had each been making a greater impact, and an increasing persuasion against my former way of thinking.' In Mecca there were 'no segregationists-no liberals'; indifference to colour was spontaneous, and for Malcom X this was evidently a shattering experience: 'I shared true, brotherly love with many white complexioned Muslims who never gave a thought to the race, or to the complexion, of another Muslim.'⁶⁶

It was Islam, Rodinson, notes, which became the defender of the oppressed people of Africa.⁶⁷ And if they enslaved Black men in wars, the Muslims also enslaved white men, and made slaves, regardless of their colour, into rulers, as already noted. And to add to this, only three Abbasid caliphs were born of free mothers, and all these caliphs belong to the eighth century.⁶⁸ In Andalusia, the Maghrib and Sicily, many people of colour could be found in the army, administration, and arts.⁶⁹ One of the most remarkable of Mu'awiya's lieutenants was Zayyad 'the son of his father' (i.e. of an unknown father). He became governor of both Kufa and Basra.⁷⁰ It was this Zayyad who crossed the Oxus and took Bukhara.⁷¹

[The absence of Muslim prejudice towards coloured people was such that it struck Lady Ann Blunt, who on her trip to the Nedjed region (1878), stated that the governor of one of the largest cities of the region, Meskakeh, was 'a Negro completely black with the repulsive features of the African.'⁷² It seemed to me absurd,' she added, 'to see that Negro, who was still a slave, in the midst of a group of courtesans of the white race; because those Arabs, many of whom were of noble origins by blood, bent in front of him, ready to obey any of his glances, or to laugh at any of his poor jokes.'⁷³

Political, Economic and Cultural Participation for All

Scott notes, how even in the earliest stages when the first shock of conquest had passed, 'the overpowering terror inspired by the presence of the (Muslim) invaders had subsided. They proved to be something very different from the incarnate demons, which a distorted imagination had painted them. They were found to be lenient, generous, humane.'⁷⁴ People under the Muslim realm, Scott notes, were enabled to participate in the benefits of the civilization, almost from the very beginning inaugurated by their rulers.⁷⁵

Indeed, throughout Islamic rule, whether under the Arabs, or under the Turks, all minorities benefited from freedom and equality of opportunities that cannot even be equalled in any of today's Western powers. St John of Damascus (674-749) was, until his death, a minister for the Caliphs in Damascus.⁷⁶ Caliph Al-Mutasim (833-842) had two Christian ministers, one of whom was for finance.⁷⁷ And history repeated itself, only requiring political troubles or economic crises to justify some purges but which were always short in duration.⁷⁸ The possibilities for advancement were indeed great, notes Van Ess, and we meet Christians and Jews holding the post of Vizier.⁷⁹ In medieval Egypt the bureaucracy was totally controlled by the Copts; most physicians were likewise Christians or Jews.⁸⁰ Bennet notes that many Christians held high positions as physicians and secretaries, and moved within Ummayyad and Abbasid societies with ease whilst the only repressive measures against them may have been in response to Christians abusing their privileges in that, 'Regarding themselves superior, they sometimes used their positions to mock Islam.'⁸¹

Van Ess notes that there were no imposed ghettos in the Islamic world all the way down to modern times. Members of the same religious community often lived in the same quarter for reasons of family solidarity; but they were not kept apart from Muslims deliberately and on principle. In particular, they were not unclean; they could be invited to dinner.⁸² In Cordoba, there were eight hundred public schools frequented alike by Moslems, Christians and Jews, where instruction was imparted by lectures.⁸³ The doors of the college were open to students of every nationality, and the Andalusian Moor, Scott adds, received the rudiments of knowledge at the same time and under the same conditions as the literary pilgrims from Asia Minor and Egypt, from Germany and France and Britain.⁸⁴

In this very field of scholarship, doors were open to all scholars whether they were Chinese, Indians, Africans, Europeans, Jews, and all thrived. Some of Islam's earliest and most prominent scientists at the Abbasid court, Ishaq Ibn Hunayn and Hunayn Ibn Ishaq were Nestorian Christians. Thabit ibn Qurrah, the astronomer, was a Sabean. The Bakhishtu family who held most prominent positions in the court in the ninth century were Christians, too. And so were the historian-physicist Abu'l Faraj; 'Ali ibn Ridwan, the Egyptian, who was the al-Hakem's Doctor; Ibn Djazla of Baghdad, and Isa ibn 'Ali, another famed physicist; and so on. The Jews had the most glorious pages of their civilisation under Islam, too. If one just sifts through the hundreds of pages of Sarton's Introduction to the History of Science,⁸⁵ one is amazed at the many names of Jewish scholars who worked in the midst of Islamic civilisation on all subjects. Some were not only scholars, but even occupied some of the most trusted positions in the Islamic jurisdictions. Maimonides (philosopher-physicist) was Salah Eddin Al-Ayyubi's doctor, and Hasdai ibn Shaprut, followed by his sons, held some of the most prominent positions in Muslim Spain. Nearly all Muslim envoys to Christian powers were Jews; and most Muslim trade was in the hands of the Jews.⁸⁶

Even when Islamic land was threatened by both Crusaders and later the Mongols (mid- thirteenth century) so that much of the population was wiped out (800,000 deaths in Baghdad alone in 1258), minorities, whether Jewish or Christian (even if allies of the Crusaders) still survived under Islamic rule to our present day with all their powers, privileges and wealth intact. This fact is surely a far cry from the stereotyped image of Islam as the religion of intolerance.⁸⁷ Which highlights the true character of Islamic civilisation, a character that has remained completely alien to their successors. The Muslims did not attack the faith and practice of others. Difference of faith is a state with which Muslims could, and can live.

Working within the Muslim milieu were scientists or generals or leaders who came from a diversity of origins: Arabs, Turks, Iranians, Spanish Muslims, Berbers, Kurds... Thus it is suggested that this was the first, and by far, the most multiethnic culture and civilisation that had ever existed.

'Arab customs' wrote Rodinson, 'admitted and favoured the adoption by the clans of people of all sorts and all origins who thus became entirely Arabs.'⁸⁸ Besides, Van Ess tells, Islamic countries have never had classes or a nobility in the Western sense.⁸⁹ In contrast to Roman and medieval law, Islamic law has no category of persons for whom separate regulations were in force.⁹⁰ Medieval Islamic society was relatively fluid; even children born of concubinal relations with a female slave were considered free. Islam is basically egalitarian.⁹¹ Under Muslim rule the offspring of a believer and a Christian captive was not just legitimate, but not stigmatised at all.⁹²

Slaves, as briefly mentioned above, regardless of their origin or colour also rose to power in Islam. The Mameluks, who ruled Egypt for centuries, renewed their families by purchasing children from the Caucasus. Often, again, a great lord of Egypt raises, teaches and grooms a slave child, whom he marries later to his daughter, and gives him full rights; and we come across in Cairo ministers, generals, and magistrates of the highest order who were worth from a thousand to a thousand and a half francs in their early youth.⁹³ Sultans of Constantinople, traditionally Caliphs of Islam, were often born to female slaves of which fact they are very much proud.⁹⁴ Under the Ottomans, Lybyer relates :

*"The Ottoman system deliberately took slaves and made them ministers of state; it took boys from the sheep-run and the plow-tail and made them courtiers and the husbands of princesses; it took young men whose ancestors had borne the Christian name for centuries and made them rulers in the greatest of Mohammedan states and soldiers and generals in invincible armies whose chief joy was to beat down the Cross and elevate the Crescent."*⁹⁵

A Humane Civilisation for All Living Things

The Quran sura ii, 190-193, clearly sets out the Islamic position with regard to the use of force: no one must go beyond acceptable limits because Allah does not like any sort of proactive aggression, physical or verbal.

Many accounts in Western history, especially about the Turks and the Algerians, seem, however to offer an image of two blood thirsty groups. Hence, Postel, who wrote his accounts through the second half of the sixteenth century, states that Christians in North Africa suffered 'an infinity of martyrdoms' and the seamen thought Algiers 'that Citie fatal to all Christians and the butchery of all mankind'.⁹⁶ This image of 'bloodthirsty pirates' became part of European folklore as shown in Voltaire's *Candide*.⁹⁷ The appeal made in 1858 by Monseigneur Pavy, Bishop of Algiers, for the building of the Cathedral de Notre Dame d'Afrique in Algiers dwells at length on the horrors of 'la piraterie Musulmane' (Muslim piracy) and concludes by insisting on the necessity for the conquest of 1830 which had brought 'these horrors to an end'.⁹⁸ The image of innocent victims, impaled, outside the city gates were morbid images that daily stirred both revulsion and fear. Images and unsubstantiated accounts of ruthless Barbary pirates were revived as recently as 2003 by the BBC in its Time-Watch programme.⁹⁹

The story of Turkish/Algerian corsairs spreading terror on the high seas, and European coastlines was a political ploy used to justify the conquest of Algeria by the French in 1830. Earle and Bono,¹⁰⁰ and above all Fisher, each has debunked this legend.¹⁰¹ Indeed, piracy was practiced mostly by Europeans,¹⁰² and there was hardly any pirates left in Algiers by some time in the eighteenth century as Valensi¹⁰³ and Braudel¹⁰⁴ have shown.

As for such captives who allegedly were impaled in their thousands outside the gates of Algiers, or any other place where the Turkish writ ran, there is none of such. Pilgrim accounts of the fourteenth century by the Irishman, Simon of Semeon tell that tales about Christian slaves who were yoked like animals are not to be believed.¹⁰⁵ 'Christian captives are well treated, craftsmen especially such as masons and carpenters, are attached to the sultan, but all, including women and children, are humanely treated and supplied with money and bread'.¹⁰⁶ Also denying Muslim cruelty is the eighteenth century chronicler d'Argens,¹⁰⁷ who states that the torments inflicted by the Turks on slaves are imaginary. He pours scorn on the monks with their accounts of 'burnings, impaling, and cutting into pieces, calculating that according to them, more

slaves would have died in one short period than have ever been killed or are likely to be killed until the end of time in the whole Islamic world.¹⁰⁸

Even those who have no liking for the Turks give accounts, which also belie those of propagandists. La Condamine, hardly known for his sympathies to Muslims, remarks that slaves are not ill treated in Muslim lands.¹⁰⁹ Desfontaines and Peyssonnel, give similar accounts; Peyssonnel noting the freedom of slaves to practice their religion, and says that Muslim are the gentlest slave takers.¹¹⁰ Equally, Baron Tott,¹¹¹ otherwise very hostile to the Turks, described, when he stopped in Tunis, slaves as well clothed, well fed and well treated, remarking that the Europeans are the only ones who ill treat their slaves, and he compares the lot of the Christian captives with the 'Negroes of our colonies' who are much worse off.¹¹² An 18th century contemporary, Laugier de Tassy, from his experience in North Africa¹¹³ recognised:

"It is not surprising to see so many people affected by prejudice against these people (of North Africa), because all that is needed for them is to be of a different religion and different country from the others to bear aversion for them; not conceding that they might have some good qualities... Thus many run away from the light of truth and remain all their life locked in perceptions which only have error and lies as their foundations."¹¹⁴

Emmanuel d'Aranda, a student from Flanders, who was caught at sea in 1640, and remained captive in the Regency of Algiers for two years (1640-2), narrated his experience.¹¹⁵ His first master was Cataborne Mostafa, who shared his meals with him, and his company. Then at some point his master, as a punishment following a quarrel with an army officer, was sent away for military duty for six months. Here is what d'Aranda has to say:

"I was sad about my master, who told me: 'henceforth you will go and live at Mahomet Celibi Oiga; I hope with God's help, before my return you will be free, and if I had money I will share it with you.'" I answered: 'Master, I know about your good will and your poverty; I kiss your hands, thanking you as much as I can for the good treatment I received in your house.' He said 'When you are back in Flanders, give my greetings to your parents.'¹¹⁶

At the new house of Celibi Oiga, it was the same sort of treatment, the master being a very devout man, and very learned, discussing various issues of science and religion. D'Aranda also says he was allowed to attend Christian mass every morning.

Equally, Chevalier d'Arvieux wrote of his experiences in the Regency of Tunis as an envoy of Louis XIV to that country between 1665-1675, when he helped secure the freedom of Christian slaves through negotiations with the Turks. His Memoires were only published long after his death in 1702 by Father Labat in 1735. He says:

"We imagine that the Christians who have the misfortune to be slaves in Barbary, are tortured in a very cruel manner and the most in-humane treatment inflicted on them. There are people who in order to stir the charity of the faithful pour with great assurance these lies: their intention, although good, is still always a lie. They forget that in this instance that it is not right to cause harm so as to derive good. I, too, have been in this situation like many others.... But what I saw in Tunis has convinced me these people are full of humanity, as I witnessed that our slaves on the boats waiting

*to sail were fed every day (fruit, meat, bread...)... and some of these slaves demanded that they stayed with their masters until the day they left for home; and I agreed. Their masters shared their meals with them, gave them tobacco, and looked after them as if they were their own children. They kissed them on the day of parting, and assured them, that if business or misfortune brought them back to the country, they could freely live with them, and they will be more than welcome.*¹¹⁷

Islam, generally supposed to be a source of cruelty, shows the complete opposite. Thevenot remarks that one of the teachings of Islam (zakat) is well observed amongst the Turks, for they are charitable and quite willingly help the poor, whether they are Turks, Christians or Jews. Some Turks give their wealth to the poor when alive, others leave, on their death, large sums to found hospitals, build bridges, caravansaries and aqueducts. Those who do not have the means spend their time repairing roads and filling cisterns.¹¹⁸ Tournefort provides corroborating evidence, maintaining that apart from individual alms-giving, no nation spends as much as the Turks do on foundations. The rich visit prisons in order to free those who have been imprisoned for debts. Tournefort saw that many families whose properties had been ruined by fires, recovered through charities. He saw people who visited the afflicted in their homes: the sick, even when attacked by the plague, were helped by neighbours and by the funds of religious foundations.¹¹⁹

Muslim generosity often strikes many a traveller as being misplaced. Among the singularities noted by a foreigner in Cairo, Volney mentions the large number of hideous dogs wandering in the streets and the kites hovering over houses, uttering mournful noises. He points out that Muslims kill neither, though both dogs and kites are supposed to be impure. On the contrary, devout Muslims establish bread and water foundations for dogs.¹²⁰ Thevenot also observes that the charity of the Turks extends to animals and birds. On market days many people buy birds which they soon set free.¹²¹ Thevenot noted persons who leave enormous wealth to feed cats and dogs. They even give money to bakers or butchers for this charitable purpose. Tournefort says it is a fact that in Istanbul (Constantinople) people are eager to execute the wishes of the donors by distributing food to animals in public squares.¹²²

Benevolence was a form of charity which was commended by the Prophet as the first of all virtues; a benevolence which, indeed, is extended to all animals.

‘To all the brute creation,’ writes Miss Pardoe (in *City of the Sultan*) the Turks are not only merciful, but ministering friends; and to so great an extent do they carry this kindness towards the inferior animals that they will not kill an un-weaned lamb, in order to spare unnecessary suffering to the mother; and an English sportsman, who had been unsuccessful in the chase, having on one occasion, in firing off his piece previously to disembarking from his caique, brought down a gull that was sailing above his head, was reproached by his rowers with as much horror and emphasis as though he had been guilty of homicide.¹²³

Islamic Faith as Source of Humanity

From these above instances, it is argued that the Islamic society is far from deserving the dark image it has been too long painted. The Muslims, of course, are no super-humans. Many amongst them accomplish terrible deeds against others, their own, and even to themselves. Most importantly, the godness of Muslims as an entity has nothing to do with the fact that Muslims as individuals are better than others. Far from it; they are as good and as bad as anybody else. The difference is the faith itself, its laws and rules, and the changes it makes within individuals and society, especially when such a faith, and its fundamental law, the shari’a, an often demonised concept, work. Of course it is easy to pick on an individual case of

strict application of the Shari'a ignoring its wider positive impact. It is indeed, the shari'a, which insists on the protection of others including the Christians, the Jews, and others who live under an Islamic state; so condemning as invalid the whims of any ruler or individuals. In this respect, Daniel correctly notes that the first and most crucial element that impacts on the position of such Christians under Islam and Muslims under Christianity is the fact that the great difference between Christian canon law and Muslim shari'a Law (or qanun, which does not in any way correspond to any other religions' canon laws) was that the former could always be reversed.¹²⁴ Within Christendom, thus, there was not even a residue of protection for any Muslim, as the history of the Inquisition, which led to the burning at the stake of tens of thousands of Muslims for their faith, was to show.¹²⁵ Christians within the land of Islam, on the other hand, could always appeal to the Qu'ranic law which is unchanging and which protects the rights of the non Muslims and their possessions once they pay the poll tax (jizya).¹²⁶ All, therefore, that was required of the non Muslims living under Muslim jurisdiction was that they should pay tribute regularly and obey the laws of the land.¹²⁷ Indeed, any Muslim true to his faith by following the Shari 'a has absolutely no excuse for hurting anyone of a different faith who had not harmed him; or sought to harm him.

Furthermore, it is Islam, faith alone, that changed people for the better as is here well expressed by a few illustrations. Thus, when the Abyssinian king asked them about the new religion, Jaafar, cousin of the Prophet (PBUH) answered:

*"We were plunged in the dark meanders of ignorance and barbarism; we adored idols; we ate animals that had died of themselves; we committed hateful things; we wounded the love of our own relations, and violated the laws of hospitality. Ruled by our passions, we only recognised the law of the strongest, until God has chosen a man from our race, illustrious by his birth, for very long respected for his virtues. This Prophet had taught us to profess the unity of God, to reject the superstitions of our fathers, to despise Gods of stones and wood. He commanded us to speak the truth, to be faithful to our trusts, to love our relations, and to protect our guests, to flee vice, to be kind and generous towards our parents and neighbours. He has forbidden us from despoiling women's honour, and from robbing orphans. He recommended us prayers, giving alms, and fasting. We have believed in his mission; we have respected the laws and the morale that he brought us on behalf of God."*¹²⁸

Smith expands on this:

"The practices that Mohammed forbade, and not forbade only, but abolished, human sacrifices and the murder of female infants, and blood feuds, and unlimited polygamy, and wanton cruelty to slaves, and drunkenness, and gambling, which would have gone on unchecked in Arabia and the adjoining countries."

*Smith adds: "The Dark Ages of Europe would have been doubly, nay trebly dark; for the Arabs who alone by their arts and sciences, by their agriculture, their philosophy, and their virtues, shone out amidst the universal gloom of ignorance and crime."*¹²⁹

One worse aspect of pre-Islamic Arabia Islam removed, which Smith, like Lebon, focuses upon is the burial alive of girls. Thus Smith goes:

*"The most barbarous practice of these `times of ignorance,' was the burying alive of female children as soon as they were born; or worse still as sometimes happened, after they had attained the age of six years. The father was generally himself the murderer. `perfume and adorn', he would say to the mother, `your daughter, that I may convey her to her mothers.' This done, he led her to a pit dug for the purpose, bade her look down into it and then, as he stood behind her, pushed her headlong in and, then filling up the pit himself, levelled it with the rest of the ground."*¹³⁰

And it was the same changes Islam brought to others elsewhere. In contact with Islam, every nation prospered as recognised by Forster, who praised `the salutary moral influence of Islamism upon its Negro proselytes'.¹³¹

Smith goes along the same line:

*"We hear of whole tribes laying aside their devil worship, or immemorial fetish, and springing at a bound, as it were, from the very lowest to one of the highest forms of religious belief. Christian travellers, with every wish to think otherwise, have remarked that the Negro who accepts `Mohamedanism' acquires at once a sense of the dignity of human nature not commonly found even among those who have been brought to accept Christianity."*¹³²

Smith adds:

*"Nor as to the effects of Islam when first embraced by a Negro tribe, can there, when viewed as a whole, be any reasonable doubt. Polytheism disappears almost instantaneously; sorcery, with its attendant evils, gradually dies away; human sacrifice becomes a thing of the past. The general moral elevation is most marked; the natives begin for the first time in their history to dress, and that neatly. Squalid filth is replaced by some approach to personal cleanliness; hospitality becomes a religious duty; drunkenness, instead of the rule becomes a comparatively rare exception. Though polygamy is allowed by the Koran, it is not common in practice, and, beyond the limits laid down by the Prophet, incontinence is rare; chastity is looked upon as one of the highest, and becomes, in fact, one of the commoner virtues. It is idleness henceforth that degrades, and industry that elevates, instead of the reverse. Offences are henceforth measured by a written code instead of the arbitrary caprice of a chieftain-a step, as every one will admit, of vast importance in the progress of a tribe."*¹³³

In Conclusion, if those leading the onslaught on Islam believe everything will be better without the `darkness of Islam' as they put it, they can be guaranteed, that without Islam, monsters will prevail.

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