

Islam And The West - We Are Culturally Closer Than We Accept

After reading an article from the archives of Salon.com entitled "Why Americans can't find Islam on the Map" by Salon senior writer Eric Boehlert, I was particularly incensed not because Americans can't find Islam. It was the date of the article September 21/01 that incensed me. Almost five years has gone by and yet Western civilization remains unfamiliar with the Arab regions.

In Boehlert's article, he cites Charles Kimball, chairman of the department of religion at Wake Forest University, and an Islamic scholar. "Most people have a detailed ignorance of the Middle East. They have all these images and details in their head but little coherence or understanding."

I find that is as true to today as it was five years ago. Put simply, we have been misguided. The media paints a grim picture based on propaganda and hardcore documentation and leaves us confused, fearful of the unknown. The truth is that we are culturally closer than we accept.

The shaping of our mathematics can be attributed to Al-Khwarizmi (c.780-c.850), the chief librarian of the observatory, research center and library called the House of Wisdom in Baghdad. His treatise, "Hisab al-jabr w'al-muqabala" ("Calculation by Restoration and Reduction), which covers linear and quadratic equations, solved trade imbalances, inheritance questions and problems arising from land surveyance and allocation. In passing, he also introduced into common usage our present numerical system, which replaced the old, cumbersome Roman one.

Without Arabian improvements upon the compass, the astrolabe, nautical maps and seaworthy lanterns, Magellan, Cabot, Vasco da Gama, Columbus, et al., might have had trouble pulling anchor and leaving port. The Arabs also pioneered the usage of hydraulic presses and water clocks, which tracked the passage of time and phases of the moon.

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayym is certainly one the most famous works of Arabic translation in the English language. In his seminal "Algebra", Khayym attempted a fusion of algebraic and geometric methods, discussing the solution of cubic equations by geometric means, anticipating analytical geometry. Khayym also dabbled in astronomy, his lunar calculations leading him to reform the calendar in 1079.

The first madrassas in Spain, in Malaga, Zaragoza and Cordoba, which later evolved into universities, started in the 11th century. The foundation of Damascus University dates back to the 8th century.

Our modern-day idioms have roots steeped in the Arabic language. Dragoman, a wonderfully resonant word, meaning an interpreter or guide in Eastern countries, derives from the Arabic verb tarjama, to translate. It is one among thousands of lexical items in English that derive from an Arabic translation. Others include admiral, alfalfa, algebra, banana, carafe, giraffe, mohair, sofa, sugar and zero.

An agricultural crop such as the watermelon is one of the many crops the Arabs introduced to the West. Others include artichokes, rice, cotton, asparagus, oranges (from "naranj"), lemons, limes, figs, dates, spinach and eggplants.

"The written record of the Qur'an was an amazingly important event in the history of the Middle East, because it required an enormous amount of research on language and genealogy, and the development of critical methods for assessing the accuracy of reports. All that went into the formulation of Islamic law and theology. With the revelation of the Qur'an in 622 A.D., and the founding of Islam, Arabia underwent radical changes. Previously nomadic communities were unified into courts run by caliphs, the civil and religious heads of the Muslim state. Systems of trade and taxation were established, a confederated army replaced the tribal one, and a centralized empire was formed. By the late ninth century, Islam had become the principal faith of a dominion that extended from the western Mediterranean into Central Asia. The written record of the Qur'an, meaning "recitation" or "recitations," led to a shift from the oral tradition to a written one, which had a dramatic impact on the culture from literary composition to law to philology.

Islam was the first major religion, certainly the first monotheistic one, to practice religious tolerance. As rulers they were lenient, even generous (unlike the Germanic tribes that ravaged the late Roman Empire). Besides, Jews and Christians were "People of the Book" - Islam borrowed much from its elders; Abraham, Moses and Christ are recognized prophets in the Koran. As long as they paid their tithe to the Caliph and kept out of trouble, Jews were free to do as they wished. "Holy Toledo," the meeting point of the three great religions, became a model of religious tolerance and harmony - an idyll that ended when the Christian kings of the north recaptured it in 1085. (Until the rise of Holland in the 17th century, if you were Jewish it was generally better for your overall health and well-being to live in Muslim lands such as North Africa, the Levant or Turkey, than almost anywhere in Christendom, particularly those places where Catholicism prevailed. French missionaries are to blame for introducing the virus of anti-Semitism to the Middle East in the 19th century.) Of the three great thinkers who flourished under Islamic rule, one was non-Muslim, Maimonides of Cordoba (1135-1204), author of "The Guide for the Perplexed," who was Jewish. Like Avicenna and his fellow Cordoban, Averroes, Maimonides attempted to

reconcile Aristotelian philosophy with religious belief.

With such a rich historical path, how is that we have forgotten this once grand empire. The answer may lie in the cyclical nature of history. If this is so, we should take heed now. We are culturally closer than we accept!

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