

The Islamic World and the West: Recovering Common History

Europe overlooks long history of good exchanges with Arab-Islamic world and encourages defensive posture

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Wisdom from the East: The House of Wisdom – the royal library in Abbasid Baghdad (top); the world map by Al-Idrisi, looking southward

OXFORD: Recent years have seen much talk of the dangers of Islam in the West and its perceived incompatibility with Western societies. According to statistics, estimated on the basis of country of origin and of first- and second-generation migrants, Muslims represent the largest “non-indigenous” immigrant group in Europe. The largest groups are in France, with approximately 5 million; Germany, between 3.8 and 4.3 million; and the UK, 1.6 million, followed by the Netherlands and Italy, 1.1 million each, as well as Bulgaria and Spain.

The tendency across Europe to label immigrants in religious terms has led to a “culturalizing” of social problems and subsequent reference to a “Muslim problem.” In late 2010, for instance, the first conference on the Islamization of Europe was held in France, cautioning against the increasing presence of Islam in Europe, the latter defined as a civilization with Greco-Latin roots.

But, is Europe’s civilizational heritage really Greco-Latin? Mainstream European historiography would certainly have us believe so, stressing legacies such as the influence of Greek philosophy, the Latin Christendom or the Latin alphabet. The reality is more complex.

Islam in Europe tends to be viewed as not only a recent, but also a foreign and threatening presence. This popular *misperception* results from a thousand years of willful forgetting. In fact, Europe and the Arab-Islamic world have brushed shoulders for centuries, and their histories are inextricably

linked. Knowledge, techniques and institutions made their way from East to West. As Europe was

plunged into the Dark Ages, the Arab-Islamic world experienced its Golden Age; illustrious centers of learning in Baghdad, Cairo, Palermo, Cordova, Granada, Seville and Toledo drew scholars from far and wide, who not only studied the works of the Ancients but also developed bodies of Arab-Islamic science and philosophy. This westward flow of ideas and practices profoundly shaped Europe's development.

Yet, these positive encounters no longer constitute part of the collective memory of the West. Within the dominant narrative of the rise of West, the revival of Ancient Greek knowledge following the Dark Ages was key in paving the way for the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. This progressive pathway is attributed to qualities described as uniquely European such as intellectual curiosity, rationalism or the protestant work ethic. The dominant discourse of Europe's ascent depicts it as charting its own course without building on the achievements of other geo-cultural domains or civilizations. Debts to others are rarely acknowledged.

Despite these distorting Eurocentric explanations, there have also been scholarly attempts to question mainstream European historiography by illuminating the role that the East played in the rise of the West. These works demonstrate how contact with the Arab-Islamic world helped fuel the expansion of the European trading system along with rational religious, scientific and artistic inquiry. Uncovering this shared heritage may help build the foundations of a collective memory that combats the discourse on the danger of Islam to Europe and the West.

History demonstrates how groundbreaking achievements are invariably built on the contributions of others. Just as the Arab-Islamic world built on the foundations of earlier advancements and borrowed from other geo-cultural domains, so too did Europe. Transmissions of science and technology to Medieval Europe from the Arab-Islamic world paved the way for the European Scientific Revolution, the greatest impact being on mathematics, astronomy, chemistry and medicine. The Enlightenment, too, was influenced by a strong tradition in the Arab-Islamic world of reasoning that encouraged individual judgment and contributed to rationalist philosophy in Europe. The combination of reason and observation in the acquisition of scientific knowledge, unlike the Hellenistic tradition of observation alone, advanced European scientific knowledge.

The contribution of the Arab-Islamic world to the rise of the West also extends to material and institutional elements. Commercial and industrial activities in the Near East and India did much to propel the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism in Europe. This, in turn, calls into question the widely held belief that capitalism emerged in Europe due to specific values and ethics connected to Protestantism and rationalism. Even rationalism, which underpinned the emergence of a rule of law in Europe, may have some origins in Islamic legal institutions, with transmission as the 12th century. This implies that the emergence of a rational, impersonal state may not have its origins entirely in Europe as is commonly thought.

The rise of Europe should be seen as part of a global history. Instead of thinking in terms of separate civilizations, it is more fruitful to think about one human civilization to which different geo-cultural domains contribute, much like an ocean into which many rivers flow. Conceiving of civilization in

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these terms renders the contributions of others visible. It also encourages recognition of the debts that we all owe to others and reduce cultural arrogance.

Unearthing the many positive exchanges that occurred between Europe and the Arab-Islamic world has immediate implications for contemporary transcultural relations. Once this stark opposition is broken down, it becomes more difficult to categorize the East in general and the Arab-Islamic world in particular as peripheral and subordinate. The East no longer seems so reassuringly inferior, antagonistic or alien to the West. This forces us to revisit the notion of the "Arab predicament" that has generated so much fatalistic thinking.

A more holistic look at history is instructive in other respects. Identifying our commonalities, which in part involves tracing our past encounters and exchanges, is critical to promoting modern transcultural security. Awareness of this enriching process of cross-cultural fertilization needs to be promoted among the general public and not simply in restricted academic circles. Here, education is key.

Promoting this awareness would help build a collective memory in Europe that Arabs and Muslims are present, not only in relation to confrontation but also in connection to high points in Europe's history.

The United States has been more successful in assimilating people from different cultures than Europe. This is because America did not ask immigrants to choose between their

ethnic/cultural/religious frameworks and their "American-ness."

Host countries have the right to demand loyalty to the security of the state and the rule of law from their new immigrants, but they must allow them to assimilate at their own pace aided by

opportunity, inclusion, trust and respect. Pushing immigrant communities to shed cultural frameworks only encourages these communities towards counterproductive defensive postures.

America assimilated immigrant communities successfully because it gave them the necessary time to do so, and Europe needs to do the same.

In conclusion, increased awareness of our connections and reciprocal debts is not enough to ensure transcultural security. This will also depend on enabling the emergence of endogenous good governance paradigms outside the West. While people around the world do seem to embrace democratic ideals, the desired end point of such struggles does not or may not have to be an exact replica of Western liberal democracy. Imposition of governance models and interference from outside will be unsustainable over the long run and will only undermine trust and transcultural security. We, therefore, not only need to revisit history, but also look at the course of history with new lenses in order to ensure peaceful and mutually respectful relations between the West and the Arab-Islamic world.

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