

# Muslim-Christian Ties in Europe: Past, Present and Future

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## *The History of Islamic-Christian Relations in Europe: Cultural Interaction Versus Political-Ideological Confrontation*

From the universal perspective of the history of civilizations, Europe displays a remarkable disparity in regard to the mutual cultural influences of the Muslim and the Christian world. The influence of European thinking on the Muslim world dates back to the beginning of the 19th century while Muslim civilization had made its profound impact on European-Christian culture -- on its long way to the development of science and technology -- already a millennium ago and over a period of several hundred years. In other words, for over a thousand years European culture had no particular influence on the Muslim world; rather it benefited from the early Islamic "enlightenment" in all fields of culture and science.

It is a historical fact that the shaping of a genuine European intellectual life in the Middle Ages was the result of the flourishing Islamic civilization in Spain. During five centuries -- from the eighth to the thirteenth century exactly -- the history of world civilizations was that of Islam. In comparison to the Christian civilization of Europe at the time, the Islamic civilization was much more refined and enlightened. Over a crucial period of roughly two hundred years Europe's encounter with Islamic civilization enabled it to develop its skills in all scholarly and scientific fields, particularly those of philosophy, medicine, astronomy, chemistry and mathematics. It is one of the great achievements of Muslim scholars in the Middle Ages to have preserved the treasures of ancient Greek philosophy and science for posterity. Christian scholars only came to know about the concepts of Aristotelian metaphysics through the Arab philosophers in Spain and their translations and commentaries. The Arab philosopher Ibn Roshd (Averroës), born in Córdoba in 1126, exercised the biggest influence through his commentary on Aristotle. The Arab schools (Universities) in Córdoba, Sevilla, Granada, Valencia, Toledo attracted a great number of Christian scholars. Great Christian thinkers of that time, such as Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham, Gerbert of Aurillac, later to become Pope Sylvester II, to mention only a few, developed their intellectual skills in those centers of learning.

The "Great Library of Europe" in Toledo -- where in 1130 a school of translation was founded -- attracted students and researchers from all over Europe. Arab-Islamic medical science had an enormous impact on the development of the medical discipline in Europe. The first

professors of medicine at the newly established European universities in the 12th century were all former students of Arab scholars. The basic work of the most famous medical scholar, Ibn Sîna (Avicenna), *Al-Qanûn (canon medicinae)*, was taught in all major European faculties of medicine over six centuries. As late as 1587 King Henry III of France established a chair for Arab language at the Collège Royal in order to promote medical research in France. Similar influences on the development of scientific methods can be traced in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, architecture, music and industrial techniques. The Arab astronomer Al-Battâni (Albatenius, 858-929) authoritatively disproved the Ptolemaic dogma of heliocentrism long before Copernicus published his famous treatise *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* in the 16th century. The Romanic period of European art was deeply indebted to Islamic architecture particularly in Spain. Without going into further detail one can rightly state that the Islamic civilization -- that flourished in the South of Europe until the late 12th century and in its universal achievements even surpassed the earlier contribution of the Roman empire to the development of civilization -- awakened Europe from its "dogmatic sleep" in the Middle Ages and thus prepared an early European renaissance in the sense of an enlightened, rational, non-dogmatic world vision.

On the political level, however, this rich cultural influence from which the Christian civilization in Europe onesidedly benefited -- it had nothing to offer of its own for the development of Islamic civilization at that time -- was only rarely matched by open-mindedness and tolerance. Charles the Great (747-814) entertained cordial relations with the Abbasids in Baghdad. Harûn al-Râshid even respected him as protector of the Oriental Christians with certain ceremonial rights over Jerusalem. At a much later historical period, Emperor Frederick II (1194-1250), "King of Sicily and Jerusalem", in spite of his participation in the crusades, displayed a genuine openness towards the Islamic civilization and was eager to learn from the advanced Muslim scholars. It must be noted, however, that both rulers' interest was directed to the Islamic empire in the Orient, not the one on European soil centered in Córdoba where -- in spite of the rich cultural influence -- a political rapprochement was never found.

The political history of Islamic-Christian relations in Europe is dominated by the movement of the crusades, which was initiated in the 11th century and through which the Popes tried to establish the undisputed hegemony of the Holy See over the Christian Occident in particular. The crusades quickly turned into colonialist-imperialist undertakings through which European states wanted to secure their vital economic and trade interests. Religion was merely a pretext for the European rulers' colonialist designs -- not only against the Muslims in the Holy Land but also against the Christian Byzantine Empire -- which was most clearly demonstrated by

the Fourth Crusade in the course of which the Doge of Venice, Enrico Dandolo, conquered and pillaged Constantinople in 1204. While the Islamic reconquista succeeded in 1187 in reconquering Jerusalem by Salaheddîn, the Christian reconquista finally brought about the end of the Islamic presence in Europe with the fall of Granada in 1492. In the Eastern part of Europe, however, the newly emerging Turkish empire had not only conquered Byzantium (Constantinople), the Center of Eastern Christianity in 1453, but had gradually expanded its conquests up to the gates of Vienna in 1683.

This complex history of confrontations between Christians and Muslims in the West, the South, and the East of Europe and in the Near East has practically made a genuine "dialogue of civilizations" impossible -- in spite of the rich influence of Islamic culture on the development of the European mind. In the context of the political-military confrontations religion served as an ideological tool on the part of Christianity to defend the interests of European rulers -- including the head of the Holy See in Rome. This explains the "history of deliberate and unintentional misunderstandings" that accompanies the Islamic-Christian encounter in Europe over the centuries. The early "clash of civilizations" since the Middle Ages has created a legacy of confrontation, distrust and misunderstanding up to this day. Anti-Islamic stereotypes in Europe -- now again becoming virulent under a new constellation of world politics -- are the reflection of this early antagonistic history of Islamic-Christian interaction in the course of the expansion of Islamic rule in Europe since the 8th century and of the resulting Christian reconquista and crusades. It is within this context of the violent European encounter with Islam that -- as Edward Said put it -- the European doctrine "turned Islam into the very epitome of an outsider against which the whole of European civilization from the Middle Ages on was founded."<sup>1</sup>

With the advent of European colonialism, the relations with Islam took another turn towards political domination and "cultural tutelage" on the part of Europe. European power politics have shaped the political map of the Middle East up to the present time. Political and military domination was complemented by the claim of ideological hegemony of Christian Europe over the Arab-Islamic civilization. Age-old prejudices -- nourished since the time of the crusades -- have been revived and even strengthened as tools in a confrontation that has increasingly been related to the establishment of a new political entity in Palestine at the expense of the historical Islamic presence particularly in Jerusalem.

### ***Metaphysical Concepts in Islam and Christianity and their Role in Shaping the Relations between both Communities in Europe***

In order to better understand the surrogate character and the ideological nature of many of the

confrontations described above, we should briefly reflect on the undeniable dogmatic-metaphysical similarities between Islam and Christianity that could be the basis for an enlightened dialogue between the two civilizations in the theological, cultural and political fields. It is commonplace that both civilizations are based on the belief in one god. Monotheism is the quintessence of their religious attitude towards the universe. The concept of oneness is more precisely and with higher abstraction expressed in Islam while the Christian concept may be seen as containing relics of polytheism in its Trinitarian conception of God. The Islamic concept of God may help Christianity to clarify its own conception of monotheism and to critically evaluate any anthropomorphic elements in its dogma of the trinity of the one God.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, both religions are of a universal nature and therefore open to all mankind. Their concept of God is not one of a tribal god; it excludes any form of discrimination in regard to membership in the community of believers. This universality of their message may constitute a rivalry between the two religions, reaching out to all mankind, but at the same time it underlines their open-mindedness towards all creeds of humanity. A special binding factor in the field of theology is the eminent role which Islam attributes to Jesus among all the prophets. The Christian beliefs in the immaculate conception and in Jesus being without sin are equally upheld by Islam. (The main difference, however, remains as to Jesus being regarded as the son of God or merely as a prophet, albeit the most noble among them all.) Similar conceptions exist in both religions in regard to the Resurrection and the Final Judgment.

These "structural" similarities of the metaphysical dogma, however, have not become the basis for a genuine dialogue between the two religions. For Christianity in particular, dogmatic differences have been more important and the Prophet's labeling as "heretic" has poisoned the relations between the communities over the centuries. A lack of confidence, even deep mistrust has prevailed between the two communities, which may partly be seen as a result of hundreds of years of armed confrontation in Europe and the Near East. A hostile prejudice against Islam still characterizes many European approaches to questions of the Muslim world, its religious dogma, its social rules, lifestyle, etc. As the Austrian-born Pakistani thinker Muhammad Asad rightly stated, Europe identified the political and military threats posed by the Muslim powers of the time -- particularly the threat of the Ottoman Empire -- with Islam as such, i.e. with the religious message of the Prophet.<sup>3</sup>

Another obstacle to genuine understanding and dialogue was constituted by the fact that for a very long time research on Islam was in the hands of Christian missionaries who dealt with the subject in an apologetic and highly polemical manner. This created a strangely distorted image

of Islam in its religious, moral and social aspects as well. Such a doctrinal position, in turn, has had a profoundly negative impact on the popular European perception of Islam up to the present day. What today is known as "orientalism" has its roots in this apologetic Christian approach which put the Christian doctrine in a position of superiority over the pretended Islamic "heresy". As aptly stated by Edward Said, "Orientalism depends for its strategy on [a] positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand."<sup>4</sup> This kind of approach is one of the

major obstacles to an understanding between Muslims and Christians at present. This approach completely fails to critically analyze the existing stereotypes as a legacy of earlier confrontations; on the contrary: it strengthens those stereotypes in the new set-up of a "clash of civilizations" according to which Islam is portrayed as a threat to the security of Europe and to the preservation of its cherished "liberal" lifestyle and value system. Orientalism, the profession of "Islamic Studies", is in many respects part of a new "crusade" under the Eurocentric conditions of the 20th century.

One of those stereotypes affecting Islamic-Christian relations since the times of the crusades and the wars with the Ottoman empire has been that of the hostile nature of Islam in both its religious and political message. This stereotype revolves around the Christian interpretation of the Qur'anic term of jihâd and may serve as an example of the work still to be done to prepare for a fair and balanced interpretation and representation of the Islamic message in Europe. Christian scholars used to teach that Islam generally and unreservedly justifies war against non-believers, i.e. Christians themselves. Certain sentences of the Qur'ân were and still are deliberately taken out of context so as to "prove" an aggressive nature of Islam. It is particularly sûrah VIII, 39 that serves this purpose. One deliberately ignores the very clear provisions in sûrah XXII, 39 where force is declared admissible only in the case of self-defense ("Sanction is given unto those who fight because they have been wronged ...")<sup>5</sup>, and in sûrah II, 190 where this principle is even more strictly expressed.

("Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, but begin not hostilities. Lo! Allah loveth not aggressors.") The misinterpretation of the use of force in the teachings of the Qur'ân is one basic example of an Islamic-Christian misunderstanding that has created an atmosphere of deep mistrust prolonging the wrongful perception of Islam as being a threat to Christian civilization in Europe and negating its very right of existence.

Connected to this prejudice of a "hostile" nature of Islam is another stereotype according to which Islam does not accept religious freedom and therefore is incompatible with the liberal worldview of secularized Europe that nonetheless defines its identity on the basis of its

Christian history. The many "orientalists" and experts of Islam seem to deliberately ignore the very clear formulation in sūrah II, 256: ("There is no compulsion in religion.") Therefore, jihād can under no circumstances be used to prove a hostile or aggressive nature of Islam towards Christianity. Even at present stereotypes of this kind are propagated in academic lectures and through school-textbooks. Deliberate distortion, the omission of clarifying additional sentences and the isolation of certain formulations from their proper context in the Qur'ân demonstrate the need for a new hermeneutic approach in the Muslim-Christian dialogue in Europe. The participants of the symposium on "The Concept of Monotheism in Islam and Christianity" (held in Rome in 1981) pointed to the urgent need to correct those stereotypes: "... one of the main obstacles to meaningful understanding and co-operation between Islam and Christianity is the continuing existence of the false stereotypes in school-textbooks. A concrete program of action needs to be elaborated in order to examine and rectify all school-textbooks from this point so that Christians from a young age can learn from the true culture of Islam and the degree of closeness and identity with Christianity."<sup>6</sup>

### ***Present State and Future Prospects of Islamic-Christian Relations in Europe***

It is obvious that even in the present situation in Europe a certain constellation of interests sustains those age-old stereotypes. Since the end of Communism and the disappearance of the related friend-enemy-pattern Islam has functioned as a surrogate for the former enemy stereotype through which the West tries to ideologically assert its worldwide hegemony. Islamic-Christian relations in Europe are affected by this new international constellation in which Islam is portrayed as a threat to European identity and security. Samuel Huntington's thesis of a "clash of civilizations"<sup>7</sup> serves as a justification for the prolongation of the above-described historical stereotypes. The existence of sizable Islamic communities -- mainly of migrant workers -- in Europe has increasingly led to hostile reactions. These communities are frequently portrayed as a threat to the social and cultural cohesion of Europe. Under those circumstances it is very difficult to preserve a climate of dialogue and co-operation when political movements in Europe deliberately exploit, even fuel traditional anti-Islamic prejudices. The climate is being prepared for a kind of "cultural war" as can be seen in connection with the Rushdie-affair or with last year's campaign waged against the renowned German expert on Islamic civilization, Annemarie Schimmel, who was vilified because of her lifelong efforts to convey a balanced and objective image of Islam in Europe. A very negative and obstructive role is played, in this regard, by the media which -- to a large

extent -- are under the influence of outside parties with their particular interests. The influence of the American film industry in Europe has added to this cultivation of an enemy stereotype at the expense of Islam and the Muslim communities on our continent.

Islamic-Christian ties in Europe in the present historical constellation are substantially determined by the fate of the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The deep historical mistrust of this Muslim community in Europe was undoubtedly one of the reasons for Europe's total inactivity in the crucial phase immediately after the collapse of the Yugoslav Federation. Europe's passivity vis-à-vis the acts of genocide in Bosnia has badly affected Muslim-Christian relations not only on this continent, but on the global ecumenical level. This passivity can only be explained by the legacy of earlier Islamic-Christian confrontations as we have described them in this paper. This is again a sad example which demonstrates how little impact the theological and philosophical closeness of the two religions and civilizations has had on the situation "on the ground".

Another important factor of Muslim-Christian relations in Europe in the present time is definitely the Arab-Israeli conflict and the controversy over the status of Jerusalem. A better understanding between and co-operation among Christians and Muslims is not in the interest of the third party, the Jewish state in Palestine and its supporters in Europe and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> On the other side, the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem is unacceptable to Muslims and Christians alike. The issue of Jerusalem actually offers a possibility for joint action between the two communities of faith.

In general, however, Muslim-Christian relations in Europe are at a crucial stage at the end of the millennium as the difficult conditions of Muslim migrant communities in Europe and the handling of the Bosnian crisis by European states amply demonstrate. The legacy of the reconquista and the crusades can still be felt, especially since the end of the East-West conflict, which effectively did away with an enemy stereotype that had absorbed or overshadowed other historical animosities for nearly half a century.

The present state of Islamic-Christian relations in Europe is characterized by new confrontationist schemes that are nurtured by the prejudices preserved from earlier centuries. Even members of the intellectual élite of Europe embark upon such a "cultivation" of the Islamic enemy stereotype as can be seen from their statements on the Rushdie-affair or from the treatment of Christian scholars such as Annemarie Schimmel who portray a balanced image of Islam. It seems as if Europe in the present constellation -- with the ideological vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet bloc -- is not yet prepared to do away with its age-old stereotypes. The apologetic approach of earlier Christian theology towards Islam --



where Islam was seen as a misguided version of Christianity: Arabia haeresium ferox -- is surviving in its secularized form in a secularized Europe: the Islamic civilization is merely seen from the point of view of our European value system. The recent political developments in the Middle East and North Africa, the Islamic revival movement in these regions are perceived as a threat to vital European interests. The Muslim migrant communities in Europe are seen as potential allies of this new movement, which is thus perceived as threatening Europe's cultural identity. In this particular context, "there is a consensus on 'Islam' as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world's new political, social, and economic patterns." (Edward Said)<sup>9</sup>

It is against this background that we must evaluate the future relations between Muslims and Christians in Europe. In view of the new tensions, the guideline should not be Huntington's paradigm of a "clash of civilizations". As we have seen from recent political discourse, this theory mainly serves the interests of those who try to justify a new dominationist scheme vis-à-vis Islam in connection with conflicts in the Middle East, in particular the Arab-Israeli conflict. Any future perspective should be based on the idea of a dialogue of civilizations on the basis of equality of the partners in such an undertaking. The old Eurocentric dogmas of orientalism and the related ideology of superiority have to be effectively abolished. In our view, a sincere dialogue can be based on the structural similarity of the monotheistic message of both Christianity and Islam. This will require the abandoning of the earlier missionary approach. The presence of Muslim communities in Europe -- the Muslim people in Bosnia and the communities of Muslims in various European states -- should not be seen as a threat, but as a possibility to build bridges of understanding between Islam and the West. The realities of a multicultural society in Europe will have to be accepted if we want to stem the increasing alienation between the two faiths and communities inside and outside of Europe. In this context, the polemical use of the term "fundamentalism" should be abandoned. This term has often been used to discredit the Islamic revival movement and Islam as a whole. It should be replaced by a more precise term to appropriately describe phenomena of religious fanaticism in all religions.

The development of the conflict over sovereignty in Palestine and Jerusalem will have a considerable impact on the future relations between Muslims and Christians in Europe. Only if the European position will be recognized as fair and balanced -- and not directed against basic Islamic rights in Jerusalem or in support of the occupying force in Palestine -- will Islamic-Christian understanding be promoted. The mistrust rooted in Europe's former colonial presence in the region has to be removed by a fair policy in regard to Islamic rights in the



In this evaluation of future prospects we must point to a certain cultural disparity which may constitute a serious obstacle to dialogue and mutual understanding: in reality, secularized Europe has lost its religious (Christian) awareness -- some would say even its Christian identity --, whereas the Muslim world presently experiences a renaissance of this awareness. Both communities, so it seems, see each other on the basis of a different hermeneutic framework and of different value systems and anthropological assumptions. It will be of utmost importance that both sides -- Muslims and Christians alike -- do not allow third parties to interfere in their communications in Europe. Any future dialogue should be direct and should not be determined or affected by the geopolitical interests of outside parties. The future of Muslim-Christian relations in Europe must not be overshadowed by a revival of the spirit of the crusades, but should be guided by a mutual awareness of the basic theological truths and moral values which both civilizations share. The structural similarity of the spiritual message of both religions could serve as a basis for a better social, cultural and political understanding.

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## ***Notes***

- 1-Orientalism. Reprint ed., New York: Vintage Books, 1979, p. 70.
- 2-On the issue of monotheism see Hans Koechler (ed.), *The Concept of Monotheism in Islam and Christianity*. Vienna: International Progress Organization/Braumüller, 1982.
- 3-Cf. Muhammad Asad and Hans Zbinden (eds.), *Islam und Abendland. Begegnung zweier Welten*. Olten/Freiburg i.Br.: Walter-Verlag, 1960, p. 193
- 4-Orientalism, p. 7.
- 5-English text according to the translation by Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'ân. Text and Explanatory Translation*. Beirut: Dar al-Kitab Allubnani, 1971.
- 6-The Concept of Monotheism in Islam and Christianity, p. 133.
- 7-"The Clash of Civilizations?," in *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3, pp. 22-46. See also his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996. The term was originally coined by the orientalist Bernard Lewis. See "The Roots of Muslim Rage," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 266, September 1990, p. 60.
- 8-See also the analysis of Edward Said in which he points to "the role of Israel in mediating Western ... views of the Islamic world since World War II." (*Covering Islam. How the Media and*

the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World. London/Henley: Routledge & Kegan  
Paul, 1981, p. 31.)  
.9-Covering Islam, p. XV