

Relations between Islam and the West – a great challenge for societies

Christianity and Islam



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As followers of Christianity and Islam make up nearly half of the Earth's population, the relations between these two major religious systems and two civilizations are crucial for our world and its future

The current status of these relations is very bad indeed. The suicide attacks in New York, Washington, Madrid, and London, the attacks against Western tourists in Indonesia, Egypt, and Turkey, and also the wars in the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Sudan may attest to a mounting clash of civilizations and presage an outright war between Islam and Western civilization. That is made all the more likely by the fact that the conditions for dialog

between Islam and Christianity as religions have deteriorated in recent years, while the cultural stereotypes existing on both sides have grown even stronger.

On the other hand Islam and the West have more than 1,400 years of mutual relations behind them, including periods of confrontation interwoven with times of intensively exchanging cultural values and material goods. Those times were characterized by mutual curiosity and numerous important cultural borrowings, as well as by attempts to imitate one another. Islam and Christianity are also longstanding neighbors, with adherents of the two faiths long living side-by-side in the Middle East, the Balkans, Turkey, India, the Philippines, Europe, and the United States.

Dialog and conflict

What future lies ahead for these mutual relations, of such import for the world at large? There are several issues that contribute to the overall picture, one of them being theology.



Students outside the Faculty of Economics, Cairo University

Jerzy Zdanowski

Islam and Christianity in a sense spring from the same source, as they are both Abrahamic religions. They involve the same figures: Adam, Eve, Abraham, Moses, and even Jesus and his mother. They evidence similar visions of life, the world and its history, similar concepts of time, and a common figure of God. On the other hand there are indeed many differences, and serious ones at that.

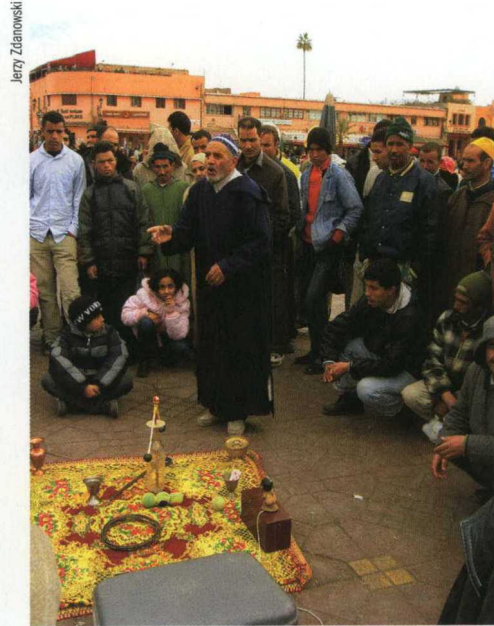
Muslims reject the notion of the Holy Trinity; they do not believe that Jesus was crucified. They respect him as a prophet, but do not recognize him as divine. Christianity, in turn, does not recognize the holiness of the Koran, the book which Muslims believe to contain the final Revelation. A strong movement appeared within Christian theology as far back as in the 7th century, treating Islam as a heresy. Theological dialog has been underway between the two religions for centuries. That dialog took on new forms after the Second Vatican Council, but it has clearly waned in recent years.

Such mutual animosity, or even hostility, stems from history. Events such as Muslims' seizure of Jerusalem in the 7th century, Islam's ouster of Christianity from Northern Africa, the Crusades and the Spanish reconquest, and above all colonialism and the bloody price certain Muslim countries had to pay for independence have left behind psychological traumas and barriers to communication. It suffices to mention that among the Muslims of the Middle East, the Crusades remain vivid as an image of deceitful, ruthless, and faithless "Franks," as Western Christians were then known.

Living stereotypes

The past has likewise given rise to many stereotypes that prove to be extraordinarily deeply rooted, one reason being that they found reflection in spiritual and cultural works, including the most preeminent works that form the cultural canon of civilization. Medieval mass culture was to a large degree informed by *Chansons de geste* (songs of heroic deeds), whose leading villain was the deceitful and ruthless Saracen. Dante's *Divine Comedy* condemned Muhammad to terrible torture, which he deserved for being a heretic.

The other side also paid such treatment back in kind. As recently as the early 20th century, mothers in Mecca warned their chil-



A public storyteller regaling onlookers with the "1001 Nights," at a bazaar in Marrakesh

dren from going to Jeddah, since there they might encounter a green-faced monster that meant trouble – this of course referring to European Christians. Interestingly, such cultural stereotypes withstand the test of time.

Theological differences and mutual perceptions pose a serious problem in relations between Islam and the West. However, the true challenge to both sides lies in unresolved political problems and urgent developmental needs. It is a fact beyond doubt that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, dragging on since 1948, casts a long shadow across the overall shape of the West's relations with the Islamic world. The frequently unilateral support shown for Israel by the United States and many European countries, plus stagnation in the implementation of international agreements concerning the future of the Palestinians, evoke a sense of historical injustice in Muslim societies, sparking animosity towards the West and suspicions of bias. Of course it is hard to expect the emergence of a Palestinian state to immediately improve the West's image among Middle Eastern societies and ease the tension between civilizations. However, it could mark an important turning point in such relations, and it will definitely entail a shift towards assuaging tension.

War in Iraq

Another important political problem is the Western countries' intervention in Iraq in March 2003. Nearly 90% of individuals

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Newspaper salesmen
on a Cairo street

surveyed in the Middle East were opposed to it. While most respondents view Saddam Hussein's ouster as something positive, the very same people are nevertheless opposed to the US and its allies maintaining a lasting presence in Iraq. They believe the West to have motives other than just fostering democracy in Iraq. These ulterior objectives are considered to be a desire to control Arab oil resources, to create a protective umbrella for Israel, and to strive to dominate the Islamic world. In this sense the intervention of 2003 is perceived as indicative of a new colonialism, as another link in the chain of events including the Suez Canal crisis of 1956, the Six-Day War of 1967, and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. In this respect, a considerable portion of the region's inhabitants sympathize with Al-Qa'ida's struggle against the West, although only 6–7% of those surveyed support terrorism.

Another factor that is not conducive to reconciliation involves cases of Christians

being persecuted in Muslim countries, increasingly frequent since 11 September 2001. Christians in the Middle East, where they have been present for 2,000 years, are now leaving the region en masse. The cause for the exodus lies in the uncertain political situation, constant economic crisis, and growing resentment from the Muslim majority, which is undoubtedly linked to the military presence of the Christian West in the region.

Islamization of Europe?

There is a rising fear of complete Islamization not only in the Middle East, but also in Europe, given the stable growth in the EU's Muslim population. It currently stands at some 20 million individuals, accounting for some 5% of the population in EU countries. Many official representatives of Muslim states openly speak of the inevitable future Islamization of the West, thus further antagonizing the mood. The ongoing series of mutual suspicion, fears, and obsessions can

be viewed as including such events as the 2005 riots in France, which erupted in connection with anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments in Europe.

The Muslim Middle East is Christian Europe's closest neighbor. It is struggling with serious developmental problems and will obviously not be able to cope on its own. It is likewise obvious that if those problems are not resolved their negative consequences could have an impact on neighboring Europe as well. Those problems are: economic destabilization, low GDP growth, overpopulation, rapid population growth, high unemployment, continuously high illiteracy, and outdated education methods. The Arab world, accounting for 5% of the world's population, only has a 2% share in world trade and attracts only 1% of foreign direct investments (FDIs). It produces very few artistic and scientific works of global value.

In the political domain, it is dominated by authoritarian, repressive governments, stifling the voice of society. Authoritarian rule, in turn, gives rise to nepotism and corruption. That renders social and professional advancement dependent upon having the right connections, rather than the right knowledge. A lack of prospects for any rapid improvement in the economic and political situation gives rise to frustration, apathy, and a tendency to resort to extreme, forceful measures.

Scenarios for the future

Improving the situation of residents and implementing reforms in the Muslim world are topics being ever more frequently addressed at research conferences and meetings on the region. Such gatherings draw attention to the fact that the developmental problems will intensify in connection with rapid population growth in the Middle East. The area stretching from Morocco in the west to Oman in the east is presently inhabited by 320 million people, while in 2050 there will be 550 million. It is likewise pointed out that the Muslim world continues to "have its back turned" on Europe in the intellectual sense; it is not very interested in what is going on in the West, in its culture or science. As a case in point, there are significantly fewer European studies centers at Arab universities than there are Middle Eastern studies centers at European universities. In this respect, Middle Eastern residents maintain a preva-

lent conviction about the superiority of their own world, which stems from the conviction of Islam's superiority as a religion.

Europe, the EU, does perceive its neighbors' problems and does try to help it - through association agreements with certain countries of the region, aid programs under the Mediterranean Neighborhood Policy, and many forms of cooperation between state and nongovernmental institutions. Students from Arab universities are included into EU programs such as Erasmus, and researchers from Arab centers participate in projects sponsored by the European Science Foundation in Strasbourg. These are activities heading in the right direction, as they help to forge interpersonal ties that lay the best groundwork for dialog between civilizations.

The conflict between Islam and the West is something real. It manifests itself on many levels and engenders serious problems. And although Western individualism is frequently difficult to reconcile with the community-based ethos of values that dominates Muslim countries, the existing divergences do not

The conflict between Islam and the West cannot be overcome by military means; there must be dialog and economic integration

by any means have to lead to armed conflict between the two civilizations. What is necessary is tolerance and mutual understanding. A long-term strategy needs to be adopted, geared towards economic integration and forging personal bonds founded on a principle of mutual benefit.

The alternative is an explosion of xenophobia and populism on a scale leading to widespread chaos. How future relations between the West and the Islamic world develop will depend on both sides - hinging on whether Europe overcomes its fear of its neighbor and takes a long and hard look at its problems, as well as on whether the social elites in Muslim countries manage to take advantage of the opportunities that lie inherent in the region's population, raw materials, and globalization. ■

Further reading:

Zdanowski J. (2004). *Historia Arabii Wschodniej [History of Eastern Arabia]*. Wrocław, Warsaw: Ossolineum.