

Perspectives

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Our Muslim Fellow Europeans

by Martin Rose

Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979 there has been a dramatic shift in the way that immigrant minorities in Europe have seen themselves, and been seen. Once they were Asians, Indians, Pakistanis, Arabs, Turks or Moroccans. Over a generation they have become 'Muslims.' Not that they have lost their links of affection and culture to their countries of origin: it is simply that this other, larger identity has grown in importance until in many eyes it eclipses the 'national' identity. It is a curious process, starting from a self-identification that was anything but Muslim. In Britain in the 1970s "young Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were so open-minded about their origins and identity," in the words of Kenan Malik, "that they were quite happy to be labelled 'Indian', notwithstanding the turmoil and bloodshed of Partition. But while they were happy to be labelled 'Indian,' it never entered their heads to call themselves 'Muslims.'" This of course has changed utterly in the last 20 years, and the ball is in the other court: 'Muslims' and the 'Muslim community' are today primary categories for social and political, as well as religious, discourse.

Why this has happened is a very complex business, but above all it is two-sided. On the one hand it is clear that minorities in Europe have found it attractive to highlight a transnational element in their heritage which imbues pride and self-respect, and the stout solidarity of numbers; on the other, a combination of sublimated racism and reaction to assertiveness by often marginalized minorities has added 'push' to the 'pull.' A Muslim identity, worn with pride, is a positive reaction to being at the bottom of the pile and to varying degrees socially excluded. Majority populations in Europe (and even in North America) are ready to collude in this transformation, pushed by terrorism since 9/11; and all too ready to take at face value the cultural and religious loyalties of Muslim minorities.

This has translated into a very dark political discourse about Europe, in the USA and in Europe itself. Migration is – this story recounts – utterly changing the face of Europe. By 2020 (or 2030, or 2035 – you can pick your date, for this is a polemical, not a scientific discussion) the rapid breeding of European Muslims and uncontrolled immigration will undermine the native majority, leaving Muslims in control of 'Eurabia'. This 'analysis,' reminiscent of other racist polemics of the last century, is designed to reinforce fear based on racism – the fear of the 'Other' that is hard-wired into human beings and that it is the business of civilization to tame – and to build support for a right-wing nativist politics that also echoes the worst days of the 20th century. What it is not, is true: but this scarcely matters. With it goes a carefree essentialism, a cascade of reckless statements about Muslims and Islam, the highly

selective use and interpretation of evidence and, all too often, a complete disregard for veracity. As the result of the recent Dutch elections shows, this is a powerful means of mobilizing support for the nationalist right. We know it all too well: Europe has been here before.

But the story doesn't have to be told this way. Indeed, there are much better ways of telling it. Europe's history is not an insular slab of smug Græco-Roman virtue, a story of civilization marching along a narrow road through a dark forest, from Periclean Athens, through Rome and the monasteries of the Dark Ages, the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment, to modernity, Us and the End of History. It's always easy, back-casting, to see the path you think you've followed as the only possible path:

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but it's also always wrong. Human civilization, from the bronze age to the silicon age, is a much more convoluted and interesting story than this 19th century justificatory tale told to bolster European empires and egos. That strand (or a less caricaturish account of it) is certainly important, but so are others. Not, or not necessarily, because they in some way outweigh or outshine 'our' traditional history; but because our traditional history – the folk tale of the Western intelligentsia – has been designed to ignore the huge multiplicity of rivers that flow into our sea.

To a great extent this is a measure of our cultural and historical illiteracy. We simply don't know, at the level of public understanding, about the alternative aetiologies of modernity, which lead back to Babylon, to China and to Egypt – and beyond. The arrogance of imperial cultures leads us, even when we are being as open-minded as we know how, to deprecate and patronize 'lesser' cultures, in an unconscious rush of what Edward Said called Orientalism. For the most part this isn't even conscious. It is the furniture of the Western mind – and it is urgent that we redecorate and refurnish that mind, if we are to live well in the 21st century and beyond.

Islam is a case of this unconscious – and conscious – oblivion. For a significant part of our shared history, the Dar al-Islam has been the First World, and Europe the Third: as Gibbon put it, ‘the age of Arabian learning continued about 500 years, and was coæval with the darkest and most slothful period of European annals.’ Yet we seek all too often to diminish the colossal achievement of the Islamic empires, the cultural and scientific achievement above all of Abbasid Baghdad, unrivalled in the West for centuries after its fall. We ask the Islamic version of the ‘Needham question:’ if the achievement was so great, why did it suddenly stop? And in that question is another layer of assumed superiority – the grudging admission that ‘they’ may have been great once, but now are degenerate and in perhaps terminal decline. It is of course an element in bolstering our own self-esteem, and it is all too obvious in modern historiography with books like that of Sylvain Gougenheim, whose *Aristote à Mont St-Michel* is a thumb to the nose, a sort of ‘Ya-boo-sucks’ to anyone who thinks that the scholars of Baghdad and Toledo made a significant contribution to modernity, because even what we have traditionally and grudgingly admitted – that Muslim scholars carried the Greek, Aristotelian torch through the Dark Ages, is wrong.

This seems to me to be the central problem. It seems almost impossible for us to think about intercultural history without competitiveness, as though our cultural understanding was a video-game, a winner-takes-all shoot-em-up in which there can only be one winner. Even when we speak with openness about the shared past, we do so in terms that reflect Us and Them as binary categories. And it all too easily degenerates into arguments (like Gougenheim’s) of precedence, modern Muslims too succumbing to this urgent need to show that ‘they’ discovered this and invented that. Our inability to construct a larger Us is damaging and deforming: by its very nature it renders impossible a subtle, nuanced and relatively objective understanding of human culture and human society.

Acknowledging that our Western account of ourselves, our origins and our intellectual history needs expansion is just a beginning. Competitiveness, however well clad in academic rigour, still declines to admit that there are no single and undivided streams that flow from past to present. Claiming anything for ‘Us’ is to misunderstand the nature of human history (in what sense do I own anything that my grandfather did, or wrote, or said – let alone Ptolemy, or Roger Bacon or Isaac Newton? In what sense do I not own the achievements of Ibn Rushd or Confucius, Ibn Haitham or Maimonides?) To focus myopically on our own story as we are used to hearing it told is childish, a yearning for the warm security of the nursery.

An interculturally literate view of the world is vital, therefore, not just so that we can appreciate the achievement of ‘other’ cultures; but so that we can understand how badly framed that statement is: we are all passengers on the same ship, children of a humanity that stretches back into a very remote past, of a Eurasian Bronze Age and a Neolithic revolution and a prophetic age. The last few centuries are small eddies in a big picture – what Freud called the narcissism of small differences. It’s rather important that we get over them.

This requires mutual knowledge, a will to understand and trust, and the building of personal relationships. The truth

is that we actually know very little of other cultures – that even when we think we know, our knowledge is as much the result of (often selective and purposeful) reading as of direct personal experience. I was very struck at the time by a remark made by the thoughtful and intelligent editor of a major British newspaper after the July underground bombings in London: I have thought long and hard, he said, and I realize that I have never had a Muslim at my dinner table. That is our predicament: knowledge without experience. The editor undertook, in his column, to put this right. So must we all.

I am the director of a project run by the British Council, called *Our Shared Europe*. It is an attempt to give substance to some of this thinking – the creation, if you like, of a common dinner table at which we can get to know and trust one another across precisely the divides that most deform our society. Ignorance is a problem of both sides of the Atlantic (though it takes different shapes). Much of it is unintended – ‘I realize I have never had a Muslim at my dinner table’ – and the result of perfectly natural identification with one’s own, and a reticence about branching out. But much too is quite intentional – ‘I shall never have a Muslim at my dinner table’ – and is all too frequently aimed at using fear and alienation to garner support for other, and profoundly unattractive, political causes.

Our Shared Europe is designed to explore each other. It focuses on three areas: education, ideas and debate, as well as commissioning ground-breaking research into questions like the media that European Muslims consume, the art they make and the reasons for their under-representation in crucially important youth exchange schemes. The mechanics, in other words of how They are Us.

Education is vital – and no area is more important than the way history is taught, which can close doors or throw them open. Our intent here is not primarily to enter into a competition of narratives, but rather to introduce thought-provoking novelty. Our first project is material, for exhibition and the classroom, on Evliya Celebi, the great 17th century Turkish traveller in Europe and the East. It is an opportunity to look at cross-cultural continuities from music to medicine, and coffee to vaccination. As I walked round the exhibition behind a group of small Muslim schoolboys in shalwar khameez, I heard one say to another enthusiastically, “Why don’t they teach us this stuff in school?” We agree: ‘they’ should, and we shall try to make it easier to do so.

This leads me on to our work with historians at a higher level, work which will concentrate on building bridges between scholars across the Atlantic, to re-examine some of the central questions of our shared past, which when prejudicially examined can all too readily be used to build hostility. What they build when examined unprejudicially remains (by definition) to be seen, but we are confident that open, generous and above all research-based debate about some of the great shibboleths of the past will be fruitful. Evidence-based positions are always better than position-based evidence; and the Carnegie Corporation has recognized this aspect of our work in recent weeks by awaiting a major grant.

Finally – and of course closely linked with the other two corners of the triangle – we have worked in public debate about contemporary issues in European Islam, often in

situations like the European Parliament, where audiences have been large and powerful. Perhaps the most powerful and certainly the largest, was the audience for a debate on the motion 'Europe has failed its Muslims,' which took place in London last February, in front of a live audience of 900, and a global BBC television audience of some 70 million. (Interestingly, the motion was lost by a relatively small margin, which demonstrates clearly the non-propagandist nature of the event.)

It's right at the heart of what the British Council calls 'cultural relations,' the building of trust through mutual knowledge and carefully nurtured relationships. As an organization established in the 1930s to counter extreme narratives through cultural relations, we are pretty well equipped to work in this area, and we do so with enthusiasm. It is a steep hill to climb, but the future of Europe as a free, open society depends on our getting to the top by this road, building trust, not mistrust. On both sides of the Atlantic, whether we are talking about Our Shared Europe or Our Shared World, we need every encouragement we can get to see through essentializing platitudes ('Muslims are ...'), destructive oppositions ('They aren't Us') and bad history ('History shows us beyond doubt that they ...') to a more nuanced and generous world in which people are cheerfully different and relationships between people bind the world together like the sand dune held together by esparto grass.



Martin Rose has been a British Council officer since 1988, prior to which he worked in academic publishing in Africa and the Middle East (Macmillan Press 1979-82) and banking (Mellon Bank 1984-88). He was educated at Oxford University (MA in Modern History, Magdalen, 1973-76; M Phil in Oriental Studies, St Antony's, 1982-84). His postings with the Council have included Baghdad (1989-90), Rome (1991-96), Brussels (1999-2002) and Canada (2006-10). From 2002-06 he was founding Director of Counterpoint, the British Council's in-house 'think-tank' focusing on Cultural Relations. In 2010 he is moving to take up the post of Director of the British Council in Morocco. His publications include *Trust, Mutuality and Cultural Relations* (with Nick Wadham-Smith, 2004) and *British Public Diplomacy in an Age of Schisms* (with Mark Leonard, 2005). He was the 2009 Zaki Badawi Memorial Lecturer for the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (UK). (<http://www.oursharedeurope.org/zaki-badawi-lecture-09>).

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