



The Pragmatic Caliphs

By JASON GOODWIN Published: January 6, 2008

Many Westerners think the world would be safer if it were less Muslim, more Western. And in the Middle East and beyond, many Muslims are horrified by our arrogance; a tiny minority respond with violence. Yet the so-called clash of civilizations, as Zachary Karabell's important new book demonstrates, draws strength from a profoundly partial reading of history. "Peace Be Upon You" is a polemic in the service of peace — readable, accessible and, maybe, indispensable.

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The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul in a 19th-century lithograph by Lovis Haghe.

PEACE BE UPON YOU The Story of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Coexistence.

By Zachary Karabell. 343 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.95.

Karabell, the author of "Parting the Desert: The Creation of the Suez Canal," begins with a brief but very clear account of early Islam, turning easy assumptions on their heads. He explains that the faith was not created in direct opposition to the other monotheistic religions; it built upon them, and against the tribal pantheism of seventh-century Arabia. Muslims believe that with Muhammad, the revelation given to earlier prophets was perfected.

Islam was generally not spread by the sword, either. True, a Muslim military caste defeated, and replaced, existing rulers, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian or pagan. Still, ordinary life went on. Even the dreaded jihad, Karabell writes, was an ambiguous concept, and could mean a moral program of self-discipline and purification.

Karabell's Islam is a multifaceted faith that has no pope, no single interpretation of the law. In Muhammad's lifetime the holy city of Medina was an ideal, never "a viable model for Muslim society." After the Arabs conquered the Middle East scarcely a decade following the Prophet's death in 632, they faced the problem of how to govern the conquered. What, in effect, would Muslim society be in the real world?

The short answer, Karabell says, was: tolerant. Pragmatism prevailed in most Muslim states from then on, for nearly 1,400 years. In both North Africa and Spain, ordinary people sometimes converted, hoping for access to wealth and status. Often the conversions were sincere. They were welcomed, within limits, but they were very rarely forced. Only reverse conversions were anathema to the Muslim authorities: apostasy was a crime.

Islamic rulers, like rulers anywhere, enjoyed the benefits of the powerful, financed by public taxation, while the public, as usual, grumbled, married, had children, died. The rulers spent the money in different ways, depending on their outlook and opportunities;



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some pursued wild game, others translations of Greek philosophy. Some were strict and pious, others drank and recited poetry. Harun al-Rashid, best known from “A Thousand and One Nights,” did them all together.

Jerusalem fell to Frankish Crusaders in 1099, and there was a gruesome massacre that shocked even its perpetrators. But here Karabell brings out another strand of his narrative, rightly asserting that to dwell on the massacre is to misunderstand the significance of the next 200 years of frequent coexistence in the Middle East. The complexity of the Muslim-Christian relationship of the time belies the supposition that it should be viewed in terms of a religious conflict. Christians battled Muslims, certainly; but Muslims fought Muslims, too, and everyone sought logical alliances, holy or otherwise.

But if the Crusades were not exclusively, or even primarily, religious, why were they fought? For the usual rewards, Karabell says — trade, influence and dynastic advantage. Had it been otherwise, he writes, “Christians throughout Europe would have rushed to fight side by side with their Byzantine brothers, and Muslims would have overcome their divisions and joined hands to fight a common adversary. That did not happen.”

Over time, however, the Crusades became established as a myth of perpetual conflict, to be exploited at different times, and in different societies, for particular historical reasons. So Sir Walter Scott’s Muslim warrior Saladin was the avatar of British chivalry, not because this is what Saladin was, but because Scott was a 19th-century Briton. Most other versions were more loaded and inflammatory.

After the era of the Crusades, Karabell reports, pragmatism continued to hold sway in the Muslim world. By the early 16th century, the Ottoman Turks’ capture of Egypt and the cities of Medina and Mecca made them the pre-eminent Islamic rulers of the world, responsible, among other things, for subsidizing and protecting the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and the government of Jerusalem. The Ottomans placed great stress on their Islamic credentials — which did not stop them from ruling over millions of Christians, or from welcoming the Jews from Christian Spain after their expulsion in 1492.

The Ottomans were dynasts. They waged endless wars, against both their Western enemies and the Shiite empire in the east, to maintain their control and to expand their dominions. Sometimes these wars were styled as jihad. But the Turks had no more interest than the Arabs in converting people. Their non-Muslim subjects were second-class citizens — they paid a valuable head tax, and they were exempt from military service — but they were citizens nonetheless. They were answerable to the leaders of their faiths — the patriarch, or the chief rabbi; so that a Jew in Salonika or a Greek in Smyrna seldom encountered the Ottoman authorities.

The career of Sabbatai Sevi, a Jew who considered himself the Messiah, is a perfect illustration of Ottoman pragmatism. When he toured the Jewish communities of the Ottoman world gathering adherents and outraging the Jewish establishment with his mystic utterances and scandalous decrees, the Ottomans ignored him. But when he marched on Istanbul, he was arrested for inciting rebellion, interrogated and compelled to choose between converting to Islam or being executed. Sevi converted. Order was maintained.

What, then, accounts for the current hostility? Insecurity, of course, is widespread in the Muslim world. And terrorism works very well in an age of mass global communications and sophisticated technology. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict creates injustice, gets worse daily and has encouraged a complete reinterpretation of history. As this enlightened and enlightening book makes clear, we can, if we want, find evidence of clash and discord in the past, which makes for good reading. But we can also, if we wish, find many centuries, and many lands, in which nothing much happened, triumphantly — in which people of all faiths concerned themselves with “the uneventful reality of everyday life.” History matters; but, in Karabell’s resounding phrase, “it is up to each of us to use it well.”

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