

Islam and the Promotion of Culture and Science

As the Moslems challenged the civilized world at that time, they preserved the cultures of the conquered countries. On the other hand, when the Islamic Empire became weak, most of the Islamic contributions in art and science were destroyed. This was done by the Mongols who, out of barbarism, burnt Baghdad (1258 A.D.), and by the Spaniards, who out of hatred, demolished most of the Arabic heritage in Spain. The difference between the Arabs and these was the teachings of Islam which:

1. Stressed the importance and respect of learning. For example, the first word revealed to the Moslems' prophet Mohammed was "Read". In Mohammed's era, a captured enemy was freed if he paid a ransom or taught ten Moslems writing and reading. In their holy book, the Qur'an, the importance of knowledge has been repeatedly stressed as it says "Those who know and those who do not are not equal."

The prophet Mohammed stressed learning by saying. "One hour of teaching is better than a night of praying." One of the early princes, Khalid Ibn Yazid (end of the 7th century), gave up his treasure for the study of medicine and chemistry. He studied medicine under John the Grammarian of Alexandria, and chemistry under Merrinos the Greek (Haddad 1942). He also encouraged several Greek and Coptic medical books to be translated into Arabic.

2. Forbade destruction. On conquering Mecca, the prophet Mohammed strongly stated that no homes, animals, or trees should be destroyed. His followers abided with these principles when conquering other countries.

3. Encouraged cleanliness and personal hygiene. Islam instructed them to approach God in their prayers five times a day with bodies and clothes spotlessly clean.

4. Developed in them the respect of authority and discipline. For example, realizing the scourges and terror of plague, their prophet Mohammed (p.b.u.h.) decreed that "no man may enter or leave a town in which plague broke out." And to make this law all the more binding and effective, he promised the blessing of heaven to those who die of plague by stating that if a man died of plague he would be considered a martyr (Haddad 1942). Thus Mohammed (p.b.u.h.) laid for the Moslems the laws governing cordon and quarantine for the first time in history and made it work.

5. Tolerated other religions. The Islamic religion recognizes Christianity and Judaism and considers their followers to be people with holy books like Moslems. Moreover, they candidly treated the Jews at an era when the latter were persecuted in Europe. Dr. Jacob Minkin, a reputable Rabbi and scholar says "It was Mohammadan Spain, the only land of freedom the Jews knew in nearly a thousand years of their dispersion...

While during the Crusades, the armored Knights of the Cross spread death and devastation in the Jewish communities of the countries through which they passed, Jews were safe under the sign of the Crescent. They were not only safe in life and possessions but were given the opportunity to live their own lives and develop a culture so unique and striking that it went down in history as the 'Golden Ages'. The Moors, the Muslim conquerors of Spain in 711, were not religious fanatics. They were strong in their faith but generous regarding the religious convictions of others.

"The Renaissance of Art in Italy, says George A. Dorsey, has blinded us to the Renaissance of Science in Spain, which fostered science, promoted culture, encouraged learning, and set a premium on intellectual pursuits, no matter whether the intellect was Moslem, Christian or Jew. Not since the days of Greece had the world known such thirst for knowledge, such passion for learning, such spirit shared by the prince and the courtien alike" (Minkin 1968).

The Arabs were assimilated by the vast new countries they reached. From this marriage of genuine characters and righteousness with the ancient and well-established civilizations, a great new nation was born. It is difficult to identify this new breed as Arabs, because although the language was Arabic, all the scientists were not necessarily from the Arabian Peninsula.

It is also equally difficult to describe it as Islamic, because although most of the scientists were Moslems, sponsored by Moslem rulers, and governed by the Islamic law, yet some scientists were Christians or Jews, especially at the early phase of the Islamic civilization: the translation period to Arabic, and the decline part: the translation period to Latin and Hebrew. Therefore, in this article, the adjectives Arabic or Islamic will be used as synonyms.

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