

“Dialogue of Civilizations, or Clash of Cultures?”

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As a daily exercise, I glance at the various postings that appear on some Arabic-language websites. I look especially for signs of genuine moderation and objectivity in the writings of Arab commentators dealing with current issues. On 1 October 2006, I noticed on the www.kwtanweer.com site, an essay with the title of **“Dialogue of Civilizations, or Clash of Cultures?”** (*Hiwar Hadarat, am Sira’a Thaqafat?*)

It was indeed a scholarly work by an Arab intellectual. By searching his website, I discovered that, over the years, he had lectured at several European and American universities. The list of his Arabic publications is informative, with titles on contemporaneous issues, such as globalization, and its impact on the Arab world.

In his most recent essay mentioned above, he commented on Pope Benedict XVI’s lecture at Regensburg University in Germany. He faulted the Pope for not observing the rules that should govern **“the Dialogue of Civilizations,”** and suggested a proper course for avoiding **“a Clash of Cultures.”** It was a lengthy piece of seven pages; if translated into a European language, it would become around a ten-page article. I was saddened to notice that certain parts exhibited serious blind spots in his survey of Islamic history, specifically when dealing with the treatment of non-Muslims living under Islamic rule.

The author quoted, by way of introduction, from remarks made recently by Kofi Anan, the General Secretary of the UN *“who had called for a proper sensitivity to be displayed when dealing with religious beliefs and sacred symbols. He warned that mistakes, whether intentional or not, could lead to a world war of religions. Anan did not directly refer to the controversial statements of the Pope that were actually hurtful not only to Islam, but equally to the feelings of Muslims.”*

The essayist went on to deal with the impact of the information technology that allows critics to attack all the sacred symbols and traditions of the various civilizations, he then proceeded with his critique of Pope Benedict XVI:

“I find neither a reason nor a necessity for the Pope to have approached the topic in an ambiguous way, and at this specific time. Even if we suppose that he did not fully realize the repercussions of certain portions of his lecture which included Islam, and the Prophet of Islam, he actually departed from the modern traditions that had been handed down by the popes who had preceded him during the 20th Century. He also showed his ignorance of those papal qualities that he should have exhibited with respect to other religions.

“I believe that Pope Benedict XVI knows full well the size of the old Eastern Christian communities, both Orthodox and Catholic, who are Arabs, Syrians, Copts, Maronites, Chaldeans, and Armenians. They have coexisted with Muslims for more than 1400 years, and their churches and monasteries are to be found both in cities and the country side. I

don't believe that the two sides (i.e. Christians and Muslims) have clashed, or have been involved in any violent confrontation. A study of the social and civilizational history of the Middle East should form the proper paradigm for an elevated and peaceful coexistence of religions, rather than an insignificant text which related a dialogue that had taken place between the Byzantine Emperor Emanuel II and a Persian emissary, even if we believe in the [authenticity] of that dialogue!

"So, I would advise his holiness who was an academician, to read and reflect at length about the wonderful and peaceful ways through which Islam spread across continents, and especially in the heart of Southeast Asia, the depths of Russia, as well as in sub-Saharan Africa. He would then realize that the sword had no existence in the cultural spread of Islam across the ages."

The essayist turned to deal with the topic of violence in history, with this question being posed:

"Where was violence? In the Church, or in Islam?"

"The history of the Church in Europe is soaked with innocent blood, religious wars, not to mention the Crusader Wars, and the Inquisition. This is why we should not regard history as an authoritative source of judgment, nor apply such conclusions for the solution for present issues.

"Finally, I am not asking Pope Benedict XVI to apologize, but I would ask him to embark on a proper reading of history, and to be fair in his dealing with Islam and its Prophet. I would like him to utter an honest word about Islam's civilizational mission, its cooperative spirituality, and the humane role it has played. I would appreciate him not considering Islam as represented by terrorist organizations, while ignoring those peaceful societies that have made a contribution to humanity."

It is not easy to comment on this lengthy essay. The style was rather academic, testifying to the erudition of the writer. And yet, it was a very disappointing piece coming from a person who is ----linguistically at least--- very much at home in English, as his studies in the United Kingdom, at various universities, attested. It was disappointing both for what the essay contained, and for what it left out, in its survey of the history of Islam.

He referred, to the fact that Christians *"have coexisted with Muslims for more than 1400 years, and their churches and monasteries are to be found both in cities and the country side. I don't believe that the two sides (i.e. Christians and Muslims) have clashed, or have been involved in any violent confrontation."*

He then added these words of advice to the Pope: *"to read and reflect at length about the wonderful and peaceful ways through which Islam spread across continents, and especially in the heart of Southeast Asia, the depths of Russia, as well as in sub-Saharan Africa."*

What a poor and unscientific argument to point to the continual existence of Eastern Christian communities in the Middle East, and to conclude from that the supposedly

peaceful nature of the Islamic expansion that began in the early years of the 7th Century. What our professor failed to mention was that the majority population of the Middle East was Christian, with a number of Jewish communities scattered throughout the area. By imposing the discriminatory institution of *Dhimmitude* on both Christians and Jews, these communities decreased gradually, so that within around four centuries, they finally became a minority. **To remain silent about the less than second-class status imposed on Christians and Jews, is not a sign of good or unbiased scholarship.**

It is very important to remember that in the textbooks used in Arab schools, the conquests or futuhat of Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, North Africa, and Andalusia (Spain & Portugal) are celebrated as great victories over the Infidels. Such battles are engraved in the communal Arab memory. For example, more than a millennium after the beginning of the futuhat, Saddam Hussein could name his attack on Iran in 1980, as the *Second Qadisiyya*. The first *Qadisiyya* had taken place during the first half of the Seventh Century!

Arabs are constantly being reminded that the Muslim faith and warfare form an indissoluble unity. I noticed that in an article on www.elaph.com dated 9 October, 2006. The author was commenting on a series of broadcast programs during this month of Ramadan that described the era of the Abbasid caliphs, *Haroun al-Rashid*, and his two sons, *al-Ameen*, and *al-Ma'moon*. In referring to the father's life, he said "*This great man, Haroun al-Rashid, went on the Haj one year, and engaged in ghazu (raids) the following year, was famous for his justice, when compared with the blood-letters that preceded him....*" So, a famous caliph is held up as a model Muslim for alternating his frequent observance of the haj with the Islamic duty of jihad or ghazu!

This is not to deny that in some parts of the world, Islam came via different routes. For example, Arab merchants carried Islam into the East Indian islands (now known as Indonesia) and to Malaysia. The same method took place in sub-Saharan Africa. But it should be remarked that no sooner than Islam had taken roots in those parts of Asia and Africa, than force was used to consolidate its presence, and to persecute and marginalize the remnants of the original inhabitants who did not embrace Islam.

Our author's silences are very, very disturbing. I will rely in the remaining part of my article on several reliable sources that point to the fact that Islam was not tolerant vis-à-vis the populations of the conquered parts of the Middle East, Africa, India, and Europe.

I quote first from Bat Ye'or's article, **Past Is Prologue: the Challenge of Islamism Today**, and from a **Briefing Seminar at Freedom House, on 30 April 1997**, and her oral statement at a **Congressional Hearing Ceremony on Capitol Hill, Thursday, 1 May, 1997**.

"Arab-Islamic civilization developed in conquered Christian lands, among Christian majorities, which were eventually reduced to minorities. The process of the Islamization of Christian societies appears at all levels. It is part and parcel of the Christian suffering embodied in laws, customs, behavior patterns, and prejudices that were perpetuated

during many centuries. Christianity could survive in some countries like Egypt and the Balkans where their situation was tolerable, but in other places they were wiped out physically, expelled or forced to emigrate.

“During the whole of the 19th century, European governments tried to convince Muslim rulers - from Constantinople to North Africa - to abolish the discriminations against dhimmis. This policy led to reforms in the Ottoman Empire from 1839 - known as the Tanzimat - but it was only in Egypt, under the strong rule of Mohammed Ali, that real progress was made. Improvements in the Ottoman Empire and Persia, imposed by Europe, were bitterly resented by the populace and religious leaders.

“European laws were introduced in the process of Turkish modernization, and in some Arab countries, but it was only under colonial rule that Christian and Jewish minorities were truly liberated from centuries of opprobrium. Traditionalists however resented the Westernization of their countries, the emancipation of the dhimmis and the laws imported from infidel lands. The fight for decolonization was also a struggle by the Islamists to re-establish strict Islamic law.

“Why is this persecution ignored by the Churches, governments and media?”

“The 19th century - and even after World War I - was a traumatizing period of genocidal slaughter of Christians, spreading from the Balkans (Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria) to Armenia, and to the Middle East. In this context of death, the doctrine of an Islamic-Christian symbiosis was conceived toward the end of the 19th century by Eastern Christians as a desperate shield against terror and slavery. This doctrine - which also included anti-Zionism - had many facets, both political and religious. In the long term, its results were mostly negative.

“It is this doctrine - still professed today - that is responsible for the general silence about the ongoing tragedy of Eastern Christians. Any mention of jihad and of the persecutions of Christians by Muslims was a taboo subject, because one could not denounce persecution and simultaneously proclaim that an Islamic-Christian symbiosis has always existed in the past and the present. It is in this cocoon of lies and of a deliberately imposed silence, solidly supported by the Churches, governments and the medias - each for its own reasons - that persecution of Christians could develop freely, during this century, even until now, with little hindrance. Moreover, this doctrine also blocked the memory of dhimmitude, leaving a vacuum of thirteen centuries whose emptiness was filled with a myth that was useless as a means to prevent the return of old prejudices and persecutions.

“For this reason, dhimmitude - which covers several centuries of Christian and Jewish history, and which is a comprehensive civilization englobing legislation, customs, social behavior, and prejudices - has never been analyzed, nor publicly discussed. It is this silence - for which academia in Europe and America bears much responsibility - that allows the perpetuation of religious discrimination and persecution today.”

It is rather shocking that our “learned and moderate” author simply ignored the facts of history as set forth by Bat Ye’or, not only in the above paragraphs, but in her nearly encyclopedic works on *Dhimmitude*.

I would like now to turn to a specific aspect of the long-lasting impact of Islamic imperialism on the peoples of the Balkans. Here, I quote from Dr. Andrew G. Bostom’s article on “*Ottoman Dhimmitude*” that appeared on 7 October, 2005 on www.americanthinker.com Here are some excerpts:

*“Why has the quite brutal Ottoman devshirme-janissary system, * which, from the mid to late 14th, through early 18th centuries, enslaved and forcibly converted to Islam an estimated 500,000 to one million [43] non-Muslim (primarily Balkan Christian) adolescent males, been characterized, reductio ad absurdum, as a benign form of social advancement, jealously pined for by “ineligible” Ottoman Muslim families? For example, the role played by the Balkan Christian boys recruited into the Ottoman service through the devshirme is well known. Great numbers of them entered the Ottoman military and bureaucratic apparatus, which for a while came to be dominated by these new recruits to the Ottoman state and the Muslim faith.”*

“Scholars, who have conducted serious, detailed studies of the devshirme-janissary system, do not share such hagiographic views of this Ottoman institution. Speros Vryonis, Jr. for example, makes these deliberately understated, but cogent observations, ...in discussing the devshirme we are dealing with the large numbers of Christians who, in spite of the material advantages offered by conversion to Islam, chose to remain members of a religious society which was denied first class citizenship. Therefore the proposition advanced by some historians, that the Christians welcomed the devshirme as it opened up wonderful opportunities for their children, is inconsistent with the fact that these Christians had not chosen to become Muslims in the first instance but had remained Christians...there is abundant testimony to the very active dislike with which they viewed the taking of their children. One would expect such sentiments given the strong nature of the family bond and given also the strong attachment to Christianity of those who had not apostacized to Islam...First of all the Ottomans capitalized on the general Christian fear of losing their children and used offers of devshirme exemption in negotiations for surrender of Christian lands. Such exemptions were included in the surrender terms granted to Jannina, Galata, the Morea, Chios, etc...Christians who engaged in specialized activities which were important to the Ottoman state were likewise exempt from the tax on their children by way of recognition of the importance of their labors for the empire...Exemption from this tribute was considered a privilege and not a penalty...

“It is obvious that the population strongly resented...this measure [and the levy] could be carried out only by force. Those who refused to surrender their sons- the healthiest, the handsomest and the most intelligent- were on the spot put to death by hanging.

Nevertheless we have examples of armed resistance. In 1565 a revolt took place in Epirus and Albania. The inhabitants killed the recruiting officers and the revolt was put down only after the sultan sent five hundred janissaries in support of the local sanjak-bey. We are better informed, thanks to the historic archives of Yerroia, about the uprising in Naousa in 1705 where the inhabitants killed the Silahdar Ahmed Celebi and his assistants and fled to the mountains as rebels. Some of them were later arrested and put to death...

“Since there was no possibility of escaping [the levy] the population resorted to several subterfuges. Some left their villages and fled to certain cities which enjoyed exemption from the child levy or migrated to Venetian-held territories. The result was a depopulation of the countryside. Others had their children marry at an early age...Nicephorus Angelus...states that at times the children ran away on their own initiative, but when they heard that the authorities had arrested their parents and were torturing them to death, returned and gave themselves up. La Giulletiere cites the case of a young Athenian who returned from hiding in order to save his father’s life and then chose to die himself rather than abjure his faith. According to the evidence in Turkish sources, some parents even succeeded in abducting their children after they had been recruited. The most successful way of escaping recruitment was through bribery. That the latter was very widespread is evident from the large amounts of money confiscated by the sultan from corrupt...officials. Finally, in their desperation the parents even appealed to the Pope and the Western powers for help.

“Why was there never a significant ‘Shari’a-inspired’ slavery abolition movement within the Ottoman states, comparable to the courageous and successful campaigns lead by Western Christian statesmen (such as the Evangelical Parliamentarian, William Wilberforce) in Europe and America, throughout the 19th century? Deliberately limited and ineffectual firmans issued by the Ottoman Porte failed to discourage East African slave trading, and even British naval power, so successful in the Atlantic and Indian oceans, was unable to suppress the Red Sea slave trade to the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19th century.

“At Constantinople, the sale of women slaves, both Negresses and Circassians [likely for harem slavery and/or concubinage], continued to be openly practiced until...1908.”

Finally, I turn to one of the least known aspects of the savagery of Islamic imperialism, as far as the Western world is concerned, namely the horrific crimes committed by the Muslim invaders in India. My source here is voi.org/books/negaind

I quote a brief passage from Koenraad Elst’s review of a book written by an Indian author regarding the forceful Islamic take-over of several Hindu temples. The book itself dealt with a revisionist writing of Indian history that has been going on for almost a century, which tended to minimize or completely deny the horrors of Islamic imperialism on India. I quote a brief passage, and suggest that anyone interested in learning more about the subject should consult the website mentioned above.

“Negationism usually means the denial of the Nazi genocide of the Jews and Gypsies in World War 2. Less well known is that India has its own brand of negationism. The number of victims of this persecution surpasses that of the Nazi crimes. The Islamic campaign to wipe out Paganism could not be equally thorough, but it has continued for centuries without any moral doubts arising in the minds of the persecutors and their chroniclers. The Islamic reports on the massacres of Hindus, destruction of Hindu temples, the abduction of Hindu women and forced conversions, invariably express great glee and pride. They leave no doubt that the destruction of Paganism by every means, was considered the God-ordained duty of the Moslem community. Yet, today many Indian historians, journalists and politicians, deny that there ever was a Hindu-Moslem conflict.

They shamelessly rewrite history and conjure up centuries of Hindu-Moslem amity; now a growing section of the public in India and the West only knows their negationist version of history. It is not a pleasant task to rudely shake people out of their delusions, especially if these have been willfully created; but this essay does just that.”

The examples cited in my article witness to a very tragic, even scary phenomenon in certain writings coming from some Arab and Muslim writers, who want to be counted as moderate. Unfortunately, their apologetical/polemical works are suffused with revisionist history and negationism. I said tragic and scary purposely, for a well-educated Arab scholar holding prestigious degrees from British universities, to write for an Arab public and deny the dark side of the history of Islam, is beyond belief!

Frankly I am tired of hearing calls from Arab Muslims for apologies for the Crusades. Equally, I can't stand their continual lambasting of European imperialism. All right, many terrible things happened during the Crusader wars. But, as a liberated dhimmi, let me pose some questions to moderate Muslims:

Who gave your forefathers the right to engage in the futuhat of the world, including the Holy Places of Christendom? You engaged in “*Conquista*,” so why do you deny Christians the equal right of “*Reconquista*?”

Granted, European imperialists were no saints. I agree with you. I lived during a period of their control of the Levant. But their imperialism was not final; it came to an end when the French and the British packed up and went home. Now, what about Islamic imperialism? It was unique, since it literally “swallowed up” huge populations, altering forever their religions, languages, and cultures. With some exceptions such as Spain and the Balkans, Islamic colonialism has been irreversible. So, for “moderate” Arab-Muslim intellectuals to keep on “feeding” the young generation with that nonsense about how kind Islam has been to the conquered people would lead directly to a clash of cultures.

Let me also remind you that with all of their faults, Christians and their secularized Western offspring, have acknowledged their sins, and keep on chanting, *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. We have sinned, and sinned gravely against others. The Germans have confessed the sins of the Holocaust. Aleksander Solzhenitsyn has brought to light the horrific sins committed in the Gulag Archipelago. On the other hand, the heirs of the Ottoman Turks have not yet confessed their forefathers' involvement in the Genocide of the Armenians. They keep silent about the unbelievable damage they've done to the peoples of the Balkans who lost thousands of their young boys thanks to the wicked *Devshirme* institution.

I am still looking for the rise of a genuine moderate Islam, and I would know that it had arrived, when all traces of Islamic negationism have disappeared. In the meantime, I would say to all those pseudo-moderate Islamic intellectuals, *stop laughing at my beard***, I know enough of Islamic history to see through your propaganda.

Notes:

***Ottoman devshirme-janissary system** was practiced in the Balkans for several centuries. It robbed the native Christians of their sons who were taken away and forcefully Islamized.

As they grew up, they were made part of an elite army force known as the **Janissary**, to serve the interests of the Ottomans in their vast empire.

** An Arabic proverb that means *please don't try to fool me, or insult me; I know better.*

Recommended works:

The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude,

By Bat Ye'or. Published in 1996 by Associated University Press, 440 Forsgate Drive, Cranbury, NJ 08512

Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide, by Bat Ye'or. Published in 2002 by Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 440 Forsgate Drive, Cranbury, NJ 08512

To access a list of Bat Ye'or's writings, first go to www.dhimmi.org and click on the links given next her name in lower left corner of that page.

The Status of Non-Muslim Minorities Under Islamic Rule *Dhimmitude*: the Islamic system of governing populations conquered by jihad wars, encompassing all of the demographic, ethnic, and religious aspects of the political system. The word "dhimmitude" as a historical concept, was coined by [Bat Ye'or](#) in 1983 to describe the legal and social conditions of Jews and Christians subjected to Islamic rule. The word "dhimmitude" comes from *dhimmi*, an Arabic word meaning "protected". *Dhimmi* was the name applied by the Arab-Muslim conquerors to indigenous non-Muslim populations who surrendered by a treaty (*dhimma*) to Muslim domination. Islamic conquests expanded over vast territories in Africa, Europe and Asia, for over a millennium (638-1683). The Muslim empire incorporated numerous varied peoples which had their own religion, culture, language and civilization. For centuries, these indigenous, pre-Islamic peoples constituted the great majority of the population of the Islamic lands. Although these populations differed, they were ruled by the same type of laws, based on the *shari'a*.