

Alhambra - a model for "the European house" - a paper delivered at the symposium "Globalization Process and its Impact on Turkey and the Muslim World" held in Istanbul 9-11 November 2001

For almost 1 400 years, Islam and Christianity have been living side by side, always as neighbours, for the most part as rivals and far too often as enemies. They may be regarded as sister religions since they share the same Jewish, Hellenic and Oriental heritage. They have been old acquaintances and intimate hereditary enemies at one and the same time and their conflicts have been particularly bitter precisely because of this common origin.

Both parties have been separated more by their similarities than by their differences. Both have also regarded themselves to be the carrier of God's final message and seen it as their duty to pass it on to the rest of humanity. Both have regarded the other as the main obstacle to the accomplishment of this task.

Relations between Islam and Christianity and between these two religions and Judaism have been determined by the centuries' long intervals between them. Although Judaism was not considered altogether false, the Christians considered it an incomplete forerunner and a religion of the past which was to be replaced by the ultimate truth.

From a Christian point of view, all that followed Christianity was false and could thus not be tolerated, and this has characterised the negative Christian view of Islam. Similarly Islam could not accept subsequent religions either. Mohamed was the "seal of the prophets", the last in a long line of prophets from Abraham, via Moses and Jesus. This is why the Ahmadiyahs, who regard themselves as renewers of Islam, and the Bahais, who consider themselves an independent religious system and not a branch of Islam, have been persecuted and are still subject to persecution in the same way as Christians persecuted Muslims. On the other hand, both Christianity and Judaism were regarded as forerunners of Islam. Of course, they were imperfect since they did not accept the last prophet Mohammad but even so, as monotheists they deserved to be shown tolerance as "ahl-al-Kitab" (the people of the Book, those to whom the holy scriptures have been given), although they had to submit to the authority of the Muslim state.

The Arab invasion in the 630s was welcomed with satisfaction by the Christians in Syria, Egypt and Mesopotamia who rather preferred to live under the sovereignty of their linguistic and ethnic cousins than under a continued Greek-Roman-Byzantine or Aryan-Persian rule. Consequently, Christians actively assisted the invading Arabian armies on many occasions.

For the Jews, on the other hand, Islam's expansion only meant a change of masters. It was a change for the better in many places. The Arabs came to be seen as liberators from the Christian oppression under which the Jews so often had to live. In an age that

was characterised by intolerance and cruelty the Islamic conquerors did not try to exterminate their predecessors, which the Crusaders were later to do.

A kind of *modus vivendi* was soon established between the three religions, albeit on Islam's terms. The new conquerors held the political and military power and settled down in military camps, from which they could establish their supremacy and watch over the population while the towns retained their original character. The oriental Christians were used to obeying foreign lords and paying taxes to them. The Arabs did however not interfere with their religious customs and dogmas. Administration was largely in the hands of the local representatives and the new conquerors let them retain their offices, not least because the Christian and Jewish populations were superior to the Arabs in most social spheres.

Although the Christians and the Jews lived peaceably side by side with the Muslims, the cultural superiority of the **former** was disproportionate to the position in society that the Muslims allocated to them by regarding them as second-class citizens. However, anyone could become a member of the privileged class by converting to Islam and many soon fell for this temptation and abandoned the religion of their ancestors out of sheer opportunism. Islam grew in strength as a result of the incorporation of, and coexistence with, these representatives of an old culture. The Arab conquerors not only showed a remarkable tolerance for their time but during their explosive expansion across four continents from the river Oxus in central Asia to the Atlantic, they were also influenced in all areas of life by the cultures of the peoples they conquered – not just Christians and Jews but also Indians, Persians and Egyptians who were influenced by Hellenic culture.

Ancient Greek science was kept alive in Egypt, Syria and the Persian Empire. Greek works had been translated into the lingua franca of the Near East, Aramaic, and here Greek science was united with Persian and Indian sciences.

This occurred above all as a result of extensive translations into Arabic of Aristotle, Euclid, Hippocrates and other classical Greek works from Greek, Hebrew and Syrian sources. Many of these translations were done by Christian Arabs belonging to the Syrian Orthodox and Nestorian churches. However, they were not mere translations. The source texts were commented on, criticised and provided with additions. In this way, the Arabs became the true inheritors of the Hellenic culture to which we in Europe so often refer. By their extensive translation work, it was they who saved and administered this heritage.

These activities reached their zenith with the Syrian Christian doctor, Hunajn bin Ishaq. In his long travels, he collected different manuscripts of the same works and compared these before he translated them into Syrian or Arabic. In the early 9th century, an academy was created in Baghdad – the "House of Wisdom" – where these works were subsequently available in Arabic which became the language of science.

Baghdad was the centre of the world from 750 to 1258 AD when the Mongols destroyed the city. At a time when the peoples in northern Europe were running around in animal skins, Baghdad could boast an advanced civilisation, characterised

by a co-existence of Muslims, Jews and Christians. Baghdad, which has today become a symbol for irreconcilability, was called "medinat as-salam", the city of peace.

Islamic culture is therefore not nearly so alien as our prejudices and clichés would suggest. One of the most persistent misconceptions is that the Franks' Karl Martell saved the West from destruction by his victory against the "Saracens" at Poitiers in 732 AD.

The Saracens were forced back behind the Pyrenees and they returned to southern Spain where a Muslim state existed for almost 800 years. This Islamic presence on the continent of Europe did not lead to the destruction of the Western world. On the contrary, it resulted in a unique and fruitful symbiosis between Islam, Christianity and Judaism and in unprecedented advances in science, philosophy, culture and art.

After crossing the Straits of Gibraltar the Arabs and Berber Muslims soon conquered the kingdom of the Visigoths in Spain. The conquest was facilitated by the fact that they came to a country that was divided. The native population was oppressed by an alien aristocracy while the Jewish population suffered under the burden of the Christian church. With the aid of the city's Jewish population, Toledo fell into the hands of the Muslim conquerors almost without resistance and Cordoba was captured with the help of a Spanish shepherd who showed the attackers a breach in the city wall. When Seville fell in 716 AD, the conquest was complete and the foundations were laid for a prosperous multicultural society.

The Muslim conquerors were not regarded as upstarts or barbarians. On the contrary, they impressed their new subjects with their refinement and elegant lifestyle. The Christians started to imitate the Muslims, they acquired harems and were deeply impressed by Muslim music and literature. This cultural assimilation went so far that a bishop published a furious polemical pamphlet: " My fellow Christians enjoy Arabic poems and romances; they study the works of Muhammadan theologians and philosophers, not for the purpose of denying them but in order to acquire a correct and elegant style. Where is a layman to be found today who can read comments in Latin to the holy scriptures? Alas, young Christians, whose talents are so open to impression, know no other than Arab literature; they read and study Arabic books; they acquire at enormous expense large Arabic libraries and everywhere they sing the praises of Arab customs".

This aspiration for a more refined lifestyle is reflected to this day in the European languages in expressions which have been borrowed from Arabic. Few people attending a gala first night and afterwards, a gala banquet are likely to be aware of the fact that the word gala comes from Arabic. "Hila" is the name of the costume which the Oriental ruler bestowed as a token of his favour on men of great merits, whether civil servants, artists, poets or scholars. Thus, "Hila" was the equivalent to our orders and decorations. In Moorish Spain, the word changed to gala and a person who took part in a gala was a "galan" and was expected to be gallant, a concept which consequently directly alludes to the supposedly rough customers who, sword in hand, are said to have spread their fanaticism throughout the world.

Certainly, religion established identity and the temporal-feudal order of rule was linked to this but there was a mutual tolerance between the religious communities based on the provisions on "the people of the Book" in the Koran.

A special measure of this tolerance was the conversions between the three religions. This was very common from Christianity and Judaism to Islam, not least because it meant exemption from certain taxes and freedom from certain legal restrictions, and also made it possible to move upwards in society. Individual Christians could also gain promotion at court but they always risked being subjected to attacks and cleansings in connection with a transfer of power. As "muladies", a denomination for Christians who had converted to Islam, their future prospects improved. Many Christians and Jews who remained faithful to their religion chose instead to adopt an Arabic name with the suffix ibn (son of).

The Muslims for their part used the Christian calendar since it suited agricultural cycles better. They also celebrated Christian festivals such as the New Year and Easter and venerated Christian saints. Schools were utilised jointly by all three religions and the Koran, Talmud and Bible were common sources of knowledge. In spite of the fact that a Muslim who converts to another religion is considered as a renegade deserving capital punishment according to the Koran, there existed "tornizados", Muslims who converted to Christianity.

At least five languages were in daily use. Two were spoken, Andalusian Arabic and the Romance dialect which was later to develop into Spanish. Three languages were used for writing: classical Arabic, Hebrew and Latin.

For the Jews, the Muslim conquest was a liberation from the Christian Visigothic oppression. They often adopted Arab culture and often attained high governmental posts during this period of prosperity. The Jews had their share in the numerous scientific, philosophic and literary works which were created with Cordoba as a centre of learning. They used Arabic when they wrote about philosophy or science but Hebrew was the language of poetry. In Andalusia it was perhaps for the first time used for other than liturgical purposes. Hebrew thus came to be revived under Arab protection

Jews flocked to Arabic Spain and the city of Grenada acquired a Jewish character. An Israeli publisher printed a series of books in the early 1980s with the collective title "Treasures of Jewish Thought". All six books were written in Spain during the period 1050-1428 and all except one were originally written in Arabic. They included two books by Gabriol, better known under his Latin name, Avicbron, and works by the poet Judas Halevi and Moses ibn Maimon, better known as Maimonides.

Spain was the first province to free itself from the caliphate. The Umayyad prince Abd ar-Rahman had arrived there as early as 755 AD, having fled from Damascus. The new rulers were satisfied with the title emir to begin with but, in 929, Abd al-Rahman III claimed to be "Amir al-Mu'minin", the "Commander of the Believers". During the 10th century, the caliphate in Cordoba developed into Europe's most prosperous power in both material and cultural terms. At a time when the towns of

Central Europe consisted of wooden huts, the 500 000 inhabitants of Cordoba enjoyed street lighting, efficient sewage systems and 300 public baths.

Gradually, however, the rule of the Umayyads was weakened by internal division and it was also subject to growing pressure from the Christians in the north with their demands for reconquest – "reconquista" – of lost Christian land. As a result the caliphate at Cordoba was divided up into several smaller kingdoms in 1013. Marriage between Jews, Christians and Muslims produced many Muslim rulers with fair hair and blue eyes. Alliances were concluded between Muslim and Christian rulers. The Muslim Nasrids in Grenada helped the Christians in their fight against the Muslims in Seville. Military and political alliances were concluded in accordance with the manners and customs of the medieval civilisation of princes and chivalry and not on the basis of religious affinity. El Cid himself – the Roman Catholic hero of "reconquistas" in the second half of the 11th century – fought during his stormy life on both sides as was usual for a medieval warlord with personal and material ambitions.

However, the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church considered all contacts with Muslims and every compromise to be a victory for antichrist. There was a gradual reconquest of lost land from the 11th century onwards. Toledo fell in 1085, Cordoba in 1236, Valencia in 1238 and Seville in 1248. But the last outpost, Grenada, survived a further two and a half centuries as a town open to artists, writers and scientists from the entire Mediterranean region. Grenada remained one of the world's most beautiful cities and a place of refuge for the "moriscos" (Arabs who fled from Christian Spain) and a haven for Christians and Jews.

In 1492, Grenada also fell with its fortress Alhambra (qal' át al-Hambra, the red) which had become a symbol for coexistence - "convivencia" - between Muslims, Jews and Christians. During this long process of conquest, the Christian victors were encountering a superior civilisation. Islam was more urban, technically developed, spiritually diverse and open to the world.

After the Christian conquest, Toledo became a centre for translations of Arabic scientific literature into Latin. Inquiring minds from all corners of Europe gathered there. Muslim, Jewish and Christian scholars from Toledo, Cordoba, Seville and Grenada became so to say the midwives of Western humanism by familiarising Christian Europe with the classics of the history of science such as the mathematical theories of Euclid, Appolonius and Archimedes, the astronomy of the Egyptian Ptolemy and the medical science of Hippocrates and Galen.

There were no similar impulses in the other direction. The almost 800-years-old Muslim empire in Spain has left only one document indicating interest in the north European languages, namely a small piece of paper with a few German words and their equivalents in Arabic. The perception of the north European barbarians is reflected in a comment handed down to posterity which a Muslim in Toledo made in the middle of the 11th century and which can still be used today to characterise xenophobic groups in Western Europe:

" They are more similar to animals than to humans. The vast distance from the sun makes the air cold and the heavens misty. This is why they lack warmth of disposition, they are rough, pot-bellied, pale and long-haired, slow on the uptake, lazy, lacking in judgement and simple-minded."

Arab influence on European education, science and culture also followed another route and spread via Sicily. At the beginning of 800 AD the island was a Byzantine province, but by 829 a Muslim expedition force had gained a foothold there. By 902, the whole island was conquered, together with part of southern Italy. However, Muslim domination there did not last as long as it did in the south of Spain. The Normans recaptured Sicily at the end of the 11th century, although especially the cities by then had been radically Islamised, which led to a remarkable cultural mixture that remained vital for centuries.

The Norman government became purely Arabic in character. Roger I, who began the conquest of the island, surrounded himself with Muslim philosophers, astrologers and scientists, and his court in Palermo was more oriental than western in style. For more than a century, the island was a Christian kingdom with Muslims holding most of the highest positions.

In the first half of the 13th century Friedrich von Hohenstaufen was not only ruler over Sicily but also emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and King of Jerusalem. Although he held the highest civil office in Christendom, his private life was semi-oriental. He had his own harem and his court contained philosophers from Damascus and Baghdad and both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews. The open atmosphere found at his court laid down the foundations for the Italian renaissance. Arabic, Greek and Latin were the languages used on official occasions and Arab culture and science spread northwards from Sicily and the part of southern Italy that was under Norman rule. Both Friedrich and his son Manfred spoke Arabic, studied Arabic science and philosophy and had Arabic literature translated into Latin.

Antique scholarship came to Europe from Andalusia and Sicily as well as Arabic science and technology. The Arab contribution to medical knowledge in Europe is one of the most significant transfers of knowledge in history. Abu Bakr ar-Razi/Rhazes (died 935) compiled the medical knowledge of his day in 30 volumes, and was himself author of over 100 medical treatises which had been reprinted some forty times by the 19th century and which were used for centuries at European universities. His descriptions of smallpox and measles were particularly famous. The philosopher and doctor Ibn Sina/Avicenna (died 1037) also compiled a medical encyclopaedia that was used at European universities until the last century. Ibn al-Khatib (died 1374) understood that the plague was spread through contagion, and Ali ibn Isa's work on eye diseases showed a level of knowledge that was found in Europe only in the 18th century. An Egyptian doctor, Ibn an-Nafis (died 1288) made the first observations about the circulatory system, to name yet another example.

Special examinations before allowing doctors to practise their profession were obligatory already in the 10th century. The art of medicine was taught at special hospitals – "bimaristan" – found in major cities. Specialists developed the art of surgery at these hospitals. Various diseases were observed and described. Medicinal

preparations from plants and their effects on the human body were studied. The science of medicine was so advanced that the botanist Ibn al-Baitar, of Malaga, catalogued over 1400 different medicines in 1200. The chemist's shop as an institution is an Arab invention, and a public chemist's in Andalusia provided the inhabitants with medicine.

Arab astronomers made great progress in determining the paths taken by the moon and the planets. Early on, scientists wrote about the tides, rainbows, haloes and aurora. Arab astronomers assumed that the earth was round already in the 11th century, and the conclusions of Copernicus and Kepler would hardly have been possible without their preliminary work.

By reading translations from Arabic, Deacon Lupitus of Barcelona learned to handle an astrolabe and wrote in 984 to his fellow Christians on the other side of the Pyrenees, encouraging them to make use of the Arab scientific knowledge so that their religious tasks were made easier: "He who wishes today to have his prayer hours and celebrate Easter at the correct time, and interpret omens for the coming destruction of the world must use an astrolabe. We Christians have forgotten the old wisdom: God gives it to us again through the Arabs".

The Arabs gave Europe not only the astrolabe but an even more useful aid for accurate measurement, i.e., Arabic numerals. They should in fact be called Indian, as the Arabs do. They were known in Baghdad about 720, probably from Indian merchants. The main contribution of Indian mathematicians was above all the figure zero and the decimal system. A century after the system had become known, Muhammed bin Musa al-Khwarizmi (died 846) developed his writings on algorithms. He is fully entitled to be called the father of algebra and algorithms. The former word derives directly from the Arabic "al-djabr", the latter from a misrepresentation of the name al-Khwarizmi.

The new mathematics was revolutionary. The new numbers allowed mathematical problems to be solved quite differently than was the case with the Roman numbers. This Arabic import freed Europe from what a monk called "the tyranny of whole numbers."

The rapid spread of Islam had considerable significance for the geographical disciplines as well. The descriptions of early pilgrimages from Islamic metropolises in Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia to Mecca gave rise to geographical encyclopaediae and intercontinental itineraries. Al-Muqaddassi (died 1000) wrote a compendium of the known physical and human geography of that time, based on his own and others' reliable observations, and al-Yaqut (died 1229) compiled a geographical dictionary.

Europe made use of this knowledge as well. The Norman king Roger II commissioned the Arab geographer al-Idrisi to make a general survey map. He drew a map of the world and 72 detailed maps showing the boundaries of the known world, to the Equator in the south, the Atlantic in the west and the Pacific Ocean in the east.

The portolanos produced by Arabic and Jewish cartographers in Sicily and Mallorca in 1200 were also beyond compare. Their precision in measuring distances was not surpassed until well into the 17th century. Atlas is thus another Arabic word, and

Vasco da Gama certainly knew what he was doing when he employed an Arab as navigator for the journey which resulted in the discovery of the sea route from Europe to India. The Moroccan discoverer, Ibn Battuta (died 1368 or 1377) travelled to such distant places as Timbuktu, Peking and the Volga and is fully comparable with Marco Polo.

The following are some other examples of many of the Muslims whose knowledge has enriched Europe, and who Alexander von Humboldt has described as "the saviours of western education and culture":

- Ibn Firnas (died 888) attempted to construct an aeroplane six hundred years before Leonardo da Vinci.
- Al-Hasan Ibn al-Haytham/Alhazen (died 1039) invented the camera obscura.
- Abu ar-Rayhan al-Biruni (died 1050), a universal genius who was a historian, diplomat, Sanscrit expert, astrologer, mineralogist and pharmacologist.
- Omar Khayyam (died between 1123 and 1131) was both a poet and a mathematician.
- Ibn Rushd/Averoes (born and educated in Andalusia, died 1198). His commentary on Aristotle's work had a major influence on western philosophy.
- Ibn Khaldun (died 1406) became the father of both modern historiography and sociology.

Musical instruments such as the guitar, the mandoline and the lute were Arab cultural exports. Their names are Arabic, and with them Europe adopted Arabic forms of music. Musical descriptions of Arabic chivalry during the spread of Islam were favourite themes for Arabic poetry for a long time, and this was carried to Europe in the form of chivalric romance. Songs and music in praise of women brought a new kind of music and poetry to France in the songs of troubadours and it also influenced the German minnesong.

"Al-ard bitkellim arabi" – the world speaks Arabic – a famous Egyptian song claims, and we all speak Arabic without knowing it. The traces left by the Arab rule in Spain and Sicily can be seen especially in European languages, and above all in Spanish. It is estimated that one of five Spanish words is Arabic in origin. This is even the case with name of the Spanish national hero, El Cid, ("sayyid", gentleman). And not many tourists know that they are calling to their Maker and speaking Arabic when they shout "olé" at a bullfight. The word derives from "Wallah" (Oh God). Guadalquivir, the longest river in Spain, has got its name from Wadi-al-kabir (the big river). Gibraltar means Tariq's mountain (djabal Tariq) and the word "hasta" in "hasta mañana" comes from the Arabic word for "until" ("hatta"), for example.

The conquest of Spain started with a lightning attack, a "ghazija", hence a razzia or raid. Arsenal, fanfare and calibre are other military words of Arabic origin and as a reminder that it was the Muslims and not the British who for centuries "ruled the waves", even Admiral Lord Nelson's military title was originally Arabic. "Amir ar-

rahl" – commander of the fleet – became the Italian ammiraglio and then our "admiral". Monsoon is another nautical word from the Arabic.

Another field particularly rich in words with the same origin is botany: apricot, aubergine, tarragon, durra,hasch, ginger, jasmine, coffee, camphor, cumin, saffron, spinach, to name a few.

The following samples of Arabic loan-words in English are evidences of the fact that the Arab influences covered many areas and almost became what we today would call cultural imperialism,

- algebra, alcohol, alcove, arrack, baldachin, cipher, damask, elixir, hazard, cable, caraffe, carat, magazine, mattress, marzipan, racket, safari, satin, sugar, soda, sherbet, tariff and zenith.

A feeling of intellectual inferiority certainly contributed to the merciless way in which the Christians treated the Muslims. In 1499 in Grenada, Cardinal Ximenes ordered 80 000 Arabic books to be publicly burned because Arabic was a language for a "heretical and contemptible race". Three years later, the Muslims and the Jews were made to choose between conversion to Christianity, exile or death, and a quarter of a million Jews who refused to convert were banished.

Spain suffered from the same madness as present day Bosnia. The fervour for religious conversion was transformed into a programme of racial extermination. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella did not want to go down in history as monarchs over three religions but as Catholic regents, and this meant the end of "convivencia".

The Mongols' devastation in the East and destruction of Baghdad in 1258 and the expulsion of Muslims from Spain indicated the start of a cultural and economic stagnation from which big parts of the Islamic world is still suffering.

Fuad Zakarya, a liberal philosopher and Muslim from Cairo has written: "A cultural and an economic heritage work along similar lines. A profit can only be expected if you make an investment. Unfortunately, the Arab's relationship to their cultural heritage is more reminiscent of a savings account than a productive investment. Paradoxically, the Europeans managed to make a lasting profit from our heritage. How? By criticising and improving it and, in fact, blowing new life into it."

The decline of Islamic science and art had already begun in the 14th century. Instead of the scientists and poets, literal hair-splitting theologians took control and they sought then, as now, to save themselves from political and social misery by a literal application of the Koran. Philosophers, scientists and poets were persecuted as "rebels against the divine order". The principle of "taqlid" prevailed, i.e., any opportunity to interpret the Koran freely was banned. Instead, the theory was carried through that everything that could be known and was worth knowing was not only known already but that knowledge was more reliable the closer the source was to the time it was manifested.

"Taqlid" thus implied a type of scientific and cultural doctrine of abstinence. All knowledge not found in the Koran was seen as pernicious, which explained the growing animosity to science and philosophy.

The building of the Taj Mahal in India from 1634 and the contemporary Blue Mosque in Istanbul is architectural proof that there was not an absolute stagnation although the hostile attitude of the religious fanatics to everything new set the tone. In 1580 they managed to have an observatory in Istanbul destroyed that had been built the previous year. In 1745, they managed to stop the first printing press in the same city after it had been in operation for 17 years.

However, Andalusia shows that the fundamental excesses of that period and the expressions of fundamentalism we now witness on various issues is not synonymous with Islam. There is quite simply no Islam with a capital I. Islam is a magma, a reservoir for quite separate notions and ideas, from nostalgic utopian theories of redemption to a secular emphasis on a cultural identity. The history of Islam in Spain is a concrete proof of this and a challenge to our prejudices and stereotypes. Islam was then a superior civilisation and the contributing party, with Christianity centuries behind. During long periods population groups lived in harmony, irrespective of race or religion, a "convivencia", which the British orientalist William Montgomery Watt characterized as "symbiosis, amalgamation and fusion".

Modern Europe thus has more Islamic roots than we normally imagine. Europe is a fusion of east and west. Both Islam and Judaism were fundamental European concepts at the end of the Middle Ages. Islam is thus both a foreign, an original and, through growing immigration, a new element in present-day Europe, which is more and more populated by people who were then called "enaniados", i.e. persons living in a no-mans-land between different cultures.

The European Union is inconceivable without an element of the green colour of Islam. There are already around 20 million Muslims in the European Union -more than Scandinavian Protestants -and the number will continue to grow as a result of a continuing migration. Estimates speak of 60 million in 25 years. Whether or not the European house can be built with Alhambra as a model is therefore a crucial issue for the future of Europe.

Ingmar Karlsson

Director of The Istanbul Centre for Turkish-Swedish Cooperation