

Islam Between the Past and the Present

DRAGAN POTOČNIK

University of Maribor, Slovenia

The contribution of the Islamic civilisation to the treasury of the world's arts and sciences is invaluable. The Islamic civilisation reached its peak under the great Umayyad Caliphate and Abbasid Caliphate, and later in the khanates which emerged after the collapse of the Mongol Empire. Its days of glory came in the time of Safavid Persia, Mogul India and Osman Turkey. During this almost a thousand-year long period, the Islamic world represented, together with China, the leading civilisation in the world. The relations between Europe and the Islamic world were often marked with violence and conflicts. The latter began shortly after the emergence of Islam, when the Arabs conquered the Pyrenean peninsula. They increased during the Crusades and reached the climax in the 19th century, with the discovery of oil in Western Asia. The crisis deepened in the 20th century, with the collapse of Osman Turkey. What are the reasons for these conflicts? Is the fear of the Muslims' otherness justified? How will these relations continue in the future?

The history of Islam extends over more than 1400 years and it has more than a billion believers in the world today. The beginnings of Islam date back to the 7th century, when the prophet of God Muhammad was active in the area of Mecca and Medina as a messenger of God, teaching and governing in the name of God. The founder of Islam had, unlike Jesus, spiritual and secular authority. In Muhammad's lifetime, Muslims became a religious and political community in which the Prophet was the head of the state. His authority allowed him to manage the territory and the nation, pass justice, collect taxes, lead the army and make peace. After the death of the Prophet it was necessary to find a suitable successor in order to preserve the unity of the Islamic world and to spread the word of God (Allah). His first successor was the Prophet's father-in-law Abu Bakr. Almost half a century later, the

eagerness which was ignited by the new religion made the Arabs set out to conquer the world, which started one of the most important chapters in the history of the humankind.

[172] Then came the period which is known in Europe as the time of the Middle Ages. During that period, which was almost a thousand years long, Islam and China were the leading civilizations in the world. That was the time of the mighty Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphate (caliph was the title of the Muhammad's successor, hence the term caliphate), khanates, which appeared after the fall of the Mongol empire, and the powerful states of Safavid Persia, Mogul India and Ottoman Turkey.

BAGHDAD, THE CENTER OF THE WORLD
FOR HALF A CENTURY

Baghdad was for almost for half a century one of the greatest cultural centers of the ancient world, the place where the Greek and Persian-Arabic worlds got closer again and where scientists and scholars from all over the world gathered. As early as 754, a center for the translation of Greek manuscripts into Arabic was founded in Baghdad. They translated the works of the Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato, the writings of Neo-Platonists, the writings of Euclid, Archimedes and Ptolemy in the field of natural science, and Hippocrates' textbook in the field of medicine. With the help of the Arabs, Europe became familiar with the works of ancient philosophers, but also with Islamic findings and inventions, as well as with the science and art of ancient India and China. Moreover, the Islamic world gave great scientists, such as Ibn Sina, better known in Europe as Avicenna (980–1037), who wrote a number of works in all the areas of natural sciences. In medicine there was Al-Razi, who was one of the most important Islamic doctors and the author of the book collecting all the medical knowledge of that time entitled *Al Hawi* (The Perfect Book). He also wrote several dissertations about alchemy. There were also important findings in the area of mathematics, most notably by Al-Khwarizmi, who belonged to the most important Muslim mathematicians and founders of algebra. It was Al-Khwarizmi who adapted the decimal number system of the Indian scholars. Indian numbers including the number zero have since then been named Arabic numbers. In the area



of geography and history, there was Al-Masudi, who is also known as the Herodotus of the Arabs. He wrote a monumental work in 30 volumes entitled *The History of Time*. One of the most important scientists of the Islamic Middle Ages was Al Biruni (around 973–1048), who was a Persian. His book about astronomy *Canon Masudicus* was the most complete work of its kind. In his work *The Remaining Signs of Past Centuries* he left us an invaluable collection of historical, ethnographic and cultural information (Lunde 2003, 48–64).

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Equally important was the contribution of Islam to the treasure chest of world art. Art from the time of the Umayyad dynasty laid the foundation for the development of most of the artistic styles. Under the influence of Hellenist and Persian art, first mosques were built. They were inspired by the old Christian basilica and developed in line with the original prayer room of the Prophet. Those foundations resulted in important masterpieces such as the Dome of the Rock, the Grand Mosque of Damascus (Umayyad Mosque), and the mosques in Kufa and Basra which no longer exist (Stierlin 1996, 65–82).

An especially important place in art was held by literature. Of course the holy books of *Quran* and *Hadith* occupied a special significance in literature. *Quran* was a rich source for Arabic literature, not only because of its holiness but also as an expression of literary brilliance. One of the greatest writers of prose in Arabic literature was the Persian writer Ibn al-Muquaffa. His greatest work was an adapted translation of the Persian version of the Indian fable with the Arabic title *Kakila and Dimna*. There were also Arabic fairy tales, the best of which are exemplified by the collection of fairy tales *A Thousand and One Nights*, which is well-known all over the world.

During the period which is called Arabic renaissance, during the rule of Abbasids, it was poetry which flourished. Poets praised the love of life and sang about love and wine. One such poet was Omar Khayyam, who was the author of 600 quatrains, known under the title *Rubaiyat*. His poetry shows his love of freedom and is targeted against the religious dogmas while exalting pleasure, sometimes even touching on mysticism. An important poet was also the epic poet Firdausi, who was the author of the most famous Persian book, the *Book of Kings* (*Shahnamah*), a national epic which depicts the history of Persia from

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its mythic beginnings to the Arabic conquest. Other great poets of that time include Rudaki (Abu Abdullah Jafar), Nizami, Abu Nuwas, Attar (Farid ad-Din). The greatest poets from the time of the Mongol invasion (13th century) were Saadi and Hafez. Saadi is famous for his masterpieces *Gullistan* (The Rose Garden) in prose and *Bustan* (The Orchard), expressing morality and teachings which are considered as the classical expression of Persian popular wisdom. Saadi lived in Shiraz, the city which a century later was also the place of Hafez, another great Persian poet. Hafez wrote masterful gazelles in which he praised wine, love, the joys of life and the beauty of nature. This was also the time of Jelaluddin Rumi, a mystical poet who is considered to be the founder of the order of the whirling dervishes. (Lewis 1976, 117–200).

Literary art was also closely linked to the art of miniature, which was for a long time developed only in manuscripts. At first Arabs did not have a painting tradition. The first examples of such art were probably the work of Christians (Byzantines and Copts).

The rich tradition of the caliphate was continued by Ottoman Turks and also the Persians. Thanks to the great Turkish architect Sinan, we can admire numerous mosques (Suleyman Mosque in Istanbul, Selimiye Mosque in Edirne), madrasah and hamams. He was also active in the Balkans, where he built the bridge on the River Drina in Visegrad (Stierlin 1998, 65–82).

The contribution of Persian civilization into the treasure chest of world art was also great. Islamic Persia reached its peak during the rule of the Shah Abbas. This was the period when philosophy, theology and the fine arts flourished. It was the time of philosophy which originated from Aristotle's principles, from classical Islamic and Persian philosophy. This was also the time of architecture. The most beautiful buildings can be found in Isfahan, which turned into one of the architecturally most beautiful cities under the Shah Abbas (Potočnik 2006, 70–3).

ANTERIOR ASIA IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

From the beginning of the 19th century onward, the Islamic world came under the pressure of imperialist and colonial interests from Eu-



ropean countries, especially Great Britain, France and Russia. At the end of the 18th century, the Quadschari dynasty came into power in Persia. At that time, Persia was faced with great internal and external political problems. Russia used the opportunity and took regions in Caucasus away from helpless Persia. After the Russian victories, Persia was forced to accept the loss of even more land in Caucasus with two peace treaties (in 1813 and 1828). It also had to give up the building of a naval fleet in the Caspian sea. [175]

The discovery of oil in the 19th century brought western companies to Persia. The British Anglo-Persian oil company soon appropriated itself of the oil fields in the Persian Gulf. The systematic reforms and the modernization of the country started during the rule of the Shah Nasir ad Dino (rule from 1848 to 1896). Following the efforts in modernization of the state in the Ottoman Empire, Persia also developed its own constitutional movement in 1900. In 1906 the Shiite priests became associated with some of the most progressive members of the middle class and they forced the Quadschari ruler Musafar ad Dino to give the country a constitution, which remained in effect till 1979. But due to strong internal resistance, the constitution could not be really implemented. Already in 1911, the parliament was violently disassembled.

In 1907, Persia became more and more dependent on Great Britain and Russia because of its debts. Even though Persia did not actively participate in the World War I, it came under an even stronger British influence after the war. It was the renewal of the movement for the constitution which protected Persia from coming under the British protectorate.

In 1924, Reza Khan, an officer of Persian Cossacks, brought down the Quadschari dynasty and established the Pahlavi dynasty, which remained in power till 1979. In order to modernize the country, the new shah ruled without the influential Shiite clergy. He also used violence in trying to abolish old customs in traditions. Persia was protected by treaties with its neighbors, but this did not prevent its involvement in the World War II. In 1941, the country was occupied by Russian and British troops and the ruler had to step down. The same year he was succeeded by his son Mohamed Reza Pahlavi.

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In 1951, the prime minister Mohamed Mosadik nationalized the oil industry and forced the shah to step down. But Iran was badly affected by the decrease in world oil prices together with the British boycott of Iranian oil. After the coup in 1953, the shah regained his power and the foreigners again retained the central role in the oil industry. In the period from 1979 on, the shah tried to develop the country following western countries as role models. His neglectful treatment of religion and the violence of the secret police provoked hatred from members of different strata of society. In 1979, the unrest and uprisings in the cities forced the shah to flee the country. The same year, the Shiite spiritual leader ayatollah Khomeini, returned from his exile. On 30 March 1979, the Islamic republic was proclaimed. This ended the period of Iranian monarchy. The leadership of the country was assumed by the ayatollahs, the highest Muslim priests in the country. Khomeini was the political and spiritual leader of the country till 1989.

At the end of 1979, the rising inner political tension became even worse after the occupation of the American Embassy. The crisis was further intensified by the Iraqi-Iranian War, which out in 1980, when the Iraqi troops invaded Iran. This was the beginning of the 8-year Iraqi-Iranian War, also known as the Gulf War. The consequences of the war were detrimental to both countries. Iran was affected by inflation, unemployment and general economic misery. The conflict with the USA flared up again in 1987/1988, when there came to a series of fights between the Iranian naval forces and the USA battleships. The relationship with the USA again worsened after the American occupation of Iraq in 2003.

From the beginning of the 16th century, Afghanistan was also ruled by the Safavid dynasty. When the shah Ahmed Durani attained the unity of Afghan tribes in 1747, he created a monarchy which was based on successful wars against Persia and India and which persisted almost without interruption till 1973. In the 19th century, Afghanistan became the victim of imperialistic tensions between Russia and Great Britain. This caused several wars. With the second Afghan War (1878–1880), the British managed to create in Afghanistan a buffer state against Russian imperialistic tendencies towards Afghanistan. It was the third Afghan War from 1921 which brought independence to Afghanistan,



but it stayed under a strong British influence. In 1973 the monarchy ended with a military coup which deposed the king Mohamed Zahir. Soon after that, in 1978 there was a communist coup supported by the Soviet military and a civil war broke. The communist rule was endangered by the revolt from the traditionalistic Islamic Mujahedin, but it managed to stay in power through the military intervention by the Soviet Union in 1978. Several years later, in 1989, the Soviet soldiers left the country, but the conditions in Afghanistan remained unstable. Fierce internal fights for power among individual political groups in the country continued. In 1992, the pro-soviet government fell. The Mujahedin proclaimed the Islamic republic of Afghanistan. In 1996, they were removed from power by the Taliban militia. The Taliban renewed tribal institutions. In 2001, the USA ended the terror of the Taliban rule with a military action.

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In the modern age, a major power in this area was the Ottoman empire, which by that time had experienced several decades of decline. In the period between the beginning of the 19th century and the end of the World War I, they tried to renew and modernize the country, but the trade and colonial inroads that the European countries made into the Near East and northern Africa undermined their fragile economy. The consequences of the long crisis were the increasing demands for independence from the peoples oppressed by the empire and the subsequent loss of extensive territories due to secession. The fight for freedom from 1821 to 1829 led to the Greek uprising and the Turkish-Egyptian War in the year 1839. After the Crimean War (1854–1856) the country became destabilized by internal wars and revolutions. In 1908, the uprising of the Young Turks took place. This was followed by new uprisings and new losses of extensive territory (Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, the Balkan Wars). Parts of the territory were taken over by other countries. Austria, for example, annexed Bosnia in 1908. The worst consequences followed from Turkey's defeat by Russia in the 1870s.

In the second half of the 19th century, the European influence on the Ottoman empire increased, which resulted in the monopolization of the infrastructure for land connections between Western and Southern Asia. In 1895, the German empire gained the concession for building the Baghdad railroad, the works on which began in 1903 and were

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finished much later in 1940. The European influence could also be seen in the British conquest of the south of Yemen, which allowed the British to control the way into the Red Sea. The rest of Yemen was lost to the Ottoman empire much later in 1918. In the 19th century, the British also made protection agreements with Oman and individual shaikhates in the Persian gulf and on the Bahrain island. Under the French-British leadership, the Suez Canal was completed by 1869.

In the World War I, Turkey was part of the Central Axis (Germany). The decisive defeat of the Ottoman was achieved when the British gained the support of the Arabic Bedouin army with the help of the colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia).

After the World War I, Turkey lost the islands in the Aegean sea, Armenia, Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Arabia and Thrace due to the peace treaty of Sevres in 1920. Turkey was left only with Anatolia, the sea passes and Istanbul. The treaty was fought against by the nationally minded Turks under the leadership of Atatürk, who chased the Greeks from Asia Minor (from Izmir and its surroundings) and achieved a new peace treaty in Lausanne in 1923, which established the borders of Turkey which still exist today. The last sultan Mehmed VI had to leave his throne. Under the leadership of Atatürk the country was modernized through western style reformation. In the World War II it remained neutral till the end in 1945, when it declared war to Germany. In the following period its relationship with the Soviet Union worsened, and it became more dependent on the economic and military help from the USA. Turkey has been a member of NATO since 1952.

Due to the problem of Cyprus, their relationship with Greece has experienced several lows. In 1974, the Turkish army occupied the northern part of Cyprus and established the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. This was followed by inner political conflicts between left and right extremists. The state coup in 1980 was a consequence of these circumstances. It was only in 1990s that the situation became more stable. This was the beginning of the process of gradual democratization and modernization of economy.

The Turks also ruled over the territory of Palestine during a 400-year period (from 1516/1517 to 1917/1918). During the World War I,



Palestine was occupied by the English. In the second half of the 19th century, this area became more heavily populated with Jews, mainly due to their emigration from Russia, where they suffered the pogroms.

In 1897, the first Zionist congress in Basel laid the foundations for the sionistic movement: the foundation of the Jewish state. After the World War 1, The League of Nations accepted the British decision and gave Syria and Lebanon to France, and Iraq and Palestine (Transjordan) as a mandate territory to Great Britain. Transjordan gained partial independence in 1923, but it remained financially and politically dependent on the Great Britain. In 1946 it was proclaimed a sovereign state and became the Kingdom of Jordan.

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When it seemed that the question of the Near East would be solved with the independence gained by most of the Arabic countries in the 1930s and 1940s, the immigration of Jews into Palestine created a new crisis point. In the period from 1882 to 1939, the number of Jewish immigrants increased to 425,000, which amounted to 30% of the population of Palestine. The Arabs were strongly opposed the Jewish immigration, but to no avail. In the period between 1928 and 1939, there were five big uprisings, but London completely stifled all of them. The Arabic opposition to Jewish colonization forced the mandate authorities to restrict Jewish immigration from 1939 onward.

One of the first international decisions adopted by the UNO after 1945 was the decision about the division of Palestine between the Jews and the Arabs. This led to the foundation of the state of Israel, which was proclaimed in 1948, immediately after the English moved out of Palestine. The Arabs rejected the plan and the first war between the Jews and the Palestinians broke. Despite of the support that the Palestinians received from the Arabic countries, the war ended with the Arabic defeat. Israel was weaker economically and in terms of population, but after the war it managed to extend its territory by 30% more than what was originally determined by the division plan.

Most of Palestine thus became incorporated into the Jewish state of Israel, while the rest was united with Transjordan into the state of Jordan. The land strip along Gaza was occupied by Egypt. After 1948, there were three more wars, which were caused by the wish of Arabic refugees to return home and the demands of the Palestinians to have

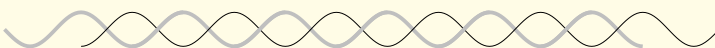
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their own state. In order to realize these demands, the Palestinian Liberation Organization was founded in 1964. It soon organized military and political activities for the liberation of Palestine and started to launch guerilla attacks. The USA tried early on to secure its influence in that region, which resulted in the Baghdad treaty in 1955. The treaty was signed under American pressure by Great Britain, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey with the purpose of minimizing the influence of the Soviet Union in this area.

In 1978, South Lebanon became another crisis point, as it was attacked by Israel targeting the PLO. Lebanon developed intense internal tensions after the World War II, because it was divided into several Christian and Muslim religions, while its internal affairs were under the influence of other Arabic countries. In 1958, a civil war out and it continued with interruptions the following 20 years. As a consequence, Lebanon was divided into the Christian part and the Muslim part which were ruled by different militias.

In the beginning of the 16th century, the Turks occupied the territory of Syria. The Turkish authority persisted in this country until the end of the World War I. Soon after the territory was abandoned by the Turks, European powers returned to the Syrian shores. The hope of independence was destroyed by the Sykes–Picot agreement in 1916, which planned the division of the Ottoman empire into several interest spheres. According to this agreement, France would get Syria, Great Britain would keep Iraq, and Russia tried to secure its influence in the area of Bosphorus. The involvement of European powers in the area of Western Asia was later recognized by the Balfour declaration, which stressed the British support for the political meaning of the Zionist movement. This movement later, when the Jewish state was created in Palestine, served as a protection for the British influence in the eastern Mediterranean.

Syria came under the French authority and was occupied by the French troops. In 1920 there was already a strong resistance against the French. After fierce fighting between the French and the independence movement, Syria gained independence in 1946. After the declaration of independence, they set out to build a country based on Islamic and socialist foundations. From 1958 and 1961, Syria was part of the United



Arab Republic. It got involved in several Israeli-Arab wars, and in 1976 also in the Lebanon Civil War.

In the middle of the 16th century, the Turks conquered the northern and eastern parts of the Arabic peninsula. In the 18th century, they founded the state of Wahabites in the land of Najd, which in 1806 also took over the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Wahabites then established an alliance with Mohamed Ibn Saud, the patriarch of the military Bedouin tribe of Saud. The connection between *Quran* and fighting has to this day been the motive on the flag of the kingdom: on the green banner of the Prophet, the curved sword underlines the Islamic faith. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Bedouin family Saud was strengthened with the British support, and the Turks had to leave the Arabic peninsula. In 1926, Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud proclaimed himself the king of Najd, Hedjas and dependent territories, and in 1932 he became the king of Saudi Arabia. The country was ruled in the manner of an absolute theocracy. In the 1930s, they started to pump oil and modernize the country western-style. The power of the royal family has remained unchanged to this day despite of the increasing demands for political reformation.

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One of the countries of the Near East which were created from the Ottoman Empire was also Iraq. During the World War I, the British took Mesopotamia from the Turks, and after the war it came under the British authority. Under the British authority, the Mesopotamian leaders named the country Iraq in 1921, and they founded a kingdom with the king Faisal I in power. Iraq became independent in 1931, with the British retaining their right to participate in political decisions. Soon after its foundation, Iraq became riddled with inner political problems, which were caused by the fact that the country consisted of Arabic, Kurdish, partly Shiite and partly Sunni groups of population. In 1958 the revolutionary military officers murdered the king Faisal II and declared Iraq a republic. This was followed by a decade of unrest and uprisings, until the party Baas came into power in 1968. In 1973, the government nationalized the oil industry. When Iraq attacked Iran in 1980, the crisis worsened. The renewal after the end of the war was again stopped by the sudden Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, which caused another war crisis. The Iraqi crisis reached its climax in 2003 with the

invasion of American forces and the fall of Saddam Husein's regime.

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THE ROOT OF CONFLICTS

The Islamic world was several centuries ahead of the West. The relationship between Europe and the Islamic world was often marked by violence and fighting. Where are the roots of these conflicts? The beginnings date back to the years after the foundation of Islam. As early as 711, the Arabs came across the Gibraltar and in a few years conquered almost the whole of the Iberian peninsula. Despite the fact that Spain experienced an economic and cultural development under the Arabs, the Moors (the Muslims) were considered as the main enemies of Spain (Lewis 2004, 20–53).

This conflict between western (Christian) Europe and Islam grew even more intense during the period of the Crusades. After the defeat of the Crusaders and their expulsion, it was not until the 18th century that the European countries threatened the Arabic world again, during the time of the imperial politics of European countries in South and Southeastern Asia. It was mainly Portuguese ships, and occasionally English and Dutch ships, which stopped on the shores of Islamic states and first started trading and then continued by conquering the strategic places (Krieger 2003, 122–148).

This was the time of the worst invasions by the Turks (15th to 18th centuries) into the territory of Europe. However, wars in the name of God in religion were not waged only by the Muslims, but also by the



Christians. This was a time of wars, a time in which a nation who did not conquer was conquered. It is wrong to believe that it is written in *Quran* that Islam should be spread by the sword. The very opposite is true: *Quran* says that conversion into a different religion should not be forced. It also forbids the destruction of religious buildings (*Quran* 2:56). [183]

During the rise of European states in the 19th century, Great Britain, France and Russia started gradually to occupy areas of Anterior and Central Asia. There were several reasons why the Islamic world was such an easy prey for the European states, turning into a mere shadow of its former self. The most significant of these reasons were corruption, incompetent rulers, disunity of the Islamic world (Sunnites and Shiites), political instability, slow reforms and general technical underdevelopment.

OIL AS AN INTRODUCTION TO HUMILIATION

The situation worsened for the Muslims even more when oil was discovered in Anterior Asia in the 19th century and their exploitation began. The discovery of oil brought many western companies to Anterior Asia. One such example was the British Anglo-Persian oil company which soon took over the management of the oil fields along the Persian Gulf. Foreigners thus gained a central role in oil industry.

Foreign, western European companies and increasingly also American companies started to endanger even the holy Islamic places (Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem and Baghdad), which irritated the Muslims even more than the economic exploitation.

The relationship between both civilizations deteriorated even more due to the crisis in Turkey after the end of the World War I. In 1920, Ottoman Turkey was completely defeated as the last of the great Islamic empires. The Turks themselves abolished the sultanate, which also meant the end of the caliphate. Many Muslims had trouble accepting the fact that the force of imperialist countries and domestic (Turkish) modernizers brought to a sorry end the period of almost thirteen centuries of caliphate. Caliphate was the symbol of Muslim unity, progress and identity.

Another strike for Islam came with the foundation of the Jewish

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state in 1948, which triggered several wars between the Jews and Palestinians and indirectly caused a conflict between the USA and Islam. The above facts also figure as the main reproaches in the statements of the first enemy of the USA Osama bin Laden. He exploits the feelings of humiliation and shame that the Islamic world has experienced in the past hundred years to wage his war against the USA.

In the west, Islamic civilization is often seen as an opposition to Christianity, especially as a religion which is undemocratic and hostile to women. Here it has to be noted that both religions originate from the same roots and that often the reason for intolerance lies in the lack of knowledge in the West about Islam. In all its aspects, Islam is closer to Judeo-Christian tradition than to any other religion. It could be even said that Judaism, Christianity and Islam represent the variants of the same religious tradition. Christianity and Islam are both essentially successors of the Jewish law, and also of Greek philosophy and science. Of course there are considerable differences between the two religions (Lewis 1995, 305–86).

The reason why Islamic civilization is often marked as undemocratic and uncivilized can also be attributed to the fact that many Islamic countries do not have a democratic tradition. The influence of Islamic clergy together with the local traditions often result in the lack of human rights, most notably the rights of women.

QURAN IS NOT OPPOSED TO HUMAN RIGHTS

Living according to the teaching of *Quran* is a duty for every Muslim. The teaching of life according to *Quran* is acceptable for any society and is not opposed to any ethical norms of civilized society. Sometimes it is difficult to assess Islamic society according to the standards of European society. *Quran* teaches that the woman is the pillar of the family and has to be respected. In practice I have often experienced the opposite in my travels, notably in Pakistan, where the situation of women is rooted in the tradition which is not directly connected to Islam. On the other hand, the covering of women is in accordance with the *Quran*, which says that the woman should be covered in public in order not to excite men with her appearance.

Another legal and cultural phenomenon of Islam is polygamy. Dur-



ing the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, polygamy with an unlimited number of wives was something ordinary. Polygamy also used to exist or still exists today in some non-Islamic countries. However, the ideal of the matrimonial union in Islamic countries is a monogamous marriage. The following quote from the *Quran* clearly shows this: 'If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice. Two or three or four, but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one.' (*Quran* 4:3.)

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Polygamy is thus more an exception rather than a rule. In some Islamic countries, polygamy is prohibited, e.g. in Tunisia and Turkey. It more commonly appears only in the upper classes of Saudi Arabia, in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and in the sub-Saharan Africa.

Islam should be regarded with respect which is accorded to those who have a different religion and not with fear of what is considered as an aggressive religion threatening world peace. The greatest problem of tolerance in Europe is its lack of knowledge about Islam. Many of those who are the most hostile towards Islam have never read the *Quran*. Distorted information has caused a distorted understanding of the essence of Islam. It is not correct to make generalizations about Islam on the basis of terrorist attacks in New York or London. If we had read the *Quran*, we would know that it says that killing one person is like killing the whole world, and saving the life of one person is like saving the whole people. The fear of Muslims is unfounded, since they enrich the world with their customs and traditions, and also teach us about love and respect of fellow human beings.

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