

ZOCALO

"Ignorance Is Not Its Own Excuse"

Just when I think our misunderstandings around Islam can't surprise me anymore, it happens again. I refer, of course, to the current controversy over caricatures of Muhammed published in a Danish newspaper.

I don't think you need me to recap it here. Nor do I think the editors of that Danish newspaper represent the entire Western world. It's even been suggested that, because the USA is more religious than Western Europe, we have a greater sensitivity around religious issues, and such cartoons would never make it to an editorial page here. Whether or not that's true, I realize ignorance about Islam is not uniform from one person, or one country, to the next.

But there is ignorance. While many I've talked to can see how such cartoons are potentially inflammatory (or in poor taste), few understand why they are offensive to Muslims. This lack of awareness would have been disappointing, if not surprising, before September 2001. But now? It's almost inexcusable.

Then I ask myself: should I be surprised? A thousand years ago, Western European knowledge of Islam was equally thin. Reliable sources of information were scarce. European scholars sought to explain Islam from what one historian called "the ignorance of the confined space... of a man in prison who hears rumors of outside events and attempts to give a shape to what he hears, with the help of his preconceived ideas". These days information is at our fingertips; Denmark is closer to Damascus than it used to be. Yet it seems we're still stuck in that confined space. Have our methods changed so little in so long? Do we even understand what benefits Western civilization has received, historically, from the Islamic world?

I wonder whether we've remained blissfully ignorant all along or just have a selective memory. For example, take "The Song of Roland". Dating from the time of the First Crusade (c.1100 CE), it is considered one of the finest examples of medieval poetry. Because of this, many of us have studied the "Song" in school. Some may even remember the plotline: Charlemagne makes a peace treaty with the Muslim king of Spain. As Charlemagne crosses the Pyrenees, heading for home, the rearguard of his army is attacked by this same king. In retaliation, Charlemagne turns back and wipes out the Muslim army. Regretting that he ever trusted them, he concludes: "Never to pagans may I show love or peace".

Now, how many of us remember – or were even taught – the historical facts on which this poem is so very loosely based? Charlemagne did go to Spain in 778 CE, to make not just peace but an alliance with one of the

Muslim rulers there. On the way home his army was attacked, not by Muslims but by Christians. Changing this fact turns the poem into a kind of propaganda piece. It's hard to say whether the alteration was made deliberately or out of ignorance.

In literature, ignorance is easily, and perhaps unwittingly, perpetuated across the centuries: facts are distorted to tell a "better" story; and in time both the facts and the distortion can be forgotten. But there is a historical ignorance that is harder to excuse, one that forgets Islamic civilization helped spark a cultural revival in Western Europe.

By the Dark Ages, Greek literature had all but disappeared from Western Europe; only a few abridged works of "the greats" survived in Latin translation. Meanwhile, as the Muslims spread into Syria, Egypt and Iraq, they encountered treasure-troves of Greek writings on philosophy, medicine, and science. From the eighth century on, they translated these works into Arabic, studied them and expanded on them. Copies of these translations spread from Damascus to all corners of the Muslim world, including Toledo and Cordoba in Muslim Spain.

When the latter two cities were annexed to the Christian kingdoms of Spain (Toledo in 1085, Cordoba c.1230), Greek literature and the added wonders of Arabic science and philosophy (re-)entered western Christendom, complete with a ready-made corps of translators: many Christians in Muslim Spain were fluent in both Arabic and Romance languages. Soon Avicenna's treatise on medicine became the chief medical text in Western Europe; Averroes's commentaries on Aristotle were studied in Paris.

Though these Greek-to-Arabic-to-Romance translations were eventually replaced when the original Greek works came back to the West from Byzantium, Western appetites for them had first been whetted by the Muslims' accomplishments. It would be hard to overstate their influence on the development of our own civilization. But it seems we have underestimated or forgotten it, and allowed ourselves to slide back, after a fashion, into that "confined space" of the Dark Ages.

Maybe a thousand years ago this was forgivable; in the Information Age it is downright appalling. How can we hope to live peacefully with any people when we understand so little about them and our mutual interdependence? Claims of Danish editors notwithstanding, freedom of speech is not a carte blanche for ignorance; and speaking from ignorance isn't very neighborly. Before we exercise our rights and our tongue, we would do well to exercise a little grey matter first.

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