

BUILDING BRIDGES WITH OUR MUSLIM NEIGHBORS BY ACKNOWLEDGING THEIR CULTURAL HERITAGE

In preparation for a local event "Building Bridges with Our Muslims Neighbors," I prepared some blank regional maps for children to color. The idea was to give them a sense of where the world's 1.6 billion Muslims lived on our globe.

One out of every fourth person in the world is a Muslim, and there are 6.3 million in the U.S. It is also significant to note that only 20 percent of Muslims are Arabs, and 5 percent of Arabs are not Muslims.

Most of these people live under governments that stand firmly against Islamic extremism. One good example is Morocco whose king, Mohammed VI, is liberalizing the economy, making elections fairer, reforming marriage laws, deporting Islamic extremists, and abolishing the death penalty.

Morocco has been rated as the best Muslim democracy by *The Economist* magazine, although Freedom House is not ready to lift its "partially free" label until there is complete press freedom and more tolerance for critics of the king.

The earliest Muslim government was based on elections, broad deliberation (including women) and consensus, the protection of minorities, and appeal to the wisdom of experience and learning.

While the emphasis on reasoned deliberation has not been completely lost, the rule of force dramatically came into the play with the assassination of the third caliph in A.D. 656, and a switch to hereditary rule, which has been the norm in Muslim countries for centuries. That has now changed with relatively stable democracies in Morocco, Mali, Senegal, Turkey, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

One of Islam's greatest achievements came in medieval Spain. For 1,300 years Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived in relative peace and produced some of history's most advanced science, most sophisticated philosophical works, and most beautiful architecture. Medieval Christian scholars read about Greek science and philosophy for the first time because Muslims had preserved the texts in their own great libraries for hundreds of years.

In 1492, the King and Queen of Spain declared that all Jews would have to convert, face death, or leave the country. Morocco stood ready and embraced thousands of Jewish refugees, and for 500 years Morocco's Jews prospered until most of them chose to immigrate to Israel.

Many people are not aware of the technological advances of medieval Islam. The pointed arch of the Gothic cathedral, much stronger than the rounded Roman arch, was borrowed from Muslim builders.

In the early 800s a Muslim by the name of Jabir ibn Hayyan discovered distillation, a process essential to the development of the science of chemistry. Emphasizing systematic experimentation rather than esoteric alchemy, Jabir ibn Hayyan discovered sulphuric and nitric acid; and, for the first time, distilled rose water and other perfumes, prized items offered by ubiquitous Muslim traders.

A 10th Century Muslim Ibn al-Haitham built the first pin hole camera and he was the first to conclude that the eye works by receiving light rather than sending it out to objects. Our word camera comes the Arabic word for a dark room.

A Muslim engineer by the name of al-Jarazi invented the crank-shaft, the combination lock, and the first mechanical clock. These discoveries are found in his book entitled *Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices* published in 1206.

Christians of the Middle Ages rarely ever washed and the Crusaders were known for their rancid smell as well as their deception and brutality. Muslims are required to wash before prayer and for centuries they had been using the first known soap. A Muslim trader introduced shampoo to the English in 1759.

Muslim astronomers were the first to propose that the orbits of the planets were not fixed circles but ellipses, and a Persian stargazer was the first to observe and identify the Andromeda galaxy. Muslim astronomers knew that the earth was a sphere and that rotated on its own axis. They calculated the earth's circumference, the latitude and longitude of major cities, and were able to calculate the direction of Mecca from any place on earth.

Many star names are from the Arabic and the words zenith, azimuth, and nadir are from the language of Mohammed. Finally, Muslim astronomers made Henry the Navigator's honorific possible, and, as S. M. Ghazanfar states, "Muslim navigators

guided the Portuguese and Spanish explorers (including Vasco de Gamma and Christopher Columbus) in their voyages."

Muslims are proud of their great cultural history and hundreds of millions vote for politicians who reject radical Islam. Muslim scholars and scientists, many of them in top posts at American and European universities, continue to build on the knowledge of their medieval coreligionists.

It is absolutely essential that we all acknowledge these historical facts and the political reality of moderate Islam. Condemning Islam because of Osama bin Laden is as outrageous as rejecting Christianity because of the Aryan Nations.

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