

Beyond the Crusade and Jihad

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PEACE BE UPON YOU

The Story of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Coexistence

By Zachary Karabell

Knopf. 343 pp. \$26.95

The only good things to come of 9/11, some say, are a greater consciousness of and a keener sensitivity to Islamic history, religion and culture. If that is so, the education has been slow and painful in the past six years, made all the more difficult by the gruesome reality of the Iraq war.

The education has been impeded by terrible conceptual mistakes, the first and most fundamental of which occurred five days after the catastrophe when President Bush proclaimed an American crusade. This deflected attention from mass murder and defined the coming struggle -- much to the joy of al-Qaeda, no doubt -- in terms of Western crusade and Eastern jihad. Donald Rumsfeld tried to scare us with the fantasy of a worldwide Islamic "caliphate." The Danish cartoons insulted Muhammad in the name of free expression, and the pope weighed in with his dense imputation that Islam was an "evil and inhuman" religion.

These gaffes and deliberate provocations come from an ignorance of Islamic history and overlook the intensity with which historical symbols are felt in the Arabic world. If we can begin to dream of a postwar period in the near future when reconciliation with the Arab world -- as well as healing at home -- is the imperative, then a healthier respect for the traditions of those we have attacked and insulted might be a good start.

Zachary Karabell's "Peace Be Upon You" is a welcome and important contribution to this historical phase that lies ahead. The book presents an overview of the relations among Muslims, Christians and Jews since the time of Muhammad. As such, it should be required reading for congressmen who must vote on billions for a civil war between Shiites and Sunnis or presidential candidates who vie for the chance to preside over a postwar America.

Karabell's thesis is that the modern alienation between Islam and other faiths is a historical anomaly. He contends, rightly, that peaceful coexistence, more than conflict, characterizes the past 1,300 years of Islamic history. By contrast, Christian history, with its crusades and inquisitions, has been far more violent.

Karabell believes that emphasizing the historical episodes of Muslim tolerance toward other religions can be a "vital ingredient" to build upon in the future. "Reclaiming the legacy of

coexistence may not make the world whole," he writes, "but it does show that Islam and the West need not be locked in a death dance."

This is a book of broad strokes, categorical statements and historical snapshots, fashioned into a hopeful, historical meditation. Above all, Karabell is intent on debunking what he calls the "myth of endless conflict." In this, he returns to the core lesson of Islam's holy book. Christians and Jews are seen in the Koran as "People of the Book," misguided perhaps, blind to Muhammad's corrections of their "perversions" maybe, but nevertheless believers in the same God. Karabell quotes Surah 29:46: "Dispute not with the People of the Book save in the fairer manner . . . and say, 'We believe in what has been sent down to us, and what has been sent down to you. Our God and your God is One, and to him we have surrendered.' "

Karabell takes us on a swift journey through the important episodes of Islamic history: the tribal conflicts in Mecca and Medina, the split between the Sunni and Shiite interpretations, the golden age of Baghdad, the triumph of Saladin in the Third Crusade, the unifying philosophy of the Jewish sage Maimonides, the golden age of harmony between the faiths during the reign of Alfonso X in 13th-century Spain, and the long hegemony of the Ottoman Empire. These are milestones of world history about which Western audiences need to be far more aware.

Like the teacher of a survey course with an agenda, Karabell sometimes moves too quickly, can gloss over cruel and violent behavior by Islamic heroes, and occasionally gets his facts wrong.

In 1099 after the fall of Jerusalem in the bloody First Crusade, we are told that a long period of quiet ensued and that there was no sense in the Muslim world that this was religious war. This belies the brief and troubled 80-year history of the kingdom of Jerusalem from 1099 to 1187. We are told that "the Ottomans honored the flag of truce" and protected the rights of the local population. This scarcely squares with the scorched-earth policy of Suleiman the Magnificent in his 16th-century Balkan campaigns, which included the burning of Budapest. When the Ottomans were cruel, the author argues apologetically, they were simply creatures of their medieval time.

We are told accurately that Martin Luther admired the Ottoman system of administration, but not that he saw the Turks as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and the evil instrument by which God was punishing Christian sins. And surely Karabell knows that Lawrence Durrell was not an American writer.

These lapses and apologetics aside, Karabell's book is a worthy undertaking and a stimulating, useful read. In general, his presentation is lucid, well written and persuasive. It is true that the tradition of tolerance in Islamic history deserves a greater appreciation. It is also true that a mature dialogue of civilizations in the future must acknowledge violence and intolerance where it exists.