

The image of the Arabo-Islamic Culture in the European History Textbooks

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School Children in Europe read in their history textbooks pages or chapters on the Arabo-Islamic culture and civilization. Is the image of such a culture and civilization positive, negative or a mixture of both ? If it is negative, why should it be so? Does this negative image lie within the scope of what some dubbed as the "clash of civilizations" or can it be studied and improved within the framework of the necessary dialogue among cultures ?

The authors of scholastic textbooks agree that the Arabo civilization has been brilliant throughout several centuries, as it has not only preserved the Greek and Persian heritage, but also developed it. Thus we find school textbooks abounding with the numerous inventions and terminological innovations of Arabs and Muslims such as Algebra, the figure zero, admiral, cheque, sugar, tambour (drum), saffron etc. (Hatier 5th. ed. 2001, P.41 in France).

If the image of this civilization is positive in history scholastic textbooks in Europe, that of the Islamic culture is, however, negative in such same books, where it is presented from a point of view sometimes close to that of the present extremists.

Thus the reader can notice an undoubted admiration of this civilization while in the same time he finds a negative image of the foundation thereof namely, the Islamic culture, as the principles of this religion are presented in fact as irreconcilable with those of the European civilization!

Nevertheless, a flourishing and blooming civilization based on a religion implies that such civilization has noble principles such as liberty, equality,

solidarity, tolerance, open-mindedness towards the other cultures, logic of reasoning and of science which is manifested here through Koranic verses. One cannot imagine a brilliant Islamic civilization along with an obscurantist Islam. Why then certain schools in our days present the culture of Islamic extremism leading to terrorism rather than that of peace? Who stands to gain by this bias?

For students, civilization means development of literature and arts, an organized society, the quality of life, a way of life appropriate for a given society in the religious, social, cultural, scientific technological and other fields. Civilization also includes the customs prevailing in respect of food, apparel, housing conditions, the way of working, studying, governing etc. We notice in the above definition of the civilization that the notions of civilized, progress and science are contradictory to those of struggle and wars, yet some in the West or in the East use the expression struggle, clash or war of civilizations!

If the Arabo-Islamic civilization had remained flourishing for several centuries in the Middle Ages, Islam had been playing an essential role in the elaboration and the development of such a civilization. It appears that it was not quite by chance that, according to the specialized Muslims, the ulemas, the first revealed verses of the Koran are:

1. Read: In the name of thy Lord Who created all.
2. Who created man from a clot?
3. Read: Thy Lord is the Most Bountiful
4. He who taught you the use of the pen.
5. He taught man that which he knew not.

These verses, these few words, draw and present the objects of the Arabo-Islamic civilization. "Read", in the imperative, is not only the first word, but it is also repeated in the third verse, in confirmation of the first. Surely

reading is the key to knowledge, the indispensable means of culture and science.

These verses present writing after reading. "the use of the pen (the Arabic Kalam, English calamus from Greek Kalamos = reed pen). In short, knowledge, science and creation are manifested through the verbs *allama*, *ya'lam* which mean has taught, instructed and will teach, will instruct respectively in the past and future tenses and the necessity of creation with the verb "create". The Arab infinitive *ilm* means science. Furthermore, the notions of creation, invention, science, solidarity are manifested in the few above-mentioned verses.

These principles present the solid bases of cultures and great civilizations.

Thus the principles manifested in the preceding and other verses should attract the attention of the authors of history school textbooks when they present texts concerning the Arabo-Islamic culture.

For example, the Islamic civilization is taught in France in the fifth and second classes. In the fifth, it occupies a chapter in every scholastic textbook compiled by a team of history and geography professors. All editions present the Islamic civilization as a brilliant civilization during several centuries in which many towns such as Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo and Cordoba had been lighthouses in the fields of science and culture from the eighth century to the thirteenth century (1)

One can read in such textbooks phrases like: "in the Middle Ages, medicine, mathematics, geography and astronomy of the Muslims had been much advanced compared with what had been existing in Western Europe (...), the city as an economic centre (...), " etc.

(Bordas 1997 pp. 34-35)

(1) Scholastic textbooks 2001 ed. of Magnard pp 28-31, Nathan pp. 28-37, Belin pp.30-39, Hatier pp.38-43 and 1997 edition of Hachette pp.26-28 and Bordas pp.34-35.

But it appears that the authors of the chapter on “the Muslim civilization”, in France and in other countries in Europe, mix religion with pre-Islamic customs and that they do not always distinguish Islam from the attitude of certain Muslims who act out of fanaticism or of political calculations who manipulate Islam for personal or ideological ends. Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, is innocent of such extreme or immoderate behaviour.

The study of certain notions such as polygamy, jihad, the caliphate, the revelation, the black rock, the image of Mahomet as a man of war, the Shari’a, the veil, the inheritance of the son and the daughter, Islam as “submission” in the scholastic history textbooks in Europe, reveal certain prejudices.

Authors collect, sometimes without the indispensable critical analysis, information concerning Islam that is twisted due to such enduring prejudices that have constantly been invigorated by the Crusades, the reconquest of Spain, the history of the Ottoman Empire, the colonization, and the image, often tendentious, of Islam which has been propagated by the media through Muslim fundamentalists.

In fact, presentation of a Koranic text and/or verse outside its historical, geographical, religious, social, cultural, political, economic, and military context, presenting them only in its military dimension, referring to erroneous translations or to not much reliable references, is obviously one of the causes of these errors.

As noted by Fawzeya Al Ashmawi, most countries praise and speak very highly of their own history in their scholastic textbooks but criticize and distort the history of the other (2).

(2) Fawzia El Ashmawi: the Image of the other in the scholastic syllabi in the West and in the Muslim countries, an unpublished study.

Jihad

Certain authors of scholastic textbooks put the actions of Muslim fundamentalists or terrorists into the category of Jihad. So they do also regarding the unjustifiable military actions of certain Muslims through history. History textbooks present jihad as an aggression against non-Muslims to force them to be converted into Islam.

It is a must to specify clearly the notion of jihad in Islam before studying its definition in the European scholastic textbooks, in order to understand the real meaning of this term which has been and still is the subject-matter of many writings in the world.

Many languages have borrowed this term from Arabic, but have shifted its meaning, thus leading to creation of a distorted image of Islam.

Etymologically, *Jihad* in Arabic means "effort" and the verb *Jahada* means "exerting efforts". The word jihad is found in the Koran preceded by its verb in the imperative, addressed to Mahomet.

"So, obey not the disbelievers but strive against them herewith with a great endeavour"

[Surah XXV (the Criterion of Right and Wrong) verse 52]

Jihad in this verse means: debate, discussion, conviction, which necessitate exertion of mental efforts and proofs. It is reason which outclasses and dominates, rather than violence, wisdom rather than fundamentalism which really convinces. In explaining the above verse, Tabari, quoting from Ibn Abbas, says that the prophet Mohammad had to exert mental efforts, relying on the Koran, while speaking of Islam to non-Muslims (3).

The following verse specifies clearly the rules of discussion, politeness, respect and freedom:

"Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and reason with them in the better way". [Surah XVI "The Bee" Verse 125]

(3) Tabari, *Game' al bayan 'an tawel al Koran*, Dar Al Fikr, Beirut, 1988, Vol. 19, P. 23

The following verse specifies clearly the rules of discussion, politeness, respect and freedom:

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According to Koran, discussion in matters related to religion should be dominated by reason, wisdom, mutual respect and the right for everyone to freedom of thought of believing or disbelieving, as well as the right to express oneself freely without verbal or bodily aggression. This type of Jihad is called in the Koran: **the great jihad**.

The **small jihad** which means: waging war against an aggressor to defend oneself is misinterpreted in the West, just as other Muslim people misused it throughout history. This term is used erroneously by those who manage religion craftily for personal purposes or by fanatics who are far from being theologians or researchers.

This small jihad is authorized only for defending oneself with appropriate means, against aggressors both at individual and at societal levels. This is what is called in the West “legitimate defence”, but no Muslim has the right to be first in attacking any person or country whatsoever.

The Koranic verse is clear:

“Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, but do not commit injustice by attacking them first. Lo ! Allah loves not aggressors”

(Surah II (The Cow) 190). This verse is considered as containing one of the principles of Islam.

Moreover, all Muslim theologians agree on the following rule: the main principle of relations between Muslims and other societies is peace rather than war.

The other verses concerning jihad which order Muslims to combat the infidels are related to specific contexts. In general, it was the Meccans who used to attack the first Muslims and were aimed at by such verses. The Muslims at the time of the Prophet Mohammed had had no right to wage war

except to defend or recover their goods and properties or again to ward off the danger of those that had been preparing themselves to attack them. At the time of the Prophet Mohammed and the first four caliphs, the first Muslims never violated any peace treaty with their neighbours, but they did wage war in a status of legitimate defence against the Meccans or against a group of Jews of Medina when those violated these treaties. Desiring to live in peace, Muslims didn't force the non-Muslims to be converted into Islam. We should here confirm that Koran orders Muslims to respect freedom of thought, belief or disbelief

"There is no compulsion in religion"

(Surah II "The Cow", Verse 256)

Moreover, Koran makes it clear that life is sacred. The following verse shows respect for human life, considering that whoever kills a human being is as guiltier as one who would kill the entire humanity. A Muslim has no right to kill others or to commit suicide:

"That who so ever killed a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind".

(Surah V "The Table Spread, Verse XXXII)

The Prophet Mohammed said:

"The Muslim is one who does not inflict on others any verbal or physical violence" (sourah 5 verset 32).

The verses which order Muslims to combat the infidels mean only those Meccan aggressors of the seventh century and those Jews of Medina who betrayed the Muslims in Al Ahzab foray but they do not concern the infidels, atheists, Jews or Christians of today.

On the other part, according to historians, Islam spread to Indonesia, Malaysia, China and Eastern Africa through commerce, but by conquest in North Africa. Distinction should be drawn between the historical events of Islam, the principles, the instructions and the spirit of Islam.

In fact the principles of Islam agree with the universal values. The right of thinking, free-expression, believing or disbelieving is clear in the verse 256 of the Surah 2 "There is no compulsion in religion".

Koran honours every human being whether he is a believer or not "Verily we have honoured the children of Adam" (Surah 17, Verse 70).

Tolerance is clear from the verse "Whoever pardons and tolerates, Allah (God) will recompense".

The Prophet Mohammed gave the example at the time of the conquest of Mecca, telling the Meccans who had been his persecutors, chased him and who even wanted to kill him: "Go, I pardon you, you are free". Furthermore, fraternity among human beings is the subject-matter of the following verse:

"O mankind ! Lo! We have created you male and female and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another"

(Surah XLIX "The Private Apartments" Verse 13)

This verse places the stress on the notions of fraternity and such dialogue through knowledge is the results of dialogue which, in turn, should lead people to know and respect the other and his culture. Moreover, one of the "pillars" of Islam is the *Zakat* or the "legal alms", which is an expression of solidarity among human beings in the Muslim society.

Peace is also one of the principles of Islam. The Arabic definition of the word *Islam* is of assistance towards a better understanding of the real meaning. The word *Islam* is derived from the arab-semitic root SLM which means in all Semitic languages: peace, security. Moreover, one of the sacred names of Allah (God) in Arabic, is the Peace (Surah 59 "Exile" verse 23) and the night in which the first verses of Koran were revealed is thus designated by the Koran "that night is Peace"

(Surah XCVII "Al-Qadr" Verse 5)

The expression of greeting in Islam is "Peace be upon you". In every prayer the Muslims repeat the word *Salam* (peace), as Islam orders Muslims to live in peace with others.

The preceding Islamic principles agree with the universal values which impose themselves independently from any ideology. The first Muslims in the seventh century have very well understood these values and thanks to their deeds which agree with these values, these Muslims have succeeded in offering to humanity a flourishing Islamic civilization related to the principles and the spirit of Islam which invites man to become open rather than closed to the other cultures and to live in peace rather than war.

Islam is a religion of peace which orders Muslims to do and respect justice, which is a universal principle. This religion orders Muslims to read, to study and conduct research in science, to work and to assume their responsibilities, *as the Muslims are not subjected to God in the negative sense of the term* but in the positive sense. The principles of Islam which have aided Muslims to open their minds to the other cultures and civilizations and to assimilate them, constitute the base of the Islamic civilization, which is one of the sources of Western civilization.

But the European students read, in their scholastic textbooks, Koranic verses ordering Muslims to wage wars against the non-Muslims. Such verses are presented outside their context, without explanation or commentary. Thus the students misunderstand the verse which orders Muslims to convert by force the non-Muslims into Islam. This presentation is but a misinterpretation as the content contradicts with the principles and the spirit of Islam. The following text illustrates the necessity of explanations and commentaries accompanying the verse:

1. The Koranic Surah founding the *dhimmi* status

A Koranic Surah (IX, "Repentance", 29) on which the Muslim jurists rely in establishing that the dhimmis (Jews, Christians..) must accept payment of a tax in exchange for religious tolerance.

"Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture and believe not in Allah nor the Last Day and forbid not that which Allah hath forbidden by His Messenger and follow not the religion of truth, until they pay the tribute (Jizya) (....)

Nathan, 2001 p.86 (France)

It should be made clear that, according to the Ulema, when the Prophet Mohammed died, his own breastplate had been with a Jew as a debt guarantee, thus the Jews and Muslims had been living together until the Prophet Mohammed's death.

The notion of Jihad in the scholastic history textbooks in Europe

The studies contained in the scholastic textbooks of history in the European countries show that they define jihad as a sacred war aiming at extending Islam by force. But the Arabs knew such a term as "the sacred war" only from the crusades. The following examples have been chosen in the French textbooks of the fifth and the second classes, published by various publishers, which present many Arabo-Islamic notions with an erroneous notion of jihad.

It appears that the authors of the textbooks in different editions, such as Hatier, Nathan, Magnard, Hachette, Bordas, Bréal and Belin mix up historical events, the prejudices, the attitudes of Muslim fanatics and that they are influenced by the image of Islam in the media and exploit Koranic verses, or extracts from verses, cut from their context. Thus jihad, according to the scholastic textbooks is defined only in its military context. The prophet Mohammed is presented in such textbooks as a war lord who compels the non-Muslims to be converted by force.

It is clear that such authors tend to present the Koranic verses or the defensive actions of the Prophet Mohammed out of their context, which leads to misinterpretation, thus teachers and students alike read erroneous notions, the various causes of which we have mentioned above. For example the students read in their textbook:

B * Expansion of the Muslim Word

- * The Islamic law authorizes waging war when it defends, propagates and spreads Islam: this is the holy war, "jihad". Within a few decades, the Arabs conquered the Middle East and the South of the Mediterranean. That vast empire was divided among several Caliphates, whose brilliant capitals were Baghdad, Cairo and Cordoba.

Belin, 2001, p.6 (4)

The English scholastic textbooks confound and mix up the notions of jihad, fundamentalism and terrorism. Moreover, studies show that more than 10% of the scholastic text books give a negative image of Arabs and Muslims (5).

(4) See also the 2001 edition of Nathan 5th. p. 30 and 2 of p.84 and 299, Magnard 5th. p. 25 and 2 of p.72, Bordas 2nd, p. 94, Hatier 2nd. p.88 and 100, 5th. p.36 and Bréal 2nd. p.98, Belin 5th. p.27 and the 1997 edition of Hachette 5th. p.26.

(5) By way of example, see **Examining Religions**, 1999: **Islam**, p. 154; **Religions in the World**, 2002, p.61 and **the Image of Arabs and Muslims in the Scholastic textbooks in England**, the Central Department of Educational Research of the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, an unpublished study.

The scholastic textbooks in Austria and Italy mention that the Muslims have extended Islam by war and present jihad as a sacred war for extending Islam (6)

The scholastic text books in Spain

affirm that jihad is one of the pillars of Islam (7)

The Scholastic textbooks in Greece mention that jihad is a sacred war and that it is one of the pillars of Islam (8)

The Scholastic textbooks in Hungary and Poland claim that jihad allows Muslims to kill non-Muslims, that the Prophet Mohammed attacked the non-Muslims.

The **Polish** textbooks add that jihad is a sacred war (9)

(6) Mohammed Mansour, **the image of Islam in the scholastic textbooks in Austria**, an unpublished study on the scholastic textbooks: Hammerschild, H/ Öller, P./Wolfgang, P.: Geschichte book 2. Von der Urgeschichte bis zum Mittelalter. 3. Auflage, Wien 2002; Freschmann, S./ Hitz, H./Kuschnigg, W. u.a.: Geschichte Kompakt. 2. Klasse. Wien 1994, Naschdruck 1999; Böchle, R./ Helmuth, I/Kuschnigg, W. u.a. : Faszination Geschichte 1. für die 6. Schulstufe. Wien 2003; Lemberger, M.: Durch die Vergangenheit zur Gegenwart 2. Wien 2001; Lemberger, M.: Durch die Vergangenheit zur Gegenwart 2. Rätsel-und Lernheft. Wien 2001.

Salah Ramadan: **the image of Islam in the scholastic history textbooks in Italy**: L'Image de la Culture Arabo-Islamique dans les manuels scolaires Europeens.

(7) See Siri Abdulatif: **the Image of Islam in the scholastic history textbooks in Spain** Véase José Sanchez y otros, Ciencica sociales, geografia-historia (2) secundaria, ed. Sm, Madrid, 2002, page.132

(8) See Tarik Radouan: **The image of Islam in the scholastic textbooks of history in Greece**, an unpublished study.

(9) See Mustafa Elhalougi: **the image of Islam in the scholastic history textbooks in Hungary and in Poland**, *Historia 1 spotecenstwo, Elzbieta 1 Jerzy pp.80-81.*

The scholastic textbooks in Russia

Claim that jihad is a sacred war, that it is one of the pillars of Islam which allows Muslims to declare the sacred war against infidels, that the Muslims eliminated their opponents either by massacre or by expulsion (10).

Thus the scholastic textbooks present the Prophet Mohammed as a warrior, they place accent on the military dimension when they discuss the forays and fail to recognize the textual, historic, social and political contexts. Thus the students and the teachers as well receive erroneous information. Almost all scholastic textbooks say that the Prophet Mohammed attacked Mecca (see for example the French textbook of History, Hatier, 5th edition, 2001 p.30). The students erroneously understand that Muslims are bloodthirsty aggressors, that Islam encourages violence. However, presenting information inside its context would lead to the fact that the conquest of Mecca has had as its cause the violation by Meccans of the peace treaty which they had signed with the Prophet Mohammed.

It would be preferable that the authors of scholastic textbooks of history and literature present the Koranic verses which mention the principles of Islam, the verses which ban aggression while authorizing defence or present the verses that authorize war, but within their contexts. Islam is innocent of violence. Presenting Islam from a point of view near to that of the fundamentalists does not contribute to the formation of tolerant citizens useful for the society.

(10) See Abdussalam Elmansi: **the Image of Islam in History scholastic textbooks in Russia**, an unpublished study.

For the Muslim school children in Europe or in the non-Muslim countries, such false ideas are factors of humiliation, tensions and psychosocial wounds and could contribute to their easy fall into the hands of fundamentalists. The costly combat against terrorism which the world is waging at present causes many innocent people to lose their lives starts by the diffusion of fair notions concerning the culture of the other.

The studies conducted in France and then their results submitted to responsible authorities and publishers, have allowed correction of the notion of jihad in the editors Hachette and Hatier. Thus jihad is henceforth defined in their textbooks as: making efforts for defending Islam.

But there are always other errors in certain scholastic textbooks concerning Shari'a, its origins and sources, the caliphate and its religious role, Woman's place in Islam, polygamy, revelation, the black stone etc.

Our studies do not cast doubt on the capacity or the integrity of the authors of the scholastic textbooks, history teachers, or the school. The dialogue started up does on the contrary enrich cultures and civilizations by a more fair mutual knowledge.

These studies, which have been accomplished on the scholastic textbooks in eight European countries, have been presented in the framework of the Conference held in Cairo during the period from 12th. to 14th. December 2004 under the denomination: **Euro-Arab Dialogue: the Image of the Arabo-Islamic Culture in European History Textbooks in Europe.** The participants have unanimously agreed on the necessity of correction of these inaccuracies and errors in the scholastic textbooks.

The studies made and those to come must now reach the officials responsible for education in the countries concerned. It is possible to discuss the matter with them directly in order to correct them. **Meetings should be held in every country concerned with such studies,** such workshops

shall be attended by responsible officers of the Ministry of Education, the teachers, representatives of the associations of teachers, the parents of students and representatives of publishers. After presentation, discussion, distribution of the studies to participants, the meeting would permit taking concrete measures as necessary for solving the problems in an informal adaptable and flexible manner and to decide on the means of carrying on together with the project. The financial cost of such workshops would be minimal while their effectiveness will be immediate.

The Cultural Office of the Egyptian Embassy, in collaboration with the French Association of History and Geography Teachers held an effective meeting of this type in Paris in February 2002.

Following the Cairo conference, the Cultural Office of the Egyptian Embassy in Budapest too has organized, in collaboration with the Hungarian National Commission for the UNESCO a meeting which was held in Budapest on 17th of May 2005, at which the participants expressed their support of the correction of errors and the meeting confirmed the usefulness of organizing other similar workshops in the various European countries.

The correction of such errors and stereotypes will contribute to enrichment of the dialogue among cultures and civilizations, to the struggle against terrorism and to peace.

The school, in all parts of the world and more than ever, must assume to the full its role to instruct individuals in the culture of peace and tolerance, rejecting the errors which deform the image and the culture of the other. Such is its contribution towards the happiness and progress of humanity.