Islam vs. the West

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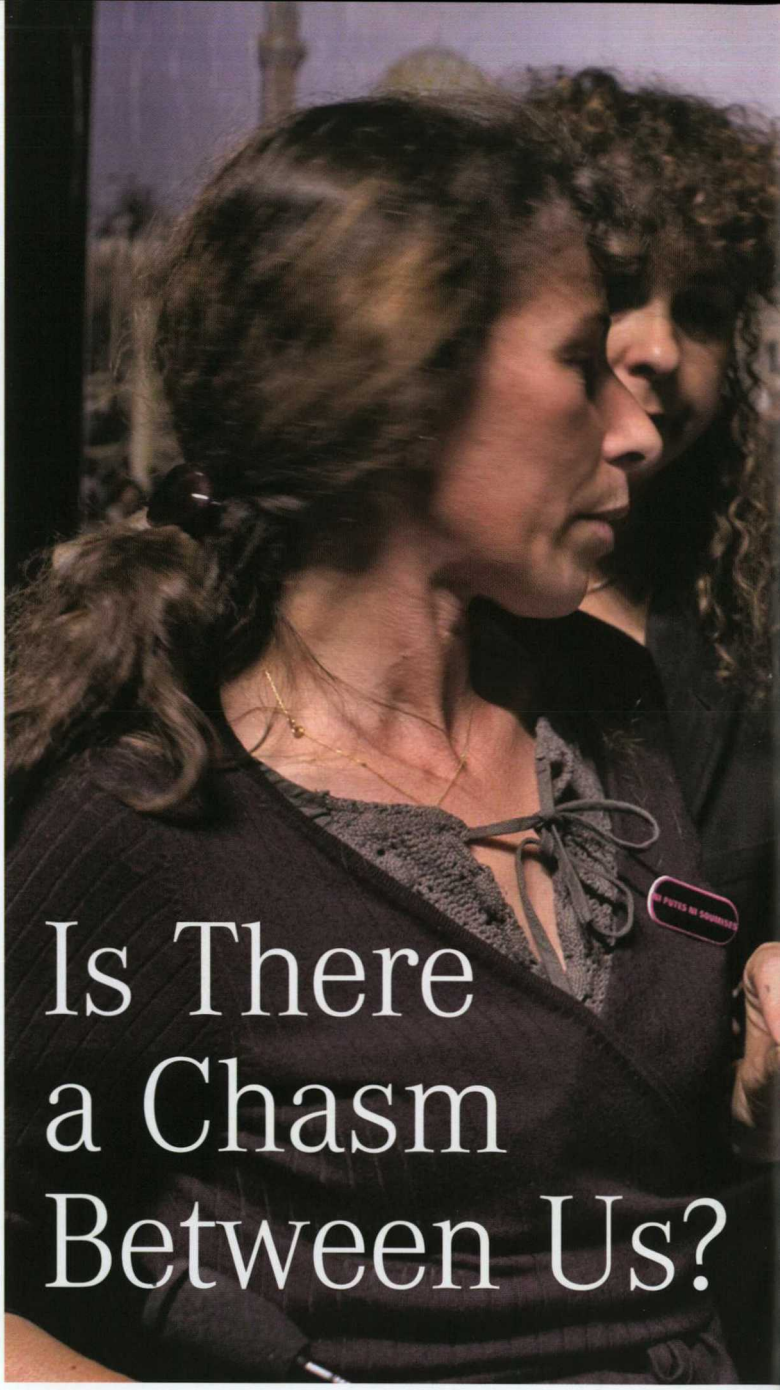
Is There a Chasm Between Us?



Prof. Jerzy Zdanowski is a historian and political scientist specializing in the Middle East, working at the Department of Islamic Civilization at the PAS Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures. We talk to him about differences between faiths, the roots of radicalization of Islam, and accepting refugees from Arab states

Academia: Tell us more about Islam. Is it a monolithic religion?

***Prof. Jerzy Zdanowski**: There are five pillars of Islam: faith, prayer, alms-giving, fasting, and pilgrimage to holy places. At the same time, the religion allows a wide range of interpretations of theology and principles of behavior. In this respect, the sheer diversity of Islam is vast. There is a belief that Mohammed himself predicted divisions in Islam: it is said he proclaimed that if Judaism is broken up into 69 sects and Christianity into 70 sects, it follows that Islam should be divided into 71 sects. Major differences exist on the theological level between Sunni and Shia, the two largest factions, although all sects agree that Mohammed was the last in the line of prophets of God, starting with the forefather Adam and continued by Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Since Mohammed was sent as the last law-bearing prophet, he is referred to as the "Seal of the Prophets."*

We are particularly interested in the relationship between Islam and Christianity.

Theological confrontations between the faiths have been ongoing since the 7th century. Analysis shows that while both religions have the same roots, they are very different. There is no real platform for full agreement on even such fundamental issues as the vision of God. There is a chasm between the two, since Islam regards the dogma of the Holy Trinity – fundamental in Christianity – as a deviation from monotheism and a return to polytheism. Islam's vision of Jesus is also very different, further supporting the rejection of the dogma of the Holy Trinity.

Conversely, Christianity does not accept Mohammed's unique position among prophets and does not recognize the sanctity of the Quran, which remains a major grudge for Muslims. All this means we can't expect ever to reach full agreement.

As recently as the 1970s, most Europeans believed that it's possible for Muslim immigrants to integrate with the communities they move to. This was especially notable in France and Germany, homes to large Muslim communities. We have seen a major shift since then: the National Front led by Marine Le Pen, calling for the closure of radical mosques, has become the third most important political party in France. Is the conflict driven by differences on the religious level?

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In spite of the clear confrontations between Islam, Christianity and the West as a whole, it must be said that in the theological sense there has been no change for the worse. Quite the opposite: the appointment of Pope Francis is paving the way for fresh dialogue in this important sphere. However, politics and current affairs are quite a different matter. Here we can see an exacerbation of problems, although I think this is a one-sided view. The picture painted by the media seems to indicate growing conflict, but we should remember that dramatic events always attract more attention than everyday processes of adaptation and integration. We only have to look at France, home to between eight and twelve million people with cultural links to Islam. The attack on the "Charlie Hebdo" magazine in January this year was depicted as a symptom of deepening conflict, and yet few people seem to remember the fact that French Muslims are government ministers, professors at the country's top universities, business leaders and top lawyers. I think that Europe's Muslim population is adapting and integrating well with local communities, and that it is an ongoing process mainly driven by local conditions.

Of course there are certain conflicts and confrontations in everyday contact, resulting from issues such as differing customs. There are historical issues that linger deep in the psyches of people on both sides. For example, the colonial mentality is rooted in a belief that the model of socioeconomic progress has European origins, and as such certain Muslim groups see it as difficult to accept. These confrontations exist on material and spiritual levels and it is unlikely we will ever eliminate them.

Islam vs. the West

In 2011, the Arab Spring swept through the Middle East, proclaiming slogans of freedom and democracy. Many people had high hopes for the outcome – how do you see the situation today?

My 2011 book on the Arab Spring, "Rebellion or Revolution?", notes that the events were more of a reaction against neoliberal economic policies adopted back in the late 1990s by Arab countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, and to some extent by Syria and Morocco. They wanted to overcome the growing issues facing their development. Neoliberal policies guarantee a rapid rise in GDP, but they also create problems such as unemployment and inflation. It was a protest with noble slogans, and a culmination of processes which had been ongoing in the Middle East for decades – women's emancipation, and evolving social and even class values. Most importantly, neoliberal policies in the region were implemented by highly authoritarian regimes, leading to numerous problems. For example, privatization processes had many drawbacks, leading to major social unrest. We also discovered that societies in the region vary greatly in terms of outlook and ideology, leading to confrontations between different sides, as shown particularly clearly in Egypt. Additionally, corporate interests of groups such as the army and the police became more pronounced as the groups promote their own interests.

In many cases, these great social uprisings ended in disaster.

Syria is an example of a tragic ending, the country having essentially disintegrated; Yemen, which had been relatively stable, is experiencing a period of unrest and society is on the brink of collapse. Libya is breaking down into regions; its tribal groups are essentially criminal organizations, seizing power because central government no longer exists.

But we also have positive examples: after the uprising, Tunisia held free parliamentary elections; they were won by the Islamist party, whose former position in the opposition means it is untainted by privatization and scams. In fact, the group is sharing power with another opposition party for the good of the country. As a result, in spite of various difficulties – mainly economic – Tunisia functions according to the principles of democracy as they are understood in Europe. Another positive example is Morocco, where a brief social confrontation was soon followed by the opposing sides coming to an agreement, and the country now has a stable, developing economy. In fact using the term "the Arab world" to refer to politics in the region is highly inaccurate since the countries are so widely diverse.

But even knowing these positive examples, the average European is likely to say that while Christians don't tend to resort to force, Muslims do. What are the roots of terrorism?

I was in London during the deadly attacks on the Tube and bus in July 2005. I still believe that people who resort to violence are a tiny minority. Reasons why people are mobilized to action are studied using the theory of social radicalization. If we accept that political and social confrontation between Europe and the Muslim world, in particular Arab states, is increasingly tense, it is more likely to be for economic and social reasons than because of religious beliefs per se. Religion serves more as an instrument of legitimizing certain attitudes. Of course it's possible to pick out verses from the Quran calling for killing, and that's precisely what happens: individual sentences get plucked out of context and fed to individuals who are susceptible to persuasion, be it because of a sense of anomie, marginalization, exclusion, deprivation, and so on. Such people are essentially "programmed." The main reasons behind radicalization are developmental problems driving the dysfunction of social and economic structures. When we look at Libya, and neighboring African countries, we see people who are desperate, who have no prospects for the future. And all this is rooted in social inequality on the global scale.

But the anger of these desperate people tends to be directed towards the West, rather than inwardly. Why is that?

Because this external world has been interfering in the affairs of Arab states for decades. In countries such as Libya this was through direct intervention, when the West used military force to overthrow the existing system and leave the local population to its own devices. Not enough people are taking this perspective. It wasn't until after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon that Americans started flocking to bookshops to read something, anything, about Islam, which hadn't really figured in their consciousness until then. Soon after the attacks, Wayne Price published his book "Why Do They

Jakub Ostałowski

Prof. Jerzy Zdanowski

Hate Us?" in which he explains that there exist historical events and phenomena which have been accumulating to shape certain attitudes of groups of people in the Middle East towards the West in general and the US in particular. For example, the unilateral support shown by the US to Israel in the Israel-Palestine conflict hasn't earned Americans any fans in Palestine.

There are many such threads of analysis, since – according to the acclaimed Arabic author Amin Maalouf – the world has become deregulated and the situation in the Middle East is unclear at best and verging on the chaotic. One example is Egypt. In 2011, the country saw a revolution under the banner of "equality, justice, democracy," followed by free parliamentary elections a year later. Then, all of a sudden, on 3 July 2013 the army halted this democratic experiment; by no means a democratic institution itself, it staged a coup, suspended the constitution, dissolved the parliament, and arrested the president. And it turned out that the army had the support of parts of the democratic circles: the segments of Egypt's society which had been secular, democratic and pro-Western supported an authoritarian intervention against the democratically-elected government because the latter had started bringing religion into the public sphere.

Do you agree with Prof. Marek Dziekan, an expert on the Middle East, who claims that Islam cannot be combined with democracy?

Discussing these concepts in such terms doesn't actually help, since "Islam" describes a civilization while "democracy" is a political system. As such, they are not directly comparable. Each civilization can have different systems of government. Christian Spain was once under the dictatorship of General Franco, yet this does not mean that Christianity cannot be combined with democracy. The same can be applied to the world of Islam: some countries are authoritarian and undemocratic, but by no means all of them. After all Turkey and Tunisia are Muslim countries with functioning democracies. The same could be said for Lebanon. It would be difficult to find anything in direct contradiction to the concept of representative and elected government in holy Islamic texts.

So considering both the contradictions and the threats, should Poland be accepting refugees from countries such as Syria?

Yes, I believe so. It's a matter of solidarity. It should be especially important for the Polish society, one which has successfully overcome many of its problems, that we should absolutely extend our hand and help these people. Additionally, we are a member of the EU, and as such we must share duties as well as privileges. I don't think the number of refugees who are already in Europe or are waiting at the threshold might destabilize the European cultural system.

More than anything, we should prepare our own society to welcome refugees. If we continue saying – as has been the case thus far – that their coming here would be a disaster, that it would lead to chaos, then the result will be increased xenophobia in Poland, and in turn immigrant circles will eventually develop radical attitudes. I see it as a major challenge and a test of our tolerance and openness to other cultures. ■

Interview by **Anna Zawadzka**