

Insightful look at a shared history

Understanding the past helps foster hope for the future, says Zachary Karabell, who studied 1,400 years of Muslim, Christian and Jewish conflicts and co-operation

PEACE BE UPON YOU: THE STORY OF MUSLIM, CHRISTIAN, AND JEWISH COEXISTENCE

By Zachary Karabell

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"Retrieving the forgotten history of relations between Islam and the West isn't a panacea," writes U.S. author Zachary Karabell, "but it is a vital ingredient to a more stable, secure world."

In *Peace Be upon You: The Story of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Coexistence*, Karabell looks at the numerous examples of both conflict and co-operation, in multiple combinations, throughout the last 1,400 years of shared history. This accessibly written book serves as a counterweight to those who would manipulate history for competing contemporary purposes that only fuel intolerance.

Karabell's is a nuanced, complex account, written with fairness and sensitivity. For example, after a brief description of the diversity of forms of Judaism and Christianity practised in the Arabian peninsula and beyond in the early 7th century, Karabell recounts how the first Muslim converts of Mecca migrated to Medina in the year 622 and came to co-operate with its five tribes (two recently converted to Islam and three Jewish), forming one single community ("ummah" in Arabic).

However, over a period of a few years, the relations with the three Jewish tribes deteriorated at different speeds and to different degrees, as well as for different reasons, leading first to expulsions and later to expulsions and killings. Karabell continues with numerous examples of how many Christian communities of formerly Byzantine lands preferred their new Arab/Muslim rulers to Christian rulers with whom they had serious theological and political differences. He then contrasts this story with another important one: Despite the Persian Sassanian Empire coming to an abrupt political end by the mid-7th century, its dominant Zoroastrian religion came to be included in the Muslim concept of the People of the Book, which already included Jews and Christians.

In cases of military conquests, Karabell stresses how the reasons and speeds of populations' conversions to Islam over the next centuries sharply differed from one region to another, a complex pattern that was to continue in many other Muslim empires over the next 1,300 years.

In fact, he argues that early Islamic history is really more about "defining a new political order" than about spreading the faith, as such.

Given how swift the conquests were and how small the number of Muslims initially were to control this vast territory, early Muslim leaders mostly fostered the integration of existing minority groups, religious or otherwise, to stabilize the economy and the administration of their new polity, leading to much interaction. "At their apex, the Abbasids invited questioning, dialogue, and debate," Karabell writes, referring to rulers centred in Baghdad.

Umayyad Spain rivalled this degree of mutually beneficial interactions between Jews, Christians and Muslims, with only moments of conflict in its first three centuries.

The generally positive interactions over the first four centuries of Islamic history, however, did not last: Karabell puts forward with great insight and economy of words a most important principle in intergroup relations: "The swing from tolerance in secure times towards intolerance in times of threat would be repeated for the next thirteen hundred years." And he points out that the story of co-existence between Jews, Christians and Muslims varies greatly not only from one historical period to another, but, within a given time, from one empire to another.

Realpolitik yielded a constantly changing political landscape of conflict and co-operation whose reasons rarely were based on religious identities. For example, in mid-12th century Spain, rising tensions between the Muslim Almohad rulers from North Africa and the Reconquista Christian rulers from the North co-existed with the production of such luminaries as the Jewish and Muslim philosophers Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes).

A few centuries later, the Ottomans, especially under Suleyman the Magnificent, attracted Jews and Christians to consolidate the economic and administrative parts of their rapidly expanding empire while making alliances with the European Valois French dynasty against the Habsburgs so as to be able to continue fighting the Persian Safavid Shiite Empire to the east.

The degree to which religious identities and ideals were used to foster or deter interreligious relations thus varies greatly throughout this long history of co-existence.

By seeking to understand where, when, and how each of the particular historical and contemporary situations have led to more conflicting or co-operative relations, Karabell avoids the two extremes of naive optimism and debilitating pessimism, demonstrating that both past and present are never as simple as they appear.

His vivid depictions of complex realities then and now help the contemporary reader grasp the importance of remaining pragmatically hopeful in the face of the divisions many Jews, Christians, and Muslims face today. He shows how no one identity marker, be it religious, ethnic, national or other, is ever the sole determinant of either positive or negative behaviour. Human history is more complex than that.

In its careful balancing act, Karabell's latest book manages, with great wisdom, to bring greater hope and peace upon us.

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