

Prince Charles and Islam's "Sacred Spirituality"

by Hugh Fitzgerald

On December 13th, at Wilton Park, the Prince of Wales explained how the Muslim critique of materialism helped him to rediscover the sacred spirituality of Islam and explain the decline of the West.

*I start from the belief that Islamic civilization at its best... has an important message for the West in the way it has retained an integrated and **integral view of the sanctity of the world** around us. I feel that we in the West could be helped to rediscover the roots of our own understanding by an appreciation of the Islamic tradition's deep respect for the timeless traditions of the natural order.*

What Prince Charles calls an "integrated and integral view of the sanctity of the world" in Islam is not exactly clear, and one wonders if perhaps Charles has confused Muhammad with the Dalai Lama, or possibly with the Natural Resources Defense Council. What is clear is that many Muslims have a most peculiar way of demonstrating their belief in the "sanctity of the world," by engaging in endless warfare, of every conceivable type (not limited to *qitaal*, or combat), in order to subjugate all those who are not Muslims. Perhaps Charles has been impressed with the way that Islam offers both a Total Explanation of the Universe, as formulated by 7th century Arabs, and a Complete Regulation of all aspects of life. Islam is a "totalitarian" ideology in the original sense of that term, but in the Newspeak favored by Prince Charles, the ideology of Islam would no doubt be described as "holistic."

And while Charles claims to find a deep respect in Islam for

“the timeless traditions of the natural order,” he does not think to include among those “timeless traditions of the natural order” of Islam the “natural” (right, proper) submission of non-Muslims to Muslims, and of Muslim women to Muslim men. Nor, I suspect, is he aware of the “timeless tradition” of Muslim men marrying girls as young as 9 (this “timeless tradition” begins with Muhammad, the Perfect Man and Model of Conduct, and is thus as old as Islam itself), or the “timeless tradition” of slavery (that particular “timeless tradition” in Islam had largely to be abandoned, but only because of Western pressure, and still continues in Mali and Mauritania), and of course there is the “timeless tradition,” central to Islam, of engaging in Jihad, the “struggle” of Muslims to expand Dar al-Islam at the expense of Dar al-Harb, until ultimately, Islam everywhere dominates, and Muslims rule, everywhere.

I believe that process could help in the task of bringing our two faiths closer together.

What is keeping “our two faiths” from coming “closer together” is that Islam views Christianity as a distorted and therefore unacceptable version of the true faith of Islam, with Muhammad’s message misunderstood, and there is no question, for Muslims, of Islam and Christianity “coming together” through any kind of compromise. Christian belief would have to change completely in order to attain to the condition of Islam, while Islam, according to its adherents, must always remain relentlessly itself. And how does one bring these “two faiths together” when Muslims are told in their Qur’an that they are the “best of peoples” and non-Muslims “the vilest of creatures”?

It could also help us in the West to rethink, and for the better

...in case you might have thought we should do it “for the

worse”...

our practical stewardship of man and his environment in fields such as health-care, the natural environment and agriculture, as well as in architecture and urban planning.

Here Prince Charles is alluding to several of his pet peeves, including modern architecture, which he finds predictably “soulless,” and environmental degradation, which he attributes to Western man not being a good “steward” of the natural environment. He thus overlooks the fact that the greatest polluter has for years now been China, not the West, and that North America and Western Europe, precisely through technological innovations such as more efficient solar collectors and electric cars, have been steadily reducing their energy use, and become better environmental “stewards.” By “agriculture” he is obliquely referring to the use of GMOs (genetically modified organisms), which he dislikes because they are “not natural,” even if they improve crop yields. He thinks that we can learn from the Islamic world’s supposed hewing to the traditional, in everything from architecture to agriculture. But plenty of “soulless” skyscrapers have been built all over the Arab oil states – see the skylines of Riyadh, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Qatar, Kuwait – while two of the major GMO producers are the Muslim states of Egypt and Pakistan. Apparently many Muslims prefer “soulless” Western architecture and “unnatural” GMOs to what Prince Charles assumes that Muslims favor.

*Modern materialism is unbalanced and increasingly damaging in its long-term consequences. Yet nearly all the great religions of the world have held **an integral view of the sanctity of the world.***

Charles liked “an integral view of the sanctity of the world” so much that he repeated this vague verbiage verbatim, two paragraphs after its first appearance.

To have Western man's "unbalanced" and "damaging" "materialism" denounced by one of the materially most cossetted people on earth, who is surrounded by every possible luxury, who denies himself nothing, is hard to take. How many millions does this royal deplorer of "materialism" spend in a year – money the British taxpayers provide him so that he can show the Union Jack here, cut a ceremonial ribbon there, and make pronouncements on everything under the sun, all Luddite-and-Green-Partyish, as is his wont, and as he does here, delivering a quite unnecessary paean of praise to supposedly un-materialist, "spiritual" Islam, from which, he claims, the West has so much to learn. This "spiritual" Islam, he needs to know, is the only major faith that in its holiest books – Qur'an and Hadith – contains rules on how to divvy up the loot from raids on the enemy. Not quite dalai-lama material.

Prince Charles seems to think that in the Islamic world, people are somehow less "materialistic" than in the West, failing to realize that that was a function of poverty, and not a guarantee of spirituality. The question to be asked is this: when Muslims became rich, did they keep the "spirituality" that Charles thinks is part of Islam, and that we, the Westerners who have been in thrall to "materialism," ought to emulate, or did they, when given a chance, become as "materialist" as anyone in the Western world?

Let's look at the behavior of those Muslims and Arabs who, through an accident of geology, found themselves sitting on top of huge oil and gas deposits which Infidels had discovered, and for which Infidels had found a use. Did these suddenly rich Muslim Arabs remain true to their supposed "spirituality"? Look at Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Kuwait, Qatar. The rich Arabs in those places have engaged in fantastic spending, satisfying their lust for every luxury, including the building of private Xanadus, some of them containing a half-dozen restaurants to satisfy the owner's every culinary whim, that rival anything built for the most

self-indulgent of Western billionaires.

But even those palaces were not enough. The richest of these devout Muslims also have enormous yachts, awaiting them in the Mediterranean, and customized 747s on the tarmacs of Arabia, ready to fly them everywhere, around the world, or to their fabulously appointed houses, villas, and estates in Paris and the Riviera, in London, and New York. In the Arab states of the Gulf, shopping is the main, and for many the only pastime, and along with the endless souks dedicated to gold and jewelry are local branches of every famous purveyor of luxury items in the Western world. The “spiritual” Muslims Prince Charles wants us to emulate live in a world of shop-till-you-drop that outdoes anything on Fifth Avenue or Rodeo Drive. Perhaps he is confusing Islam, a most worldly religion, with Buddhism or Hinduism, where asceticism is esteemed, given his habit of lumping Islam with those two as “Eastern religions.”

But during the past three centuries, in the Western world at least, a dangerous division has occurred in the way we perceive the world around us. Science has tried to assume a monopoly even a tyranny over our understanding. Religion and science have become separated, so that now, as Wordsworth said, “Little we see in nature that is ours”. Science has attempted to take over the natural world from God; it has fragmented the cosmos and relegated the sacred to a separate and secondary compartment of our understanding, divorced from practical, day to day existence.

We are only now beginning to gauge the disastrous results. We in the Western world seem to have lost a sense of the wholeness of our environment, and of our immense and inalienable responsibility to the whole of creation. This has led to an increasing failure to appreciate or understand tradition and the wisdom of our forebears, accumulated over the centuries. Indeed, tradition is positively discriminated against as if it were some socially unacceptable disease.

Again, Prince Charles is all for “tradition,” but without bothering to distinguish, as one must, between good and bad traditions. Islam itself is the most immutable of faiths; what was set down in the Qur’an, what was the practice of Muhammad and his Companions as recorded in the Hadith (or “Traditions”) – these, Qur’an and Sunnah, are not to be changed. How many of us find admirable the “traditional” Muslim attitude, fixed in amber, toward non-Muslims, toward women, toward homosexuals, toward the institution of slavery?

Prince Charles seems to think we in the West have failed to “appreciate or understand...the wisdom of our forebears, accumulated over the centuries,” a “wisdom” that we’ve managed to lose in the last few decades. That’s true, but not in the way he thinks. One very important bit of wisdom from our forebears that we have lost is about Islam itself, a forgetfulness that is causing us much unnecessary confusion and grief today. Over more than a millennium, Western man was on the receiving end of attacks by Muslims, and clearly recognized Islam as a mortal threat. The West, conscious that the Muslim duty to wage Jihad was permanent, strove to keep Islam contained. There was Charles Martel in 732, who stopped the invading Muslim army at the outskirts of Poitiers. There were the Christian warriors who, over 770 years of the Reconquista, managed to retake Spain from its Muslim rulers. There were the two successful Christian efforts to repel sieges of Vienna by Ottoman Muslims in 1529 and again in 1683. By the 19th century, and into the 20th, the superior military technology of the West allowed it to conquer large parts of the Muslim world. But even when the military tables were turned, at no time did the Western world regard the ideology of Islam as anything but a threat.

Yet today, adherents of the same Islam that threatened Europe for centuries are now on the march, not with conventional armies, but through Muslim migrants entering Europe by the millions, and bringing Islam with them in their mental

baggage. These Muslim migrants are coming not to assimilate, but rather to impose, wherever they can, their views on the indigenous non-Muslims, in whose lands they have been allowed to settle, deep behind what they, as Muslims, have been taught to regard as enemy lines.

A century ago, permitting such a movement into Europe could never have been imagined. The threat of Islam was then well understood in the Western world. Think only of what Winston Churchill, Tocqueville, John Quincy Adams, and many others less celebrated wrote, accurately and without any need for political correctness, about Islam. How the West forgot the “wisdom of its forebears” about Islam, and what that forgetfulness has led to, makes for painful reading, and the willful ignorance of Islam now being displayed by those whose responsibility it is to instruct and protect us – including Prince Charles – is difficult to explain and impossible to forgive.

In my view, a more holistic

This modish word, a sure sign of mental muddle, dropped into a sentence to give it a greater semblance of sense, means nothing much (“emphasizing the importance of the whole and the interdependence of its parts” according to the on-line dictionary’s definition), but not surprisingly, it’s a favorite of Prince Charles.

approach is needed now. Science has done the inestimable service of showing us a world much more complex than we ever imagined. But in its modern, materialist, one-dimensional form, it cannot explain everything. God is not merely the ultimate Newtonian mathematician or the mechanistic clockmaker. As science and technology have become increasingly separated from ethical, moral and sacred considerations so the implications of such a separation have become more sombre and horrifying as we see in genetic

manipulation or in the consequences of the kind of scientific arrogance so blatant in the scandal of BSE.

Unclear what this refers to.

I have always felt that tradition is not a man-made element in our lives, but a God-given intuition of natural rhythms, of the fundamental harmony that emerges from the union of the paradoxical opposites that exist in every aspect of nature... That is why I believe Man is so much more than just a biological phenomenon resting on what we now seem to define as "the bottom line" of the great balance sheet of life, according to which art and culture are seen increasingly as optional extras in life.

This view is quite contrary, for example, to the outlook of the Muslim craftsman or artist, who is never concerned with display for its own sake, nor with progressing ever forward in his own ingenuity, but is content to submit a man's craft to God. That outlook reflects, I believe, the memorable passage in the Koran, "whithersoever you turn there is the face of God and God is all-Embracing, all-Knowing". While appreciating that this essential innocence has been destroyed, and destroyed everywhere, I nevertheless believe that the survival of civilized values, as we have inherited them from our ancestors, depends on the corresponding survival in our hearts of that profound sense of the sacred and the spiritual.

What "civilized values" have Muslims inherited from *their* ancestors?

The main difference between the Muslim craftsman or artist, and the non-Muslim artist or craftsman, is not that the former is more "spiritual" and "never concerned with display for its own sake," as Charles seems to think. The most important art form of Islam, mosque architecture and decoration, is all

about display, making an impression on Believers with the magnificence, imposing size, elaborate ornamentation, and play of color, of the mosque walls and interior. The main difference between the Muslim and the non-Muslim artist is not that the Muslim has some superior sense of the “sacred,” but that Islam limits the creativity of the Muslim artist, by forbidding him from depicting living creatures. That is why there is no portrait painting in Islam, nor any statuary. Perhaps this severe limit on creative expression in Islam has escaped Prince Charles’s notice, or perhaps he thinks it adds, in some inexplicable way, to that superior “spirituality” he claims to detect in Islamic art.

Traditional religions, with their integral view of the universe, can help us to rediscover the importance of the integration of the secular and the sacred. The danger of ignoring this essential aspect of our existence is not just spiritual or intellectual. It also lies at the heart of that great divide between the Islamic and Western worlds over the place of materialism in our lives. In those instances where Islam chooses to reject Western materialism, this is not, in my view, a political affectation or the result of envy or a sense of inferiority. Quite the opposite. And the danger that the gulf between the worlds of Islam and the other Eastern religions on the one hand and the West on the other will grow ever wider and more unbridgeable is real, unless we can explore together practical ways of integrating the sacred and the secular in both our cultures in order to provide a true inspiration for the next century.

Where in the Islamic world, whenever some have become rich enough even to have a choice, has anyone or any group chosen to “reject” what Prince Charles calls “Western” materialism? Where is that supposed “great divide between the Islamic and Western worlds over the place of materialism in our lives”? If anything, Islam is more of this world than Christianity. Islam does not advocate ascetic denial, as is done in Hinduism and,

even more, in Buddhism. Many Islamic websites insistently repeat that **“Islam in no way encourages deliberate excessive asceticism, poverty and passivism.”** As for the accumulation of wealth, as long as it is used for good aims – to help fellow Muslims, to help spread Islam – it is never to be discouraged. When Prince Charles deplores a widening of “the gulf between the worlds of Islam and the other Eastern religions on the one hand” and “the West on the other,” it is clear that he thinks of Islam as being akin to Buddhism and Hinduism in their emphasis on the “spiritual,” because he thinks of all three as similar “Eastern religions.” He’s failed to grasp that Islam is the most material-minded of all major faiths. Rules about Muslims helping themselves to the property of subjugated Infidels, which includes not just goods and gold but also humans – with the women taken as sex slaves – and rules about how to divide up the spoils of Jihad (with one-fifth to be reserved for “Allah and His Apostle,” which is to say for Muhammad), are all set out in the Qur’an and Hadith.

Prince Charles expresses an intense interest in the “spiritual” in Islam, but it is clear that what he thinks he finds in Islam is to be found, rather, in those “other Eastern religions” –Buddhism, Hinduism – whose “spirituality” does indeed allow for the rejection of materialism. Indeed, if he wishes to descant upon the virtues of “sacred spirituality,” he would do better to visit a Buddhist or Hindu temple than a mosque, where, as the British police long ago discovered, he might stumble upon caches of forged passports, credit cards, and a “mini-arsenal” of weapons. Yes, this Islam that so impresses Prince Charles has another side than the “spiritual,” one that is certainly open to his investigation, if only he has eyes to see, and a mind to comprehend.

On the death of Queen Elizabeth, Prince Charles will become both King of England and head of the Church of England. Will he seek to transform that Church, to have it emulate aspects of Islam, from which, he claims, Christianity has so much to

learn? Or will he be true to Christianity, and the “wisdom of his forebears” about Islam, and seek to meet, while there’s still time, the Muslim demographic challenge which is the latest instrument of Jihad? It’s a choice between “get ready to roll” and “get ready to roll out those prayer rugs.”

First published in