

Thilo Sarrazin Confounds His Critics with Common Sense (Part III)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Anyone who has ever been to Istanbul, Granada or Cairo can only be astonished to read Sarrazin's declaration that "an independent Islamic building culture never developed." Anyone who knows Iran's impressive Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, can hardly agree with his statement that Muslims do not know anything "about urban planning with axes and public spaces.

Is Sarrazin not referring, when he claims that "an independent Islamic building culture never developed," to the fact that such architectural advances as the squinch and the pendentive, which are such outstanding and indispensable features of Muslim mosque architecture, in fact were taken from Sassanian, that is pre-Islamic, Persia?

He [Sarrazin] also reveals an almost astounding ignorance when he claims that Muslims, "apart from a few fairy tales," have never developed their own literature – as if poets such as Hafis, Saadi or Mevlana had never existed.

Out of 1400 years of Islamic history, Von Schwerin brings forth the names of exactly three poets, all of them Persians, all of them mystics, and all of them born within a century of one another. Von Schwerin does not mention a single Arabic-language writer. One may well be prompted to ask if those three constitute a magnificent record of literary achievement or if, rather, invoking the names of only those three

underscores the lack of such achievement. If one were to list, for example, the great writers in English or in French, many dozens of names, both English and French, would come at once to mind. Beyond the three Persian poets, what are the other great Muslim writers he would have had Sarrazin mention?

Revealing the full force of his deeply Eurocentric perspective, he cites the lack of symphonic orchestras as evidence of the cultural backwardness of the Islamic world. He apparently cannot imagine that there are other concepts of culture and beauty than the ones developed in Europe. Instead of appreciating the richness, complexity and elegance of the ornaments on carpets, tiles and facades created in Muslim countries, he only sees the absence of portraits and sculptures. You can almost feel pity for Sarrazin for such narrow-mindedness.

Why is it illegitimate to note that for many Muslims, musical instruments are haram – hence the lack of symphony orchestras in many Muslim societies. I wrote “many Muslims” because some choose to ignore the prohibition. But the prohibition remains, based on a handful of hadith:

Muhammad said: “Allah Mighty and Majestic sent me as a guidance and mercy to believers and commanded me to do away with musical instruments, flutes, strings, crucifixes, and the affair of the pre-Islamic period of Ignorance.” [Abu Dawud]

The evidence against musical instruments, in particular wind and string instruments, is irrefutable. There are many hadith from the most authoritative collections that forbid the use of musical instruments. The Sunni schools of fiqh all prohibit wind instruments (e.g. flutes, trumpets) and string instruments (e.g. violins, guitars) categorically, while they differ in their ruling on percussion instruments (e.g. drums). “The Islamic Ruling On Music And Singing In Light Of The Quraan, The Sunnah, And The Consensus Of Our Pious

Predecessors,” by Abu Bilal Mustafa Al-Kanadi, is a detailed treatment of the subject.

A hadith in Bukhari, on the prohibition of musical instruments, contains this: **“From among my followers there will be some people who will consider illegal sexual intercourse, the wearing of silk (by men), the drinking of alcoholic drinks and the use of musical instruments, as lawful.... Allah will destroy them during the night and will let the mountain fall on them, and He will transform the rest of them into monkeys and pigs and they will remain so till the Day of Resurrection.”**

Why should it be considered “Eurocentric” to suggest that the lack of orchestral, or indeed of any instrumental music, is a sign of cultural underdevelopment or, as Von Schwerin deliberately puts it (though Sarrazin carefully does not) “backwardness”? Plenty of non-Europeans have appreciated, and excelled in, Western orchestral music – see the musicians steeped in classical music now emerging from China and Japan. Only among Muslims does the “haram” label, the result of a handful of hadiths in which Muhammad condemns the use of instruments, deprive an entire culture, over 1400 years, of possibilities of musical expression, and of enjoying what should be a universal musical heritage. Thilo Sarrazin deplores this prohibition on musical instruments in Islam, and believes it contributes to the arrested cultural development in Islamic societies. Ulrich von Schwerin appears to find the severe limit on any musical expression in Islam – save for the occasional exceptions sometimes made for the tambourine and oud, especially at weddings – unremarkable. But no other civilization denies itself so many forms of music, and offers nothing in its place. Sarrazin is not wrong to consider this a sign of cultural underdevelopment.

Von Schwerin suggests that Sarrazin denies Islam any forms of cultural expression. In fact, Sarrazin does not ignore what ornamentation is allowed in Islam. He mentions those very

means of expression deemed acceptable in Islam – the fruits, flowers, and geometric patterns of oriental carpets, and the Iznik and other tiles used so copiously in decorating Islamic buildings, including both the facades and the interiors of mosques and palaces. Ulrich von Schwerin is so busy lambasting Sarrazin for his supposed failure to appreciate those forms of Islamic art (the carpets, the tiles) that he himself fails to mention that most important of Islamic art forms – calligraphy, and specifically, Qur’anic calligraphy.

It is not only music that is limited in Islam, Sarrazin tells us, but painting and the plastic arts are restricted in their subject matter. Images of living creatures are haram, so that portraits of people, and sculptures of them, have no place in Islamic art. And he explains that this is because of a single hadith in which Muhammad says that angels will not enter a house where there is a dog or a picture. The word “picture” has been taken to mean any depiction of a living creature, whether in a painting or in a sculpture. Thus, over 1400 years, the possibilities of artistic expression by Muslim artists have been severely limited as to both subject (no images of living creatures) and because of that hadith. Why shouldn’t Sarrazin have noted this, as he did, and in a spirit not of unalloyed contempt, as Von Schwerin implies, but of sympathy for the generations of Muslims who never had the chance to express themselves in the many ways they could have done had they not been born into, and constrained by, Islam?

Throughout the book, it is clear that he only takes into account anything that fits into his preconceived world view. He avoids mentioning that the credibility of the statistics he uses has been questioned – that would ruin his narrative. Beyond all the figures on birth rates, levels of education and economic performance, it’s his basic thesis that appears the most questionable, in which he claims that all the Muslims’ social and economic problems can be blamed on their religion – or as the second part of his book’s title states:

“How Islam Impedes Progress and Threatens Society.”

Why is Sarrazin’s a “preconceived world view”? Isn’t it, rather, a view he arrived at after long pondering the observable behavior and attitudes of Muslims, which was the subject of his first book, and of studying the texts of Islam to see how they explained that behavior, and those attitudes, for his second book, which took eight years to write? Whatever else they may be, his views are not “preconceived,” but based on observation and careful study.

If you are going to challenge the “credibility of the statistics” Sarrazin uses then you ought to give at least a few examples of the statistics you, or someone else, has found doubtful. Von Schwerin does not provide even one. We have no idea why their “credibility... has been questioned” (where? and by whom? based on what authority?) It is bad enough to allude to the criticisms of others without adducing examples we can perhaps then judge, but when Von Schwerin himself calls into question Sarrazin’s statistics on “birth rates, levels of education and economic performance,” he has an even greater responsibility to offer examples of Sarrazin’s statistics that he believes there is good reason to doubt. Von Schwerin thinks it’s enough to say that Sarrazin’s “credibility” has been challenged. No, it isn’t. Until we know what is being challenged, and the source of that challenge, we have no basis for judging its value. In the absence of such information, why should we not trust Sarrazin, with his long, sober, and distinguished career, most recently as a minister of finance for Berlin, and then as a careful banker with the Bundesbank, rather than some unidentified critic of his work, or than Ulrich von Schwerin?

First published in