



The Muslims are Coming! The Muslims are Coming!

By Michael Vlahos

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France, Italy, and Spain together could be called "Roman Europe," as they once formed the core of the old Western Empire. Or perhaps we could say "Latin Europe," as they speak what amounts to demotic Latin. Two generations hence, however, France, Italy, and Spain might be called something quite different, like *Arab-Muslim Europe* -- but in a way no one has thought of before.

We all have heard about Europe's low birth rate and fertility. People actually talk about Italians disappearing in a hundred years.^[1] In contrast, we think of Arab fertility as huge, so it is commonplace to assume that Arab immigrants might eventually replace the Italians.

That won't happen. The truth is birth rates in the Arab World are nose-diving. Algeria, for example, will age as much in the next few years as the U.S. did in a whole century. In a recent issue of *Foreign Policy*, Omer Taspinar insists that Muslim birth rates in Europe are three times higher than non-Muslims, but that won't last.^[2]

So don't look for a Muslim majority in Europe anytime soon. But the Arab minority in Roman Europe will more than double by 2050, while there will be many millions fewer Spanish and Italians. The bow-wave of the Arab "boomer" generation, buoyed by aggressive illegal immigration, could still push the proportion of Muslims in France, Italy, and Spain up to a quarter or even a third of their populations.

Even more significant will be the comparative age structure over the next couple generations. Because of the unexampled number of young Arabs that will enter adulthood during this time, the percentage of European Muslims will account for an even higher proportion of adults in their most productive years: their 20s, 30s, and 40s. As the Arab boomer generations move through time, they will come to occupy -- for at least a slice of historical time -- a unique demographic space. Even if Muslims in Roman Europe still only represent 20 to 25 percent of the total population, working adults may reach 40 percent or more. And this will hold for the duration of an era.

That era -- from 2010 to 2050 -- could alter the nature of European civilization.

Demographic change is not just about bodies. The conventional paradigm of migrations and birth rates is a quintessentially American either-or: either newcomers or immigrant newborns assimilate into their host culture, or they are destined to hunker down in grim ghettos. This American expectation is neatly summed up in Peter Schwartz's new book, *Inevitable Surprises*.^[3] Of the Muslim surge in Europe, either "this migration could revitalize the continent," if they are embraced in the American fashion, or "we might see whole European cities evolve into ghettos for Muslim and African immigrants, virtually walled off from the rest of the continent, and festering with crime, disease, and random violence ..."

This framing of the future as "optimistic" or "pessimistic" -- of either this or that -- misses a powerful dynamic in human interaction and relationship: *the possibility*

of something new.

New in the case of Roman Europe and its Arab Muslims means the possibility of a new cultural mix: a *mélange* civilization. Furthermore this is a prospect with powerful -- if overlooked -- historical precedents.

One was Muslim Spain -- *al Andalus* -- but that is shrouded in myth and long ago overturned by North African radical Islamists in the 11th and 12th centuries.[4] A bit closer to our times was the emergence of Ottoman civilization in the 14th and 15th centuries. In a new book, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State*, Heath Lowry explodes the modern nationalist narratives of both Greece and Turkey. These societies both perversely share the mythology of an alien Turkish Muslim culture subjugating the Byzantine Balkans. Lowry says it just didn't happen that way.[5]

Instead he shows that four men founded the Ottoman state -- Mihal, Evrenos, Turahan, Othman -- and two of them were Greek and Catalan Christians. The Turks entering Greek Asia Minor did not subjugate, but rather accepted Christians (and Christianity!) as well as the Byzantine-cultural elites as members of their cause. What Lowry calls a "religio-social hybrid Islamochristian entity" emerged. For a century and more the Ottoman Empire was a new and unexampled *mélange* civilization:

- Its leadership was mixed -- the families of the four founders ran the state in its first century -- and encouraged intermarriage. For example, five of the six initial Ottoman rulers had Greek mothers. Thus, Mehmet II, conqueror of Constantinople, was almost wholly Greek by blood.
- Its elites were almost equally Christian and Muslim. For example, in parts of the Balkans, half of the *timariots* -- the soldier/state officials who collected taxes and made up the heavy cavalry -- were Christian Greeks and Serbs: the local gentry.
- Christianity and Islam were often preached as one religion. For example, in the early 15th century, the Börklüce Mustafa movement "stressed fraternization between Muslims and Christians ... supported by a mystic love of God, in which all differences of religion were overlooked ... an attempt actually to unite two faiths as one."

But of course this "Islam-Christian syncretism" could not last. As the Ottoman state became more established and "empire-like" in its administrative structure, it chose to push "High Islam" over the *mélange* vision of its first generations. But Lowry has unearthed a fascinating possibility. After all, he suggests: "What could be more natural than an attempt to develop a new religious synthesis as a reflection of the actual nature of the evolving political entity?"

What indeed? Could we someday see a Roman-Arab cultural synthesis spread across Mediterranean Western Europe?

But Muslims are not talking about such a path. Some Muslims boast of eventual majorities in some European countries, but that isn't going to happen. If Italian and Spanish birth rates are plummeting, so are Muslim birth rates. It's just that it will happen a bit later. In contrast, European Muslims that effectively integrate into elite life keep searching for ways to be equal participants within the European civic framework while still preserving their identity as good Muslims. Tariq Ramadan, for example, has written eloquently in *To Be a European Muslim*,[6] about reforming Islam in Europe so that Muslims there can aspire to be full and equal citizens. Some are calling him the Muslim Martin Luther.[7]

European Muslims look at future possibility much like Americans and Europeans:

as an either-or proposition. Either Muslims integrate -- *somehow without ceding identity* -- by reforming Islam (as Ramadan urges) or they hole up and hope that someday they will overcome not simply Euro-discrimination but European secular society and culture as well. Islam will triumph, and the dream of *al Andalus* will be restored to long-lost glory.

Europe's next two Muslim generations might well pursue the path to full participation as good Italians or Spaniards. Likewise their anger as a great, indigestible community of true believers might, as Schwartz suggests, tear apart the European Union. But there is a third way, a *l'á Ottoman* -- unexpected, but not unexampled.

The first question is, why? We know what the Ottomans did, but what motivated them? The Ottomans after all came as conquerors: they could do as they pleased. Why would they recruit, elevate, and embrace the very people they were conquering? Perhaps they had no choice: they were but a tiny minority entering the Byzantine world. A *mélange* civilization was a strategic necessity for the Ottomans.

Arabs in Roman Europe have arrived not as conquerors but as lowly immigrants. They have lived at the margins, isolated and kept down. Of course they want to break out of their dead-end ghettos and share in the good life of French and Spanish and Italians. Ramadan enjoins Muslims to reform Islam and integrate into modernity and become full European citizens. But why must this be the only path of betterment for Europe's Muslims?

This is where numbers activate the dynamic. At 10 percent say, of France, Muslims are a powerful minority, but they can still be "managed" -- denied the fruits of assimilation or forced to assimilate on Latin terms. At 25 percent or more however they can demand full entry into European life. At 40 percent or more of the active adult workforce, moreover, they can alter the terms of cultural identity and relationship. It is numbers -- and the historical window they open for a time -- which make this path possible. Muslims in Roman Europe can push for a *mélange* civilization, if they wish to, because they can. *The actual demographic impact of the Muslim minority gives a mélange civilization in Western Europe's Mediterranean core its sense of possibility.*

How might such a possibility take form and what, way off in 2050, would it look like?

Three factors are critical: intermarriage, entry into the elite, and religious syncretism (an Islamochristian synthesis or fusion). Each of these today seems unlikely, but shifts in the composition of French, Spanish, and Italian societies could make them seem natural within a generation.

Moderate Islamists like Ramadan have been saying that Islam will reform and reconcile itself with Western modernity -- but outside of traditional Muslim lands. Change in Islam will emerge out of Muslim minorities in America and Europe. But why must such change necessarily mean merely a narrow reinterpretation of Islam? Why not something that, while recognizably Islamic, is also something wholly new? Why not a new synthesis? A Muslim minority with dominant numbers will not only advance deep into European societies: it will do so with increasing confidence. And with confidence will come openness to cultural experimentation and a willingness to leave old ways behind. Ramadan himself speaks glowingly of this, but assumes that such Islamic adaptation will remain unimpeachably Islamic. But why should it?

Islamic reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) in the European context will happen against a backdrop of social breakthroughs. Dominant minority numbers will finally open all doors, meaning that more and more Muslims will enter the middle classes and leadership elites. Thus they will also actively intermarry. Remember, the Ottoman

motivation to create a *mélange* civilization was in part the product of strategic necessity, but it was also something that just happened -- *because Turks and Greeks in Western Asia Minor were mixing* and living together after the fighting was over. Thus, to borrow Lowry's words, a "religio-social hybrid Islamochristian" Europe -- at least its Western Mediterranean core -- would also, in part, just happen.

In the next two generations there will be so many European Muslims that such cultural mixing, especially in Roman Europe, will be the norm. And like our Ottoman precedent, who will stop Islamo-Christians from also actively reinterpreting the sources of meaning in life -- a sort of mutant *ijtihad* gone wild? As it is with all religions, once unfettered reinterpretation is permitted, *it just doesn't stop*.

In the 14th century Ottoman World, religious syncretism was well on course to create a new religion. It wasn't going to stop: *it was stopped*. High Islam stepped in and down on it, and the rising Turkish imperial establishment had the power to make an unbending Islam, stick.

But no one in today's Europe -- neither bureaucrat nor mullah -- has the power or the authority to stop this transformation.

NOTES:

1 For projections to 2050, see Population Reference Bureau, 2003 World Population Data Sheet, <http://www.prb.org>. Actually this trajectory to the end of Italy would take several hundred years!

2 <http://www.globalpolicy.org/globaliz/politics/2003/0304muslimeu.htm>

3 Peter Schwartz, *Inevitable Surprises: Thinking Ahead in a Time of Turbulence*, New York: Gotham Books, 2003.

4 The persistence of myth here can be glimpsed in contemporary Palestinian poetry, lamenting the loss of *al Andalus*. See, Fouad Ajami, *Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation's Odyssey*, New York: Vintage Books, 1999.

5 Heath W. Lowry, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State*, Albany: The State University of New York, 2003.

6 Tariq Ramadan, *To Be a European Muslim*, The Islamic Foundation, 1998.

7 Paul Donnelly, "Tariq Ramadan: The Muslim Martin Luther?" http://www.salon.com/people/feature/2002/02/15/ramadan/index_np.html