

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

Friedman: Democracy's root: Diversity**By Thomas L. Friedman**

Sunday, November 11, 2007

Last Tuesday, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia met Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican - the first audience ever by the head of the Roman Catholic Church with a Saudi monarch. The Saudi king gave the pope two gifts: a golden sword studded with jewels, and a gold and silver statue depicting a palm tree and a man riding a camel. The BBC reported that the pope "admired the statue but merely touched the sword."

I think it is a great thing these two men met, and that King Abdullah came bearing gifts. But what would have really caught my attention - and the world's - would have been if King Abdullah had presented the pope with something truly daring: a visa.

You see, the king of Saudi Arabia, also known as the Keeper of the Two Holy Mosques of Mecca and Medina, can visit the pope in the Vatican. But the pope can't visit the king of Saudi Arabia in the Vatican of Islam - Mecca. Non-Muslims are not allowed there.

Moreover, it is illegal to build a church, a synagogue or a Hindu or Buddhist temple in Saudi Arabia, or to practice any of these religions publicly.

As BBCnews.com noted: "Some Christian worship services are held secretly, but the government has been known to crack down on them, or deport Filipino workers if they hold even private services. The Saudi authorities cite a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad that only Islam can be practiced in the Arabian Peninsula."

I raise this point because the issue of diversity - how and under what conditions should "the other" be tolerated - is roiling the Muslim world today, from Lebanon to Iraq to Pakistan. More churches and mosques have been blown up in the past few years than any time I can remember.

A senior French official suggested to me that maybe we in the West, rather than trying to promote democracy in the Middle East - a notion tainted by its association with the very Western powers that once colonized the region - should be focusing on promoting diversity, which has historical roots in the area.

It's a valid point. The very essence of democracy is peaceful rotations of power, no matter whose party or tribe is in or out. But that ethic does not apply in most of the Arab-Muslim world today, where the political ethos remains "Rule or Die." Either my group is in power or I'm dead, in prison, in exile or lying very low. But democracy is not about majority rule; it is about minority rights. If there is no culture of not simply tolerating minorities, but actually treating them with equal rights, real democracy can't take root.

But respect for diversity is something that has to emerge from within a culture. We can hold a free and fair election in Iraq, but we can't inject a culture of diversity. America and Europe had to go through awful civil wars to give birth to their cultures of diversity.

The Arab-Muslim world will have to go through the same internal war of ideas.

I just returned from India, which just celebrated 60 years of democracy. Pakistan, right next door, is melting down. Yet, they are basically the same people - they look alike, they eat the same food, they dress alike. But there is one overriding difference: India has a culture of diversity. India is now celebrating 60 years of democracy precisely because it is also celebrating millennia of diversity, including centuries of Muslim rule.

Nayan Chanda, author of a delightful new book on globalization titled "Bound Together: How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers, and Warriors Shaped Globalization," recounts the role of all these characters in connecting our world. He notes: "The Muslim Emperor Akbar, who ruled India in the 16th century at the pinnacle of the Mughal Empire, had Christians, Hindus, Jains and Zoroastrians in his court. Many of his senior officials were Hindus. On his deathbed, Jesuit priests tried to convert him, but he refused. Here was a man who knew who he was, yet he had respect for all religions. Nehru, a Hindu and India's

first prime minister, was a great admirer of Akbar."

Akbar wasn't just tolerant. He was embracing of other faiths and ideas, which is why his empire was probably the most powerful in Indian history. Pakistan, which has as much human talent as India, could use an Akbar. Ditto the Arab world.

I give King Abdullah credit, though. His path-breaking meeting with the pope surely gave many Saudi clerics heartburn. But as historic as it was, it left no trace. I wished the pope had publicly expressed a desire to visit Saudi Arabia, and that the king would now declare: "Someone has to chart a new path for our region. If I can meet the pope in the Vatican, I can host Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Shiite and Buddhist religious leaders for a dialogue in our sacred house. Why not? We are secure in our own faith. Let us all meet as equals."

Why not?

Notes:

IHT

Copyright © 2008 The International Herald Tribune | www.iht.com