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Prince Charles of Arabia

By: Ronni L. Gordon, David M. Stillman



[T]he effort for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me.

- T.E.Lawrence *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*¹

Prince Charles has often surprised his future subjects, but few shocks match the allegations of a newspaper article that appeared in October 1996:²

The idea of the Prince of Wales lugging around a prayer mat and turning to face Mecca five times a day sounds a tad unlikely - but, then again, so did confessing to adultery on prime-time television a couple of years ago. So perhaps no one should be shocked by the suggestion in a forthcoming book that Prince Charles has converted to Islam.

This claim was put forward by no less a personage than the grand mufti of Cyprus: “Did you know that Prince Charles has converted to Islam. Yes, yes. He is a Muslim. I can’t say more. But it happened in Turkey. Oh, yes, he converted all right. When you get home check on how often he travels to Turkey. You’ll find that your future king is a Muslim.”³ “Nonsense,” replied a Buckingham Palace spokesman, denying Charles’s supposed conversion. Lord St. John of Fawsley, a constitutional expert, is no less dubious, commenting that “The Prince of Wales is a loyal member of the Church of

Rumors about the Prince of Wales's conversion to Islam may well be inaccurate; even so, the fact that spokesmen official and unofficial felt compelled to deny this fact results from persistent speculation about Charles's religious loyalties that arises out of his statements and actions of recent years. And these, in turn, reflect a larger trend in Western society.

CHARLES'S PUBLIC STATEMENTS ABOUT ISLAM

The future Charles III has made several strong public statements endorsing Islam as the solution to the spiritual and cultural ills of Britain and the West. His public advocacy of Islam appears to go back to 1989, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued an edict (*fatwa*) against Salman Rushdie, a British citizen, for blaspheming the Prophet Muhammad in his novel *The Satanic Verses*.⁶ Rather than defend Rushdie's freedom of speech, Charles reacted to the death decree by reflecting on the positive features that Islam has to offer the spiritually empty lives of his countrymen.

Charles first delivered a major address on Islam on October 27, 1993, at the Sheldonian Theatre at Oxford where he is a vice patron of the Centre for Islamic Studies.⁷ He declared that the usual attitude to Islam

suffers because the way we understand it has been hijacked by the extreme and the superficial. To many of us in the West, Islam is seen in terms of the tragic civil war in Lebanon, the killings and bombings perpetrated by extremist groups in the Middle East, and by what is commonly referred to as "Islamic fundamentalism."

The Prince of Wales then explained the causes for this distorted understanding:

Our judgement of Islam has been grossly distorted by taking the extremes to the norm. . . . For example, people in this country frequently argue that the Sharia law of the Islamic world is cruel, barbaric and unjust. Our newspapers, above all, love to peddle those unthinking prejudices. The truth is, of course, different and always more complex. My own understanding is that extremes, like the cutting off of hands, are rarely practised. The guiding principle and spirit of Islamic law, taken straight from the Qur'an, should be those of equity and compassion.

Islamic countries like Turkey, Egypt and Syria gave women the vote as early as Europe did its women-and much earlier than in Switzerland! In those countries women have long enjoyed equal pay, and the opportunity to play a full working role in their societies.

Charles considers Christianity inadequate to the task of spiritual restoration and denigrates science for having caused the West to lose its spiritual moorings. Echoing a common Muslim theme, he declares that “Western civilisation has become increasingly acquisitive and exploitive in defiance of our environmental responsibilities.” Instead, he praises the “Islamic revival” of the 1980s and portrays Islam as Britain’s salvation:

Islam can teach us today a way of understanding and living in the world which Christianity itself is poorer for having lost. At the heart of Islam is its preservation of an integral view of the Universe. Islam-like Buddhism and Hinduism-refuses to separate man and nature, religion and science, mind and matter, and has preserved a metaphysical and unified view of ourselves and the world around us. . . . But the West gradually lost this integrated vision of the world with Copernicus and Descartes and the coming of the scientific revolution. A comprehensive philosophy of nature is no longer part of our everyday beliefs.

He concludes by suggesting that “there are things for us to learn in this system of belief which I suggest we ignore at our peril.”

Among the many titles borne by the British sovereign is “Defender of the Faith,” a reference to the fact that the monarch heads not only the government but also the Church of England. But the prince has reservations about this title. In a June 1994 television documentary he declared his preference to be known as “Defender of Faith” rather than “Defender of the Faith,”⁸ leading to a rash of speculation that he favors the disestablishment of the Church of England.⁹

Charles has continued to discuss the role of Islam in the United Kingdom. In a speech at the Foreign Office Conference Centre at Wilton Park in Sussex on December 13, 1996, he called on Islamic pedagogy and philosophy to help young Britons develop a healthier view of the world.¹⁰ Praising

There is much we can learn from that Islamic world view in this respect. There are many ways in which mutual understanding and appreciation can be built. Perhaps, for instance, we could begin by having more Muslim teachers in British schools, or by encouraging exchanges of teachers. Everywhere in the world people want to learn English. But in the West, in turn, we need to be taught by Islamic teachers how to learn with our hearts, as well as our heads.

The results of this study will help Westerners

to rethink, and for the better, 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.

In addition to these comments on Islam, Charles has taken steps to give that religion a special status. For example, he set up a panel of twelve “wise men” (in fact, eleven men and one woman) to advise him on Islamic religion and culture.¹¹ This caused much talk, especially as the group was reported to have met in secret. Some noted that no comparable body exists to inform the crown prince about other faiths practiced in his future realm.

REACTIONS

Muslim world. Charles has traveled extensively in the Muslim world, with recent visits to Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Bangladesh. He has visited Turkey so often that some observers believe that to be the country where his rumored conversion to Islam took place. In addition, he has visited mosques in the United Kingdom, for example, dropping in on one at the end of Ramadan in April 1996.

Some offices of the British government have found a practical use for the prince’s affection for Islam. In particular, the Foreign Office uses him as a point man for British business interests in Muslim countries, leading one journalist to comment that “the Charles of Arabia phenomenon is here to stay,” for it helps assure British commerce with the Muslim world.¹²

got moderate coverage in the British press-but it was huge news in the host country. In Saudi Arabia, the overwhelming theme of the welcoming addresses was of the Prince as candid friend of the Islamic world. The warmth of his welcome was extraordinary.

The writer of this account, John Casey of Cambridge University, warns that the British public lacks a clear understanding of Charles's standing in the Muslim world:

The extent to which the Prince is admired by Muslims-even to the point of hero-worship-has not yet sunk into the consciousness of the British public. When it does, that public may or may not be pleased.

Casey concludes that the prince of Wales's "hero status" in the Arab world is permanent. "No other Western figure commands this sort of admiration."¹³

Charles's Muslim admirers can be generous in their gratitude. At a private dinner with prince Charles in May 1997, Prince Bandar bin Sultan of Saudi Arabia announced a donation by King Fahd of \$33 million to Oxford University to construct a new Centre for Islamic Studies at Oxford, a gift designed "to establish Islamic studies at the heart of the British education system."¹⁴

Great Britain. Charles's speeches provoked a flurry of comments in England. In the popular perception, he is a spiritual dilettante, something of a religious butterfly, flitting from faith to faith and veering, increasingly, towards Islam. . . . The sight of the Prince in yet another prayer shawl only compounds the image of a well-intentioned eccentric seeking divine inspiration.¹⁵

Others wonder if Charles is aware of the punishments Islamic law metes out to adulterers-and whether he "exacted some sort of guarantee" before traveling to the Muslim world that he would not be "stoned or beaten by devout Saudi or Bangladeshi natives."¹⁶

Some Englishmen took their prince's statements more seriously. Patrick Sookhdeo, director of the Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity, raised questions about the coherence of Charles's approach to Islam, commenting that "It is not fair to compare the best ideals of the Islamic faith

What do Muslims living in a Muslim context feel? Are they content to continue submitting to authority in every detail of their lives? Many are not. We hear much about radical Islamists seeking an even closer adherence to the original teachings of Islam. But we hear little about the opposite phenomenon: the Muslims who are attracted by democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, respect for the rights and worth of the individual and other characteristics of Western society.¹⁷

Another commentator reversed Charles's argument and held that some of Britain's million and a half Muslims need instruction in British values:

it would be interesting to know who they [the Muslim leaders with whom Charles associates] are. Do they include Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammad, who supports Hamas, agitates for an Islamic state, and recently called for homosexuals to fling themselves off Big Ben? Or the dissident Dr. al-Mas'ari, who has used the new freedom of speech which we in this country have given him to call for the extermination of the Jews?¹⁸

Prime Minister John Major reacted to Charles's sentiment about wanting to be known as "Defender of Faith" with the understated comment that "it would be a little odd if Prince Charles was defender of faiths of which he was not a member."¹⁹

The conflict between Charles's enthusiasm for Islam and his subjects' leeriness played itself out recently at Oxford, where the reaction to King Fahd's huge gift to the Islamic center met with little enthusiasm. Oxford faculty oppose the gift, claiming its proposed location-on a greenfield site near the heart of the city-would constitute "overdevelopment."²⁰ Presumably their ecological opposition hides other motives as well.

Interestingly, Charles himself has mildly experienced the wrath of fundamentalist Islam. Just after Ayatollah Khomeini issued his death decree against Salman Rushdie, Charles was in the Persian Gulf and Tehran radio denounced his presence there "as a snub to Islam."²¹ Because of "heightened security concerns in the wake of Muslim furor over *The Satanic Verses*,"²² the prince was forced to

It bears noting that Charles is not the royal family's only link to the Muslim world, for Princess Diana, Charles's ex-wife, has often been linked to Hasnat Khan, a London-based cardiac surgeon. Just as Charles donned a Muslim prayer shawl, Di wore a traditional *shalwar kameez* during her visit to Khan's family in Pakistan. London's *Sunday Mirror*²³ reports that Khan's family has approved a possible marriage of the divorced 35-year-old princess and their son, then quoted the princess (via a "friend") to the effect that she hoped Khan would father a half-sister to her two sons, princes William and Harry. While Diana's divorce from the heir to the British throne removes her personally from the royal family, her sons could be the first heirs to the British throne with a Muslim stepfather.

CONCLUSION

The denigration of the West at the expense of a foreign tradition that Charles engages in occurs quite commonly among the West's intellectual elite. For some it is Islam, for others Tibetan Buddhism, Maoist thought, or American Indian spirituality. In all cases, the alien is assumed superior to the familiar. Arthur Schlesinger replies to this that there remains

a crucial difference between the Western tradition and the others. The crimes of the West have produced their own antidotes. They have provoked great movements to end slavery, to raise the status of women, to abolish torture, to combat racism, to defend freedom of inquiry and expression, to advance personal liberty and human rights.²⁴

Should Charles persist in his admiration of Islam and defamation of his own culture, it could be, as *The Independent* puts it, that his accession to the throne will indeed usher in a "different kind of monarchy."

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¹ New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1991, pp. 31-2.

² *Evening Standard*, Oct. 15, 1996.

³ Quoted in Giles Milton, *The Riddle and the Knight: In Search of Sir John Mandeville* (London: Allison &

RICHARD KAY AND NICK CLAVEN, "Why Charles Is Driven To Build a Bridge to the East," *Daily Mail*, Jan. 6, 1997.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Islam and the West," text of Charles's 1993 speech, MSANEWS of Ohio State University.

⁸ *The Independent*, July 1, 1994.

⁹ For example, *Sunday Times*, May 26, 1996.

¹⁰ *The Times*, Dec. 14, 1996.

¹¹ Richard Kay, "Charles and the 'Wise Men' of Islam," *Daily Mail*, Jan. 6, 1997.

¹² John Casey, "Friend of Islam Given a Hero's Welcome," *The Daily Telegraph*, Mar. 8, 1997.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Richard Wollffe and Simon Targett, "\$33m gift to Oxford Islamic centre," *Financial Times*, May 30, 1997.

¹⁵ Robert Hardman, "Search for the Spiritual Helps to Restore Faith," *The Daily Telegraph*, Dec. 28, 1996.

¹⁶ Catherine Bennett, "What on Earth is Prince Charles up To?" *The Guardian*, Dec. 18, 1996.

¹⁷ Patrick Sookhdeo, "Prince Charles is Wrong: Islam Does Menace the West," *The Daily Telegraph*, Dec. 19, 1996.

¹⁸ Bennett, "What on Earth?" *The Guardian*, Dec. 18, 1996.

¹⁹ *Sunday Times*, May 26, 1996.

²⁰ Wollffe and Targett, "\$33m gift to Oxford Islamic centre."

²¹ Reuters, Mar. 17, 1989.

²² United Press International, Mar. 17, 1989.

²³ As quoted in *The Boston Herald*, Nov. 4, 1996.

²⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*. New York: W. W. Norton, p. 127.

²⁵ July 1, 1994.

For updates on this story, see Daniel Pipes's blog, "[Is Prince Charles a Convert to Islam?](#)"

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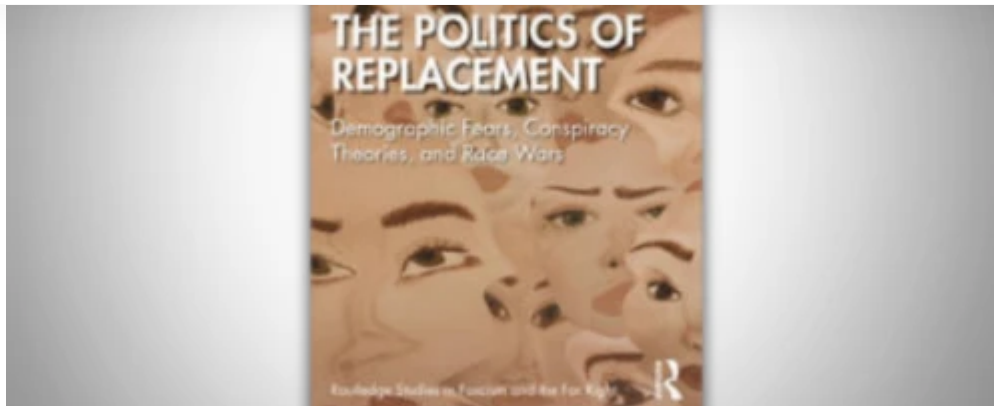
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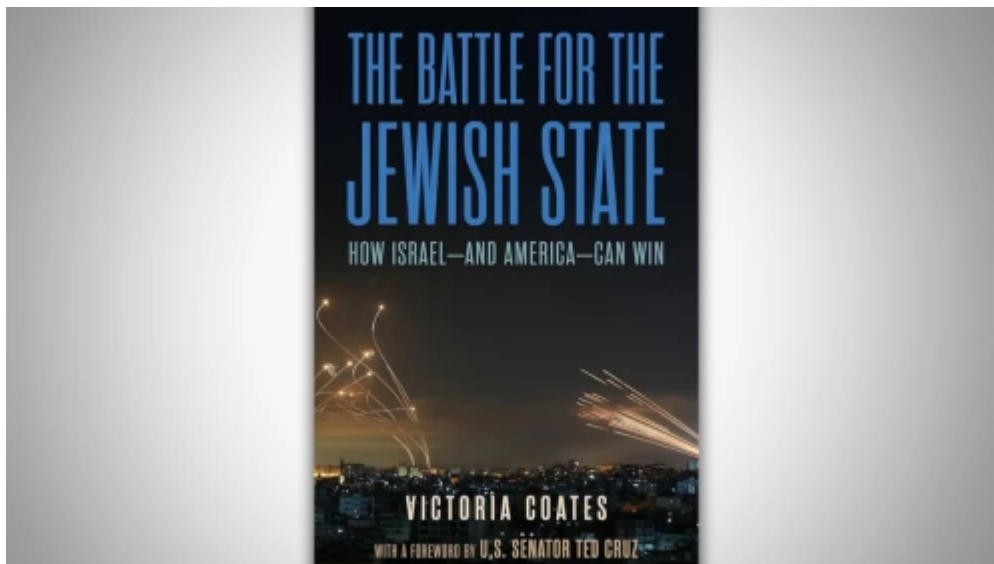
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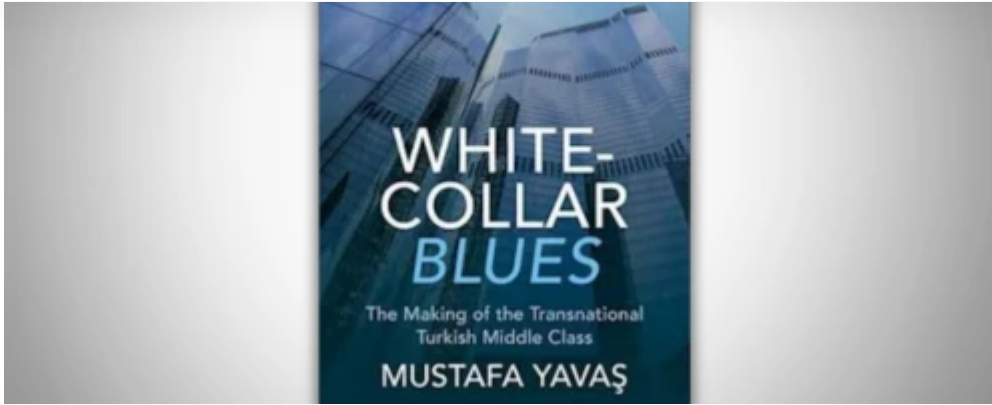
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