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Guest Editorial

The West Cannot Forge an Alliance With Islam

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(AINA) -- Palma de Mallorca is a picturesque port-city and capital of Majorca (or Mallorca) that is the largest amongst Spain's Balearic Islands in the Mediterranean Sea. Many a leaf of civilization has turned upon Palma since it was founded as Palmaria by ancient Romans. Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, and Moors had possessed the Balearic Islands before they came under the pall of Catalan Kingdom of Aragon (1329 A.D.) during Spanish Reconquesta. Palma de Mallorca recently resurfaced in news for the U.N. sponsored meet "The Alliance of Civilization" (November 28-30, 2005).

The meet in Palma de Mallorca was the product of an idea floated by Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero nearly a year ago. It received support from Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the UN. Erdogan, originally a votary of Shariat, is now interested all sort of cosmopolitan exhibitionism to see Turkey through the European Union. Precisely what sort of 'Alliance of Civilization' is being aimed at by the mandarins of UNO and Spain remains unclear. We know what it is not since former Iranian President Mohammed Khatami, said it was different from the concept of 'Dialogue amongst Civilizations' he had promoted under the aegis of UNO a few years ago. I had attended, in Iranian Cultural Centre of New Delhi, two out of the several sessions of 'Dialogue between Civilizations' in 1999. However, the focus, I was astonished to find was entirely on Hinduism and little of Islam although held in an Islamic bastion. The UNO had declared 2001 as the Year of 'Dialogue amongst Civilizations'. But ironically, 9/11 happened in the same year providing the world its most stunning photo-opportunity of 'Clash of Civilizations'.

Mr. Khatami, after attending the first session, flew away for Beirut (Lebanon) where was scheduled to attend a gathering "on human development for the viewpoints of different religions, as well as discuss the thoughts of kidnapped Shiite leader Mousa Sadr". But he did not forget to clarify, in anticipation to the issue of Islamic terrorism, that there is nothing in Islam that sanctions terrorism; and extremism and terrorism exist amongst other religious communities as well.

Could there be a greater irony than President of Islamic Republic of Iran preaching about human development from viewpoints of different religions in Beirut. Was it not Ayatollah Khomeini in 1982 who sent 1,500 Revolutionary Guards, Iran's elite fighting force, to help Shiite militia in civil war in Lebanon? They helped form infamous radical Islamic militia cum political party Hezbollah who wanted to impose an Iran-like theocratic state in Lebanon. Khomeini thus played his part well in destroying the last Christian bastion in West Asia -- people who traced their ancestry to Phoenician civilization. Ayatollah, through his Islamic Revolution, had already de-legitimized the inheritance from ancient Persia. Earlier this year Hezbollah vehemently opposed the 'Cedar Revolution' that swept Lebanon calling for withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country. It mobilized a crowd estimated as widely between half a million to one and half million in Beirut on March 8 to demonstrate in support of retaining Syrian presence. God save us from such servants of Civilizations?

The Alliance meet that produced little else than misleading homilies has not been taken seriously by the media. It is difficult to foresee what sort of Alliance it would lead to. But it seems this is projected as an alliance between West (or Christians) and Muslims brokered by Leftists and Seculars in both camps. The Jews might be inducted since Israel is the pivot in the Mid-East problem. For long we were being told that 'real' reason for rise of modern Islamic fundamentalism was the establishment of Israel in 1948 patently overlooking that Muslim Brotherhood was formed in Egypt in 1928.

Historically Christianity and Islam have been rivals for global domination. The bitter truth is that the position still remains the same. After the abolition of Caliphate (1924), World War II and Cold War the West had assumed that religion was a spent-force. Civil War Lebanon (1976-1990), Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), rise of Taliban (1996) not to mention 9/11 and subsequent events have disillusioned us.

West (and Christian world at large) will be committing hara-kiri by trying to forge an alliance with Islam. History records that all alliances with Islam since Treaty of Medina with Jews, and treaty of Hudaibya with Meccans who were till then non-Muslims in Prophet's lifetime were eyewash and counterproductive for those who signed them. Multiculturalism, Arab Nationalism, Indian Nationalism, Secularism, Communism, nothing has been able to contain the adherents of Islam in peace. It is like sleeping with the enemy; and West has already slept enough over the problem. Mr. Khatami said Islam doesn't sanction terrorism; Mr. Erdogan said Islam speaks of love. Only two kinds of people will believe it. First, those who have not experienced Islam (although television and mass-media acts as substitute to first hand experience) and Second, those who have not studied Islam.

Varying parts of Spain has a history of Moorish subjugation between 711 and 1492 A.D.. History says Moors were icons of excellence and refinement and Visigoths (Spanish) boorish people. I am no historian but the same history also records that, notwithstanding monstrous Inquisitions, the century following expulsion of Moors is recorded as Golden Age of Spain, culturally, militarily, imperially. But Spain recently had Madrid Bombings on March 11, 2004. Al-Qaeda owned it responsibility and threatened the world order evolved since Treaty of Westphalia (1648) whose twin underpinnings were nation-states and

secularism, would collapse and a new international system will rise under the leadership of a mighty Islamic state. The Madrid bombing must have blown up the 20-year old pipe dream of linking Spain with Morocco through an undersea railway tunnel formally agreed upon in December, 2003. But Spain should try to know about the bitter experiences of non-Muslim people or Dhimmis who lived under Muslim rule. Just across the Mediterranean Sea, in Barbary Coast, associated with Saint Augustine of Hippo, Christianity died a slow and painful death. They should know about the roots of Balkan tragedy (Civil War of Yugoslavia) and recent French Riots.

The other issue is about knowing the theology and history of Islam. We tend to dispense with it altogether finding it cumbersome, incoherent, full of sword-like-long-Arabic names, and tiring. Islam would have been better known were it as interesting to read as *The Arabian Nights*. But at least in this regard I would compliment Christian missionaries and European scholars who deconstructed Islam and laid bare that closed book in Arabic in public domain. This pursuit to know Islam became the cornerstone of a discipline called Orientalism, which later unearthed the rich pre-Islamic heritage in Egypt, Crete, Asia Minor, Assyria, Babylon and India.

In this regard one must remember Raymond Lully (1236-1315 A.D.). He was an unconventional and interesting character of the Middle Ages -- pioneer of Catalan literature, evangelist, alchemist, 'grandfather of computers'. He was born somewhere between 1232 and 1236 A.D. in Palma de Mallorca, the town where Alliance of Civilization was held. The Balearic Islands that were under Moorish rule since 798 A.D. (and once a base station in 11th century for launching attack on Tuscan coast of Italy) was reconquered by James I, the young King of Aragon between 1229 and 1232 A.D.. Lully, born in a wealthy family in Palma de Mallorca, apparently joined the court of James I and remained a courtesan till the age of 30.

Lully, after being given to a sensual lifestyle, became an evangelist and vowed to bring Mohammedans (Muslims) into the fold of Christianity. A modern historian would tell Lully was not simply an evangelist but a 'strategic expert of civilizations'. Lully's era when the tide of Spanish Reconquista was rising on western edge of the Mediterranean Sea but Crusades were ebbing on its eastern periphery. He understood that the battle for territory was actually a battle for minds. It was a clash between 'Romanization' and 'Arabization'. History shows that evangelization of Muslims have been a failure except in the Philippines in 16th century.

Generally evangelists target Hindus, Buddhists, and others who follow an inclusive faith and have no enmity with Christianity. But some dare devil evangelists are working amongst Muslims in Africa, in Central Asia, in South East Asia amidst tremendous pressure of Islam. I am no supporter of evangelization of Hindu-Buddhists but I feel that fight with those who claim to clinch 'Africa for Allah' can only be fought with evangelists. It's easy to guess the choice when it's between being a human being and Quranic robot. And Raymond Lully showed the way.

But what makes Raymond Lully different. Lully's famous contemporaries like philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas (1226-1274) and poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) had displayed ignorance of Islam. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, assumed to be an evangelical manual till 20th century, had made only a few references to Muslims and even admitted of his lack of knowledge about their teachings. Dante, typical of his age in Italy, though Mohammed was merely a Christian heretic and made him burn in *Inferno*. Saint Francis of Assisi reached Egypt during Fifth Crusade and tried to convince Sultan Al-Kamil to accept Christianity. Their camp parley resulted in some homilies but no result. Actually, none of them had any knowledge of Islam.

But Lully stressed that Arabic must be read and Koran and Hadith must be known. Admittedly, Lully had a predecessor, who felt the need for an informed approach towards Islam. Blessed Peter of Montboissier (1092-1156 A.D.) better known as Peter, the Venerable, an Abbot of Cluny (Germany), upon visiting Spain in 1139 A.D. became interested in Islam and had the Koran translated into Latin for the first time. He wrote a treatise *Contra sectum Saracenorum* i.e. Against the sect of Muslims wherein he made it clear that he wished Christians to approach the Muslims "not with arms as the Crusaders do, but with reason, not with hatred but with love".

In 1276, Lully founded an Oriental school in his native island Majorca where missionaries could master Arabic and Islam. He had bought a Moorish slave for conversational Arabic. While being in Paris, he traveled to Vienne, 30 km south of Paris on Rhone river to attend the Ecumenical Council convened there in 1311 A.D.. Raymond petitioned to the Council of Vienne to set up Oriental languages and literature to prepare missionaries adept to work amongst Muslims and Jews. The Council established five such schools -- at Rome, Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Salamanca -- with chairs of Hebrew, Chaldaic, and Arabic (Age of Faith p.979).

Lully sailed to North Africa thrice in pursuit of his mission -- in 1292, 1307 and 1315 to refute Islam logically and preach Christianity. He barely escaped being executed and was deported twice for Europe. But finally in 1315 A.D., at the ripe age of 82, he flared up with spirit of martyrdom visited Bougie, and began to preach Christianity to Muslim crowd before being stoned to death by an irate Muslim mob. This was exactly one hundred years ago before a Christian (Portuguese) army seized a place in Moorish North Africa viz. Ceuta, Morocco (this enclave is now with Spain).

Lully's embryonic Orientalism gave rise to secular scholars who peered into Islamic scriptures like Koran, Hadith and Hidayas; put together the history of Islam based on Muslim and non-Muslim chronicles. Sir William Muir who wrote 'The Life of Mahomet from Original Sources', Elliot and Dawson who wrote 'History of India according to its own historians', and Bernard Lewis in our times.

At Palma de Malorca, Lully's birthplace, the objective should have been to know Islam rather than solemnizing a misalliance of civilizations. Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Taoists --- the adherents of non-invasive religions without any global proselytizing agenda -- don't seem to count. Yet all these people, either historically or contemporarily, are oppressed by Islam. These religions have no conflict with Christianity in real terms. So an Alliance is plausible amongst Jews-Christians-Hindus-Buddhists who are not religious robots. Of course, this will be brokered not by religious Rightists in either camps but open minded people who care for 'Civilization'.

Priyadarsi Dutta is based in New Delhi, India and writes on Islam and allied subjects in the national news daily The Pioneer.

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