

# Pope at Mount Sinai

## The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman



THE Pope during his recent official visit to Egypt has made a declaration at the feet of Mount Sinai, which is of profound significance for humanity. He has called upon the three monotheistic faiths — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — to unite at Sinai. Humanity must take serious note of this declaration and find a way of acting in concert.

Mount Sinai is of great importance to the three monotheistic faiths. It is at Sinai that God is supposed to have revealed Himself to Prophet Moses and revealed to him the Ten Commandments. These Ten Commandments are the articles of faith of the Jewish religion. It is on the strength of these revelations that Israel has declared Jerusalem the Eternal Capital of the State of Israel.

Politically Jerusalem is the capital of Israel. Yet not a single state of any consequence has recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. The US Congress, where the Israeli lobby has undisputed sway, has on several occasions come close to recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

It is common knowledge that any politician of any consequence in the US seeking elected office, must pay a visit to Israel. Yet recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel would dangerously queer the pitch for it would threaten any settlement of the entire Middle East dispute.

Jesus Christ, whose religion Christianity is professed throughout the world and whose undisputed emissary the Pope is, was born in Bethlehem, which is currently administered by Palestinian authority. Jerusalem is the first Kibla of Islam and Muslims used to turn in prayer towards Jerusalem before shifting to the holy Kaaba in Makkah at Makkah. The newly emerging state of Palestine, whose formal foundation is expected to be laid during this year, has also declared Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.

Six years ago in Oslo, the capital of Norway, when the Peace Agreement was signed between the Palestinians and the Israelis, the Peace Process received the required shot in the arm. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shook hands before TV cameras on the verandah of the White House, with a beaming President Bill

Clinton in the middle. From that day on, President Clinton has remained engaged in the Peace Process almost on a daily basis.

That Peace Process has moved considerably forward. The Palestinian authority has been established on bits and pieces of the West Bank and Gaza and the temporary headquarters of Palestine in Tunis, has been wound down. Negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis are progressing with continuous road-blocks. There is occasional bloodshed and lot of acrimonious debates. Yet the Peace Process is making headway.

It is not very clear why the Peace Process between Syria and Israel is not making the kind of headway that one would expect. It is in a sense simpler deal than it was between Egypt and Israel at Camp David in 1979. For it involves the withdrawal of Israel from Golan Heights of Syria in exchange for recognition and more important security guarantee for Israel. For Golan Overlooks Israel and Israel wants iron clad guarantees.

Since her occupation of the West Bank in Palestine and the Golan Heights in Syria, Israel has built settlements and developed agriculture and tourism in Syria. Dismantling of Jewish settlements is a messy affair but Israel in order to achieve peace must necessarily do it. The occupation of South Lebanon by Israel has been very costly for her. The Hizbollah guerrillas has carried on murderous war against Israeli occupation and caused much loss of life among the Israelis.

It is, therefore, that Prime Minister Ehud Barak during his election campaign, had vowed to pull out from South Lebanon by Autumn of this year. The fate of Lebanon is inextricably tied with that of Syria and there lies the importance of a deal between Syria and Israel.

The official visit of the Pope to Egypt, the most important Arab country, is a signal that the situation is coming to a head in the Middle East. The three monotheistic faiths are claimants of Jerusalem. More than a territorial solution a spiritual solution must be attempted. The age of the Crusades is long gone.

It is at Mount Sinai that the Ten Commandments were re-

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Pope John Paul II receives a present at the Mount Sinai St. Catherine's monastery 26 February 2000. The Pope issued an appeal for dialogue among Christians, Jews and Muslims as he stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, holy to all religions.

vealed. This was the beginning of the journey of the three monotheistic faiths through humanity. When I was Ambassador of Bangladesh in Egypt, President Sadat after signing the deal with the Israelis at Camp David, had launched the idea of a temple at the Sinai for three monotheistic faiths. President Sadat was gunned down by assassins and did not live to carry forward his great idea. The Pope has now picked up the thread. It deserves to be explored with all seriousness.

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Bill Clinton will lay down the reins of office. He has been so intimately associated with taking the Peace Process forward, that a final solution in unthinkable without him. The Peace Process was seriously engaged during another Democrat President Jimmy Carter, under whose stewardship the Camp David Peace Agreement was signed between Egypt and Israel. During the more than a decade rule by the Republicans, the Peace Process went into cold storage. It is during the more than seven-year rule by Democrat President Bill Clinton that the Peace Process has come close to a final solution. Will, the actors of the drama in the Middle East let the opportunity slip?

# US Tries to Avert Clash with Europe over IMF Chief

Vasanthi Arora writes from Washington

THE US has sought to avert a possible showdown with Europe over the selection of the new International Monetary Fund (IMF) chief by restating its willingness to back one of the latter's representatives.

Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers said the US did not oppose a European at the head of the IMF but urged Europe to come up with the right person for the top-flight job.

A diplomatic row had erupted on Monday after the US vetoed the European Union candidate for the job, German Deputy Finance Minister Caio Koch-Weser. All 15 European Union finance ministers rallied behind Koch-Weser's candidacy and the US move was widely perceived as a calculated snub to Germany.

Summers denied German charges that Washington had pushed developing countries to nominate Stanley Fischer, a naturalised American who is currently the IMF's acting managing director. Fischer

took over last week after the retirement of Michel Camdessus as managing director. Fischer, the number two official at the fund, was nominated by an unusual coalition of African and Arab countries and has demonstrated the skill to head the fund. The New York Times says quoting his backers.

Talking to newsmen after testifying before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Summers said the US had not sought to influence the position of other countries. "Others have made their own judgements based on their own information and on their own impressions of the needs of the organisation," he added.

US President Bill Clinton had telephoned German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder over the weekend to tell him that Koch-Weser did not meet the US requirement for a "strong candidate of maximum stature who would be able to command broad support around the world". Fischer faces competition from former Japanese fi-

nance ministry official Eisuke Sakakibara, also in the run in addition to Koch-Weser. Clinton's rejection of Koch-Weser makes the succession at the IMF the biggest battle for leadership of a major international institution since the United Nations fought to oust Boutros Boutros-Ghali and replace him with Kofi Annan in 1996, says the daily.

IMF board members may begin informal voting later this week, taking a straw poll to determine whether any of the three candidates have strong support. It is still possible that one of the candidates could gather enough support to force a formal vote. Supporters of both Fischer and Koch-Weser are working to line up support from developing countries and generate momentum, the daily says.

Meanwhile, Summers, in his Senate testimony, said the US plans to reform the IMF were based on the reality that in the new global financial system the private sector was the over-

whelming source for capital. "This means the IMF will have to concentrate on helping countries make certain key reforms that will facilitate the flow of private capital," he added. The key IMF reforms, he suggested, included helping speed up the flow of needed economic information from governments to markets, paying closer attention to financial vulnerabilities and focussing financing on emergency situations.

The IMF reforms, called for as a condition for the US Congress to approve IMF reforming in 1998, are moving ahead, Summers said.

Summers urged Congress to approve additional funds for the World Bank/IMF-administered Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) debt relief initiative. He called for the approval of \$210 million in supplemental funding for the current fiscal year and \$375 million for fiscal year 2001, which begins October 1.

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## LETTER FROM EUROPE

# Is Spain Gradually Coming to Terms with Its Muslim Past?

Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam writes from Madrid

In the ninth century, most of Spain and Portugal (Al-Andalus) was ruled as an independent Emirate by the Andalusian Umayyads. Since Al-Andalus with its capital in Cordoba was under constant attack from its northern Christian neighbours, the then Emir, Muhammad ben Abd al-Rahman decided to strengthen its northern defences by building several fortified garrison towns around Toledo, which was then the most important city in this area.

“WHAT is your name?”

Following the current western trend towards using diminutives instead of long names, (just to give couple of examples, it is not James Earl Carter, but Jimmy Carter, it is not William Jefferson Clinton, but Bill Clinton) I answer, “Mahboob Alam.”

“What? Say it again, please. We are not familiar with such exotic (meaning foreign) names.”

Naturally I oblige and repeat my name several times before my interlocutor gets the hang of it. Finally he exclaims, “Que raro!” (How strange it sounds!) “Trying to be courteous, I ask, ‘What is yours?’”

“Antonio Almunia.” I am an immigrant and I want to make friends with as many people as possible in this country. So I continue the conversation by saying, “I am from Bangladesh and work for a multinational corporation. Where do you come from? Are you with a multinational as well?”

I am from Alcala de Henares (twenty-eight kilometres from Madrid) and I work in Madrid as a lawyer.” My interlocutor is flabbergasted when I say, “My name should not sound that strange to you because my name, your name (Almunia), the town where you come from (Al-Qal’at an Nahar) and the place where you work (Mayerit) have something very important in common: they are all expressed in the same language and that is Arabic.”

This is a typical conversation that I have had dozens of times in Spain at all sorts of social engagements. (There are innumerable villages, towns, valleys and rivers which still carry Muslim names. Recent studies have pointed out that even now there are close to eight hundred Spanish words, which are of Arabic origin.) Most ordinary Spaniards are however, not aware of their Muslim heritage. The few who have a vague idea of the Moorish presence in Spain, think of it as something negative. For them it is so remote and so abstract that it is almost unreal. In any case, the term itself (los moros) now has a disparaging connotation. In the ordinary Spanish mind the term raises the spectre of illegal Moroccan and other North African immigrants, who work as temporary agricultural or construction labourers (native-born Spaniards would rather live on the dole than carry out these menial tasks) and live in inhuman conditions in squalid shanty towns around Madrid or Barcelona or in plastic tents in Almeria. (where the local people recently went on the rampage to beat them up and destroy their shacks). They readily equate Islam with poverty and misery. It is hard for them even to imagine that the ancestors of these marginalised poor were the founders of the most advanced European civilisation of its time, i.e. the great Hispano-Muslim civilisation, whose presence can still be found everywhere in Spain, if only one bothers to look for it or one is made aware of it.

There are, of course, a few scholars and students of Islamic history who take a genuine interest in deconstructing this negative image that has come down to us through the centuries. Recently I have read several articles in the press trying to revive an interest in Spain's Muslim past. At this point several questions come to mind: Why and how was this image created? Who can be held responsible for this collective amnesia? (The Romans and the Visigoths came to Spain before the Arabs and the Moors. The modern Spaniards still proudly trace their ancestry back to them. Spanish history books are full of Roman and Visigothic contribution to their civilisation. They often refer to the Muslim period, if at all they do so - close to eight hundred years - as an afterthought, a mere parenthesis in their history.) When will they accept the fact that without knowing it, in many different ways, they still carry Muslim legacy in their every day life?

The process of acculturation and collective amnesia started in 1492, immediately after the fall of Granada, the last Muslim kingdom on the Spanish territory. The Church joined forces with the Crown to eradicate the last vestiges of Islamic culture. It was not an easy task because even among the Christians, Arabic was used as the language of culture. The sophisticated and the noble families of Christian Spain had adopted many Arab habits in food and clothing. The influence of Muslim culture was so pervasive in every walk of life that some-

thing drastic had to be done to acculturate the people. So the conquerors by law prohibited Islam, banned Arabic, ordered the burning of Arabic books and outlawed all Muslim habits. Even bathing was considered as a Muslim habit. Therefore, too much cleanliness came to be considered as unchristian. The Church “induced Ferdinand and Isabella (the Catholic Kings), to the conquest of Granada, to close and abolish the Moorish baths. They forbade not only the Christians but also the Moors from using anything but holy water. Fire, not water, became the grand element of inquisitorial purification.”

All the Muslims and later even the Crypto-Muslims (who had been forcibly converted to Catholicism) were either massacred or expelled from the soil of Spain and their properties confiscated. To justify these measures the Muslims and the Arab culture were demonised - they were the enemies of God and country. Thus religious intolerance was allowed to take roots in the collective psyche of the people and the Muslims came to be considered irredeemably as “the other.” No one seemed to remember that during centuries of Muslim domination, the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims used to live in peace and harmony.

This policy of religious intolerance was followed with greater or lesser intensity during the next five hundred years or so. Even Franco, who started the Spanish civil war in 1936 by invading continental Spain at the head of a large contingent of Moroccan soldiers followed more or less the same policy. He denied legal status to all other religious denominations including the Jews and the Protestants and prohibited the practice of any other religion unless one did it in the privacy of one's home. No wonder, after Franco's victory in the civil war, he received a telegram from Pope Pius XII saying: “...we rejoice with your Excellency in the victory, so greatly to be desired, of Catholic Spain.” Franco returned the complement by passing a series of laws to bring in the law of Spain in line with the teachings of the Church. Roman Catholic religious instruction was made compulsory in public as well as private education at every level.

Francisco died in 1975. The 1978 Spanish constitution introduced democracy in Spain and gave religious freedom to its citizens. There is no doubt that at least from a theoretical point of view it was a major step forward. The Muslims, the Jews and the Protestants could legally build or renovate their places of worship without any fear of being dragged away to the dungeons by the police. But the Catholic Church still retained its privileged position. While the governmental authorities (state, regional and local) gave official recognition to many Catholic churches and cathedrals as part of Spain's cultural heritage and made generous grants or gave subsidies for their renovation, maintenance, other religious denominations had to depend on private donations from their followers for such activities.

Article 16 of the Spanish constitution guarantees ideological and religious freedom to all Spanish citizens and foreigners living in Spain. In the same article it is also stated that no religion will be given the status of a state religion. This is true that after so many centuries of religious persecution, today one can publicly state that one is a Muslim or a Jew or a Protestant and openly pray in a mosque or a synagogue or a Protestant church. But the second part of the article where it says that no religion will be given the status of a state religion is more theoretical than real. Catholicism is synonymous with Spanish national identity. (This does not however, surprise me. Over 98 per cent of the Spaniards are Catholics.) All official ceremonies (does not matter whether they are state, regional or local) start with Catholic rituals.

A look at the calendar shows that most of the holidays (if not all, are religious (Catholic) holidays. Most public buildings (schools, colleges, government buildings, hospitals) have Catholic icons and insignias like crucifixes and statues of virgin Mary. Until recently the only form of marriage that was recognised under the law was the Catholic marriage. (Even people who got married under the civil law were not entitled to the passes of the nearby mountain ranges. But, in my opinion, why Emir Muhammad chose this site was the possibility of having abundant underground water supply. He wanted the place to have enough water not only to support the military contingents but also a substantial civilian population.

As a matter of fact, according to the famous etymologist Oliver Asin, the Arabs named the town as madian. Mayerit because of its abundant water supply. The Arabs introduced a

revolutionary water supply system - which they had learnt from the Persians - by building underground canals which interconnected the natural wells. I think, it is not inappropriate to mention here that the system was so efficient that it was in use for close to a thousand years, i.e. up to 1858. As another sign of reconciliation with the past, recently there have been talks to locate the remains of this water supply system, which in Spanish is known as los vias de agua and preserve them as vestiges of Madrid's Muslim past.

Emir Muhammad, not only built a castle on this site, but also built a large mosque and protective walls surrounding the town. The regional government of Madrid has recently excavated part of this wall and revamped it. It has been declared as a national monument, which will no doubt help its maintenance in future.

Immediately after the conquest of Madrid by the Christian King Alfonso VI in 1083, the mosque was converted into a church (Iglesia de Santa Maria). This church was demolished in late nineteenth century. Today, a visitor can find a plaque here on this site saying that once there was a famous mosque but no mention is made that the church itself was the famous mosque of Emir Muhammad. But the way things are moving, I am sure that sooner or later someone in the government will not find it demeaning to acknowledge that fact on the plaque.

Something similar has happened in the city of Toledo (Tulaytulah in Arabic), which was the most important town in this part of Spain. Actually the reader will remember that one of the reasons why Madrid was founded was to defend Toledo from attacks by the Christians from the North. After so many centuries, Toledo, with its Arab-built inner and outer defensive walls, massive gateways and narrow winding streets still looks like a North African town. In its heyday, there were dozens of mosques (some of them were built on sites occupied previously by Visigothic places of worship) and luxurious mansions in Toledo. The mosques (including a small one called Bab-al Mardum, which is an exquisite example of Moorish architecture) were handed over to the Catholic Church. Many of them were converted into churches. Some were completely demolished. Access to Bab al Mardum (which was built in the year 999 i.e. exactly one thousand years ago) is limited but with a bit of patience one can visit it. But here again one can sense a mood of change in the air. The regional government and the Archbishop of Toledo are investing money for its restoration, admittedly to attract tourism from Muslim countries.

Even then, I think it is a major change in the attitude of the ecclesiastical authorities. In a place where for many centuries, the authorities publicly tried to hide or deny Muslim presence, it is a major step forward to acknowledge that fact. Now that the authorities are in a generous mood, I am minded to ask them to place plaques at the famous churches of San Lorenzo and San Sebastian stating that they were originally Muslim places of worship. I should also mention here that one can also visit a mosque (Torre de la Uca), which has not been restored as a mosque but as a Centre for Arts and Crafts.

One of King Al Mamun's palaces, now known as the Galiana Palace, which is located outside the city walls on the bank the river Tago has also been opened to the public.

It is also heartening to note that recently there have been several conferences of thinkers and intellectuals to trace Muslim heritage and to promote mutual tolerance among the Catholics and the Christians. The Muslim immigrant community in Madrid has petitioned the regional government to provide teachers (education is a regional subject) to teach the basic principles of Islam to their children. Although no positive reply has yet been given, the petition has not been rejected either. Only ten or fifteen years ago it would even be inconceivable to make a request of this nature. So things are certainly changing.

These are only a few examples of how after so many centuries of ignorance, prejudice and intolerance Spain is gradually coming to terms with its Muslim past. If I make further research, I am sure that I will be able to come up with more examples. This is a slow process, but what is important is that it has started. This, indeed, is a hopeful sign for the future.