



At its height, the Ottoman Empire extended as far as Vienna, and in the 1721 map, "Turky Europe" still covered large territories. Turkish Ottomans were Muslims but several other religions were also practiced within the Empire.

Juha Merimaa

Islam is not a stranger

In populist political rhetoric, Islam is talked about as something foreign that has no place in Judeo-Christian Europe. But what then are we to think of the Muslims who saved Aristotle's legacy or the Ottoman Empire?

Europe is often thought of as a Christian continent. The reality is, however, much more complicated. The roots of European culture meander through the three major monotheist religions, including Judaism and Islam.

The histories of the three religions have been deeply intertwined, especially in their early days. Christianity borrowed scripture from Judaism, while Islamic teachers took Jesus quite seriously. Both peaceful dialogue and tensions existed between the religions.

This common history has now been made the focus of a pan-Nordic master's degree programme entitled *The Religious Roots of Europe*. Run jointly by six universities – the University of Helsinki, Aarhus University, the University of Bergen, the University of Copenhagen, Lund University and the University of Oslo – the programme focuses on the period from the birth of Christianity to the birth of Islam, that is, from the beginning to the 7th and 8th centuries of the Common Era.

Populists have overlooked the facts

On first thoughts, limiting the programme's focus to this specific time bracket may seem odd. Why should Nordic universities pay such attention to a period when none of these religions had reached the north? Antti Marjanen, Professor of Gnosticism and Early Christian Literature, points out that by learning the history, one also learns

"CHRISTIANITY WAS ALSO CONCEIVED OUTSIDE EUROPE."

about current developments. Marjanen is in charge of the academic content of the programme at the University of Helsinki.

One of the central themes is the role of Islam in European cultural heritage. Christianity and Judaism are traditionally approached in research and teaching from a joint perspective, but linking Islam into the same chain is not so common. Populist political rhetoric, in particular, views Is-

lam as a foreign religion that has no place in Judeo-Christian Europe.

In Marjanen's opinion, this view lacks all historical depth. Islam has had a prominent position in Spain and in the Balkans. The Ottoman Empire reached as far as the gates of Vienna in the 16th century. The cultural impact of Islam in Europe has been significant. "For example, the works of Aristotle became known in Europe in the Middle Ages thanks to Islamic thinkers.

"The three religions have a lot more in common than is usually thought. Just like Islam, Judaism and Christianity were also conceived outside Europe."

Greek, Latin, Hebrew or Arabic

The master's degree programme, which was launched last year, has proved very popular. Every autumn, 36 students are selected for the two-year programme, with six of them studying in Helsinki. Among the present students, two thirds are from the Nordic countries and the rest from all over the world.

Students are expected to have a bachelor's degree in a relevant field and a command of at least one classical language: Greek, Latin, Hebrew or Arabic. "The idea is that the students can study sources in the original language," says Marjanen.

The programme also involves a great deal of travel. The students attend seminars at the participating universities and visit Nordic research institutes in the Mediterranean region.

The lecturers are experts from all the participating universities, and the language of instruction is English.

But what sort of qualifications do students get from studying two-thousand-year-old manuscripts? "This programme has not been designed with any specific employment opportunities in mind. Knowledge of religions is helpful, for example, when working for a company that engages in international trade. Social decision-making is also a field in which there should be better knowledge of the significance of religions in cultural heritage."

The programme also gives eligibility to postgraduate studies. The partner universities are currently planning a research network in which the three religions could be studied up to doctoral level.

Marjanen is personally very keen on the idea of a research project. "I have studied Gnosticism and other early Christianity that falls outside the mainstream. It would be interesting to find out whether and how these elements in Christianity influenced Islamic thought." ●

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