

Podcast #71: Lessons from the Saracens

My husband and I watched *The Hiding Place* -again-the other night and we've watched other movies about the Holocaust and every time I ask myself: "How could people treat the Jews the way they did? How could neighbors turn and look the other way or even join in the persecution?"

And I've asked myself-are the Muslims to be the Jews of today because there are many voices out there that would make us afraid of them; make us afraid to associate with them. I've heard of parents who are appalled when their children are taught of Muslim holy days or of their religion, traditions, or their prophet, Mohammed.

This is definitely a case where we can see the danger of the single story. There is no single story of the Muslim anymore than there can be a single story of the Christian. On the one hand, you read that the intent of the Muslim religion is to wipe the infidel off the planet and we have seen horrific acts of terrorism committed in the name of Islam. But then you read of interactions with faithful Muslim families who are not so different than we are; who have a faith in God, live lives of compassion and goodness. If you listened to *The Story of Liberty*, you saw horrific acts committed in the name of Christianity.

And even if the Muslim was truly our enemy, for those of us who profess to be Christian, can we allow one shred of hatred to enter our hearts? Didn't Jesus teach us to love our enemies and do good to them that persecute us? I have in my reservoir of stories miracles worked through the power of love even among hardened and ferocious people, which, by the way, I don't believe describes the majority of the Muslim population.

So what is my point here. My point is that we need to teach our children about the Muslims and their faith that they may understand who they are because the Muslims are playing a huge role in our world today. Will you teach your children to fear them or to love them?

Last month we studied the stories of the Holy Land and we learned that Abraham had a son named Ishmael who, although outcast, was given promises through Abraham. It was Ishmael's descendants living in the Arabian desert that Mohammed was called to be a prophet to. They were worshippers of many gods and idols, a scattered, nomadic people.

When Mohammed said that the Angel Gabriel visited him, I believe him for so have angels appeared to prophets throughout the ages. I recognize the same truths I have been raised with in my Christian faith in the five Pillars -the foundation of Islam beliefs. Here are the five Pillars:

1. Faith-There is only one God.
2. Prayer-We should pray to God many times a day.
3. Charity-All things belong to God. We each have a personal responsibility to ease the economic hardships of others and strive towards eliminating inequality.
4. Fasting-We fast to seek nearness and to look for forgiveness from God; to express our gratitude and dependence on Him and to remind us of the needy. We refrain from violence, anger, envy, greed, lust, profane language or gossip.
5. Pilgrimage to Mecca-a holy place. At least once in a lifetime, when they are prepared, they

make such a pilgrimage and when they arrive, all dress in white—signifying all are alike before God. There is no rich or poor.

True, over the years, just as has happened in Christianity, the simple rules are often embellished and changed. But for those Muslims—and Christians—who find the heart and spirit of their religions, we find our common ground.

So I'd like to share a few things I've learned that I was completely unaware of until a few years ago and that give us hope that we can live together in peace even in our diversity. Not once in all of my schooling—elementary through college years, did I even once hear the name Saracen. The first time I came across it was in a book I found written by Rose Wilder Lane called *The Discovery of Freedom*. If you're a *Little House on the Prairie* fan, Rose was Laura Ingalls Wilder's daughter. I'll link the book in the notes—it's so thought provoking. Here are a few excerpts:

“During the stagnation of Europe that is called the Dark Ages, the world was actually bright with an energetic, brilliant civilization, more akin to American civilization and more fruitful today for everyone alive, than any other in the past.

“Millions upon millions of human beings, thirty generations, believing that all men are equal and free, created that civilization and kept creating it for eight hundred years.

“To them the world owes modern science—mathematics, astronomy, navigation, modern medicine and surgery, scientific agriculture...

These men were of all races and colors and classes, cultures and many religions; by no means all of them were Moslems. They were former subjects or descendants of subjects of all former empires. There is no one name that applies to them all. Europeans called them Saracens.

Their own records of the eight hundred years, of their civilization, its institutions, and the causes of its collapse, are largely locked in the Arabic language. Since American scholars and intellectuals in general are European-minded, an American can get only glimpses of the Saracens' world, seen through European indifference or hatred.”

The draw to this civilization was that it was a place where people were safe to think for themselves. And look what happened in education!

‘The refugee scientists in Persia . . . opened their schools, from Baghdad to Granada, their schools were crowded with students. In two centuries, there were great universities, the world's first universities.

“For hundreds of years, these universities grew. The University in Cairo was more than a thousand years old and still had forty thousand students, when I was there.

“These universities had no organization whatever. (Mohammed said that organization corrupts knowledge.) A Saracen university had no program, no curriculum, no departments, no rules, no

examinations; it gave no degrees nor diplomas. It was simply an institution of learning. Not of teaching, but of learning. A man, young or old, went to a university to learn what he wanted to know, just as an American goes to a grocery to get the food he wants.

Men who knew (or thought they knew) something, and wanted to teach it, opened a school to sell their knowledge. Success depended upon the demand for the knowledge they had. If they prospered, other teachers joined them.

The teachers lectured in open classrooms. Anyone was welcome to listen. An incoming student wandered about, listening. When he decided upon the teacher he wanted, they discussed privately whatever he wanted to learn and needed to study, and agreed upon fees. Then he joined the class regularly. If he was not satisfied, he could quit at any time and find another teacher. When he had learned what he wanted to know, he left the university to use his knowledge.

A thousand years after the Saracens built these universities, far away in time and on a continent that they never knew existed, a revolutionary leader, Thomas Jefferson—who knew little or nothing about the Saracens—realized the dream of his life when he created the University of Virginia. His dream was a new kind of education.

Proudly, almost bragging a little, he wrote to a friend in the medieval-university system of Harvard, “We shall allow them [the students] uncontrolled choice in the lectures they shall choose to attend. Our institution will proceed on the principle . . . of letting everyone come and listen to whatever he thinks may improve the condition of his mind.”

For more than nine hundred years the University of Cairo proceeded on precisely that principle. Until the end of the 19th century, Europeans were not able to impose upon that university any tinge of the European belief that minds acquire knowledge, not by actively seeking to know, but by passively being taught whatever Authority decides they should know.

Whoa! I wish that idea could catch on today!

Here was another startling discovery. I had heard stories of the Crusaders, but what a surprise they found when they got there! They found a people far from barbaric or uncivilized. Let me continue reading from Rose’s writing:

Moslems had held the Holy Land for five hundred years and Christians had been worshiping at its Christian shrines, which Moslems reverently guarded. Christian shrines and Moslem shrines and Jerusalem has always been a Holy City to Moslems, who revere Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Samuel and Christ as prophets of God.

Saracens had set the guard that still stands—or did, when I was in Jerusalem—at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Night and day for more than a thousand years an armed Moslem has stood there, to keep Christians from killing Christians of rival sects at the tomb of Christ. Of the 426,000 Crusaders who invaded the country, 30,000 reached Palestine. They found palm groves, the vineyards, the orchards of figs, the villages and towns and the white-walled city of

Ramlah.

A hundred Crusaders rode into Bethlehem and found it a Christian town built around the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary. The people, priests and monks entertained them royally. They rode back toward Jerusalem, and came to the peaceful church of the Blessed Mother of Christ, in the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives.

How does it happen that the Crusaders found so many Christians living among the infidels? Why, Christians lived there all the time. They were part of the Saracens' world. Moslems did not exterminate people whose religious belief was different; ...it was Europeans who massacred heretics.

The Crusaders whose castles were rude stone walls and floors of earth or damp stone covered thick with rotting reeds, came into rooms like jewels, the floors tiled, the walls and ceilings of mosaic. ...the most amazing thing to the Crusaders must have been its cleanliness. Moslems bathed five times a day. Mohammed taught that a clean body is essential to a clear mind and a pure spirit. He tied cleanliness to his plan for keeping the truth in men's minds without a church organization. ..So the Crusaders came into a country wherefountains were everywhere.

No European had ever seen so many cereals, vegetables, and fruits that the Saracens ate: rice and spinach and asparagus, lemons, melons, peaches....And these Saracen goods are still renowned from their world: damask linens, mohair fabrics, muslin, Morocco leather, Syrian silks, oriental rugs, mosaics, inlaid woods, glassware and porcelains, enamels, filagree and inlaid work in metals.

I can't begin to touch the advancements that happened in the Moslem world of these centuries. It didn't last, of course, but there's much for us to learn and benefit from. I hope you'll take time to learn more. I've included other writings in the Stories from Arabia book in the Forgotten Classics. I certainly discovered a huge gap in my understanding of their history. I'm still piecing things together.

Let me call your attention to one more book. There's a book written by Marcus Bach called Had You Been Born in Another Faith. I included it in The Stories of Spiritual Leaders. His intention in writing the book was to help us begin to understand the faith of others. And so he talks of the faith of the Hindu, the Moslem, the Protestant, the Confucianist, the Jew, the Catholic, the Mormon. To understand does not mean we have to embrace, but understanding is the beginning of love.

He wrote: "Most of all, I was impressed by my own realization that we understand others best when we understand what they believe, and that we can never truly enter into their belief until we stand for a little while where these people stand.

"Of course, this requires a bit of doing...But since we must learn to live together or none of us will live, what else is there to do? And since we have tried every other known avenue for understanding, why not try this?

The question he sought to answer was: "Had I been born in another faith, what would my faith—and I—be like?"

As he traveled the world in search of understanding the faith of others by standing in their places of worship and conversing with them, he concluded that the spirit inherent in religions is found to be one spirit when we truly put ourselves in the other person's place. "If a man reachest the heart of his own religion, he has reached the heart of others, too."

Dr. Albert Schweitzer was a true lover of all mankind and his philosophy was:

"Impart as much of your faith as you can to those who walk the road of life with you, and accept as something precious that which comes back to you from them."

Bach concluded: All too long, each group has lived in its own restricted sphere, unaware of its close kinship with other groups. With hatred and suspicion increasing in the world, the warning has become all too real: we must learn to live together or none of us will live.

...whenever we investigate the other person's way of life, we reinvestigate our own. And whoever approaches religion in this way is not going to condemn anything, but is going to discover that religion's likenesses are greater than its differences.

I love that thought.

I hate to close on a negative note, but the words in Rodgers' and Hammersteins song in South Pacific ring true, even though they took a lot of criticism for the song. The fact is, children must be taught to hate. They aren't born with that hate.

You've got to be taught to hate and fear
You've got to be taught from year to year
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made
And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before it's too late
Before you are six or seven or eight
To hate all the people your relatives hate
You've got to be carefully taught.

Will you carefully teach your children to love or hate those people who are different from them?
Tomorrow's world will reflect your answer.

