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Multiculturalism, a reality check

On English versus Arabic translation.

We hear a lot about the virtues of multiculturalism these days—you know, openness to “the Other,” to “alternative social constructions,” to the rich and diverse tapestry of human experience. The multiculturalist tends to deprecate our Greek and Roman heritage as a dead-white-guy’s patrimony. The one classical tag he can be relied upon to have a soft spot for is Terence’s overquoted boast that “*humani nihil a me alienum*,” that “nothing human is alien” to him. But what does multiculturalism look like on the ground, so to speak? How do cultures committed to learning about and understanding others actually act? A simple question with a complex answer, no doubt.

Yet surely one measure of curiosity about other cultures is the number of books that are translated every year from other languages. A few years ago, *The World Press Review* published a story with some interesting statistics on this question. Citing a report on twenty-two Arab countries overseen by the U.N., the article notes that

the total number of books translated into Arabic yearly is no more than 330, or one-fifth of those translated in a small country like Greece.

Indeed, the total number of books translated into Arabic during the 1,000 years since the age of Caliph Al-Mamoun [a ninth-century Arab ruler who was a patron of cultural interaction between Arab, Persian, and Greek scholars] to this day is less than those translated in Spain in one year.

By contrast, according to the U.N.’s *Index Translationum* database, since 1979 some 260,000 books have been translated into German, 194,000 into Spanish, 110,000 into English. Just something to keep in mind the next time some academic starts nattering on about “Eurocentricism,”

multiculturalism, etc.

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