

Intolerance of Islam

Article reprinted courtesy of *Hamdard Islamicus* Vol. XXI, No. 1

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(Views of a Muslim-American)

It is truly ironic that when Christian extremists in the West do something weird, they are called a 'lunatic fringe' of the Christian faith. But when an Islamic extremist does likewise, Islam is termed lunatic and not the extremist.

In a recent report entitled *The Status of Muslim Civil Rights in the United States* prepared by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Washington based Islamic advocacy group, it was stated that during 1996 there was a threefold rise in anti-Muslim bias in the United States compared to a year earlier.

Although this was not an audit of anti-Muslim incidents, and, mercifully, none of them terribly violent, they did highlight the experience of five million Muslims now living in the multicultural U.S. Society. While Muslims are growing in number, diversity and visibility in America, there remains among them a strong undercurrent of anxiety about living in a culture that many may treat Islam as foreign, mysterious or something to fear.

Who is responsible for this popular stereotype of all Muslims as "terrorists", or at least, as "fundamentalist fanatics"? No doubt, world events like the taking of American hostages in Iran in 1979, the Gulf War in 1991 and the World Trade Centre bombing in 1994 contributed to this paradigm, but there are also deeper undercurrents for this Western intolerance of Islam. Bernard Lewis' *Islam and the West*, Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* and lesser known Robert Allison - of Harvard's History of American Civilization Program in his dubious book *The Crescent Obscured* portray a simplistic East-West conflict between Islam and the so-called West throughout history.

In these books we are reminded of deep hostilities that go back to the Arab conquests of the Middle East in the seventh and eighth centuries and later the hundreds of years of threat from the Ottoman Empire, though those scholars conveniently forget the European counter attacks like the Crusades and the Western commercial, diplomatic and colonial domination during the last two

hundred years. Thus many Western scholars, who should know better, depict Islamic western relations as a story of centuries of confrontation between two great but exclusive civilizations where each finds the other as the final enemy. Hardly any reputable Western scholar ever mentions that the message of Islam conveyed by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is essentially the same as the messages of a long line of prophets like Abraham, Moses, John the Baptist and Jesus (a.s.).

Today, Islam is portrayed by the popular Western media as a triple threat to the West -- political, civilizational and demographic. For example, despite Iran's dismal failure in exporting its revolution abroad, it is still viewed as a global threat. The French writer Raymond Aron and right-wing politicians like Jean Marie LePen's paranoiac warnings of a revolutionary war by Islamic powers, Charles Krauthammer's categorization of Islam as "an ancient rival to our Judaeo-Christian and secular West" (*The New Crescent of Crisis: Global Intifada*) is only matched, specially after the Trade Centre bombing, in the audacity by the portrayal of Islam as a demographic threat from recent Muslim immigrants in Europe and the USA.

The question therefore arises: Is there really an Islamic threat to the West? Does this grand apocalyptic vision of some "Orientalist" scholars accurately define the truth of our times? Or does this remind us of the overblown, preposterous threat the peasant guerrillas known as Sandinistas once posed to the USA?

Of course, there are anti-West Muslim movements in the world today, but hundreds of millions of Muslim peoples are also friends of the West. How would one otherwise classify a majority of Muslim populations of Pakistan, Morocco, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Kuwait, Jordan, Bangladesh, and Egypt? What about

millions of Muslim masses who dream Western dreams? Why have millions of these people chosen to migrate to England, France, Germany, Italy, Australia, Sweden and the USA if they are enemies of the Christian West? And what will be the outcome of this huge migration of the late twentieth century? What difference will this make in the Islamic-Western relations? Given this scenario, orientalist scholars' interpretation of a stereotype millennial confrontation, nor the erroneous common anxiety about the threat of "Islamic Fundamentalism" can resolve the future at hand. The old glib explanations are no longer the key to the much more complex contemporary situation.

The fact of the matter is that Islam and its late twentieth century movements have been badly interpreted and misunderstood in the West. To begin with, politicized Islam in the 1990s is not alone. At the end of the 20th century, religion, by and large, has become an energetic force for change world-wide. Buddhists in East Asia, Catholics in Eastern Europe and Latin America, Sikhs and Hindus in India and Jews in Israel have seen their religions provide legitimacy to define their goals and to enable them to mobilize. Need we add to this list the names of Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority and Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition in the USA.

Despite the growing body of evidence to the contrary, Islam is still widely and wrongly perceived in the West as inherently extremist and monolithic. For the last three decades Islamic societies have been considered by these Westerners scholars to be in need of "modernization". Indeed, in one of many Civil Service Academy papers in Lahore in the 1960s, I vividly recall the assignment: "Can Islam be reconciled to the spirit of the 20th century?" As a result in the West, for the right, Islam represented uncouth barbarism; for the left, it was equivalent to a medieval theocracy and for the centre a kind of distasteful exoticism. Such a reductive view of Islam is a deliberate and gross simplification so as to realize several manipulative aims. In the USA today, grade school history text books, comic strips, TV series, films and cartoons show only caricatures of Muslims as oil suppliers, terrorists or as bloodthirsty mobs.

For example, saturation coverage was given to Muslims who vociferously supported Ayatullah Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie compared to a minimal exposure to the majority of Muslims who opposed it. Any Islamic high school student can tell you that Muslim law does not permit a man to be sentenced to death without trial

and has no jurisdiction outside the Muslim world. At the Islamic Conference of March 1989, 44 out of 45 members states unanimously rejected Ayatullah's fatwa. But this received only slight attention in the British media and no mention of it at all in the American. It is truly ironic that when Christian extremists in the West do something weird, they are called a "lunatic fringe" of the Christian faith. But when an Islamic extremist does likewise, Islam is termed lunatic and not the extremist.

Marshall Hodgson, the distinguished historian of Islam, points out that feminists frequently condemn 'Islam' for the custom of female circumcision. This despite the fact that it is really an African practice and is never even mentioned in the Qur'an.

Similarly, the various recent Islamic movements are often erroneously called "fundamentalist" in the West. The truth is that this word nor the concept exists in Arabic or is ever mentioned in the Qur'an. Actually, "fundamentalism" is a Christian code word meaning born again (and refers to beliefs held by some American Protestants who insist on literal truths of the Bible). Furthermore, fundamentalism generally urges passive adherence and does not advocate change of the social order which as already discussed is not the agenda of the contemporary dynamic Islamic movements.

Beyond this distorted and ignorant coverage of Islam in the Western media is the larger question that why is it that Islam is a threat but not Hinduism Judaism or Confucianism? Although Huntington does include Confucianism along with Islam on the fault lines of his great clash of civilizations, the media in general only singles out 'Islamic Fundamentalism' as the quintessential menace to Western interests. One reason usually given is that after the fall of Communism and the Soviet Union, a 'threat vacuum' has given rise to search for new enemies. For some Americans, the challenge is from Japan or the European Community or even in the long run from China. For others, looking for a bogeyman, it is the Islamic world with its one billion Muslims mostly living in poverty in more than 48 countries and a rapidly growing minority in Europe and America.

This demonization of Islam in Western thought is firmly rooted in the idea that Islam is medieval and dangerous. It is part of the cultural canon now and the task of changing this thinking is very urgent indeed.

Witness for example what happened with the Algerian

situation. The stunning victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the 1990 municipal elections in Algeria was a great triumph of democracy in an Islamic state which had been dominated for decades by a one party dictatorship under the National Liberation Front (FLN). Despite the arrest of FIS leaders like Abbasi Madani and Ali Belhadj and indulging in other corrupt practices, the ruling party failed to prevent an even more stunning victory of the FIS in parliamentary elections in 1991. As the world of Islam celebrated its democratic victory, the Algerian military intervened, arresting FIS leaders, imprisoning 10,000 people in camps and outlawing FIS. What did the West, the great champion of democracy, do? In face of blatant repression, it stood silent. The U.S. State Department "regretted" the suspension of the democratic process and did nothing else. Several European governments allowed the junta's representatives to pay official visits to explain their plans. A consortium of European and American banks provided 1.45 billion dollars to help the dictatorship in Algeria to spread out the servicing of its debt.

For the Muslim world this was a clear signal of Western prejudice and antagonism against Islam. Not only did the Algerian situation show that Islam could be democratic, but the West did not want it to be so. A barbaric, medieval image of Islam was suited more to its purpose. Above all, it was a test whether the West could reconcile with Islam and not the other way round because the Algerian Muslims had already tried to reconcile to Western democratic ideals. Obviously, the West failed the test. As someone remarked: "The White House prefers a police state to an Islamic Democracy". Not only in Algeria but in Central Asia, the West has taken a confrontational stand on Islam.

For someone like me, who admires the West and has indeed come to live here and raise his children in the USA, it is shocking to see the ignorance about Islam. One sixth grader I know read a passage in her school book about Muslims when they kneel to pray. According to the textbook, they are supposed to rub their faces in the sand while praying. "Daddy" the sixth grader told her father, "we've got to get some sand in the house".

In the middle ages it was understandable that a Muslim was regarded as the real enemy. John Victor Tolan's excellent work *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam* details the military, intellectual, economic and theological superiority of the Islamic world. No wonder, under those circumstances, the founder of Islam was treated as a manifestation of the Anti-Christ and in

popular propaganda like *Chanson de Roland*, the Saracen Zaragoza is shown worshipping a trinity of Golden idols: Mahomet, Apollin, and Tervegant. But that was the eleventh century when Embricio of Mainz and Gauthier de Compiegne wrote false biographies of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) preaching lechery and incest, staging bogus miracles and putting Christians to death who opposed him. Those demonic myths about Islam and its founder were firmly established in the Western mind at about the same time as the myths of Charlemagne, King Arthur and Robin Hood. But from the 20th century success of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* which resonates deeply with those long established Western fantasies of the myth of Mahmoud, and school textbooks are still circulated in the USA, one would think the West never outgrew its medieval, schizophrenic conception of Islam.

Today we must realize that in the West the history of knowledge about Islam has been too closely tied to conquest and war and, it is sad to say, to the Crusades of the Middle Ages. As Umberto Eco stated in his *Essay Dreaming of the Middle Ages*: "In fact both Americans and Europeans are inheritors of the Western legacy, and all the problems of the Western world emerged in the Middle Ages: modern languages, merchant cities, capitalist economy are inventions of medieval society:.. As Karen Armstrong, one of the few objective Islamic scholars in the West pointed out succinctly, we could add Islam to this list.

The time has now come to sever this connection between Western medieval phobias and Islam completely. It must be understood that it is a mistake to imagine that Islam is an inherently violent and fanatical faith. Islam is a universal religion and there is nothing extremist, monolithic and anti-western about it. Doctrinally, Islam is as blameless as other of the great Universal religions. In fact, Islam shares many of the ideals and visions that have inspired both Jews and Christians. Its main faults too, were the same as those of the Western Church, namely, pride, greed, violence and the lust for power. [1]

And let me add, that Islam is not only a rational creed but it is also pro-democracy. When Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) proclaimed that he was the last in the line of God's prophets on earth what did he mean by that? Was he signalling that from then on there would be no more 'dictated' messages from God in the form of Divine revelations like the Bible and the Qur'an and that the Age

of Reason had been born?

In fact in 1730 Henri, Comte de Boulainvilliers, published a rare book in the West entitled *Vie de Mahomed* portraying the founder of Islam as a forerunner of the Age of Reason. In continuation of this thought, Ah Shariati in the 20th century explained in his *Sociology of Islam* that the Qur'an looks upon not chance, not historical determinism, not powerful persons, not even Divine will as the motor of history. Actually, the Qur'an sees al-nas or the masses as wholly responsible for shaping history. Chapter XIII Verse 11 of the Qur'an (Eng. Tr. Yusuf Ali) says:

Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves.

Thus Islam proclaims man as God's Vice-regent on earth and its concept of Tawhid as a world view looks upon the whole universe as a unity: there is no separation between this world and the Hereafter, between the natural and the supernatural, between God, nature and man.

In its desperately needed re-evaluation and positive understanding of Islam, the West should not ignore the struggle in Islamic societies today between the modernist reformers and the orthodox clergy. Indeed, it was the West which promoted the clergy and financed their activities because they constituted the first line of defence against world communism. Today, with the disappearing cash flow, the same orthodox clergy that opposed communism is rejecting American capitalism. It is the modernist Muslim thinker who is ready to accommodate Western ideas on their merits. During the last two hundred years, Muslim reformers like Jamaluddin Afghani, Muhammad Iqbal in India, Muhammad Abduh in Egypt, Abdurrahman Wahid in Indonesia, Nawal Sadawi in North Africa, Chandra Muzaffar in Malaysia and Abdullahi An Na'im in New York have boldly tried to "reconstruct Islam" along modernist lines.

Indeed millions of Muslims world-wide are quietly living secularized lives. In the USA, for instance, it is estimated that only five to ten per cent of the Muslim community participates in organized religion. Indonesia, with the world's largest Muslim population, has a secular system of government. Yvonne Haddad, author of *Islamic Values in the United States*, lists how both in the West and in their homelands the majority of Muslims accept the principle that religion is a private affair between Man and his Creator.

In fact, examined critically, Modernism and Liberalism are nothing new in Islamic culture. The liberal thrust of a brilliant civilization in Muslim Spain was an early triumph over conservatism, the result of the teachings of Muslim sages like Ibn Sin (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes). Egypt in the 10th century emerged as a pluralist society with Christians, Jews and Muslims enjoying comfortable lives under the Shi'ah rulers, the Fatimids, who not only built Cairo but also the world's oldest University, Al-Azhar.

The Safawid renaissance in Iran and Central Asia was interestingly similar to the Italian renaissance. Both expressed themselves in art and paintings and creatively re-visited the pagan roots of their older cultures.

Mughul Emperor Akbar's 16th century efforts in India to synthesize Islam and Hinduism into a hybrid humanistic religion called Din-e-Ilahi was a modern liberal message to the entire world some hundreds of years before its time.

While Muslims like Akbar were seeking understanding with people of other faiths, the Christian West demonstrated in 1492 when Ferdinand and Isabella conquered Granada in Spain, that it could not even tolerate proximity with the two other religions of Abraham. Not only were the Muslims expelled from Spain which had been their home for 800 years, but Christian occupation was fatal for the Jews also. In this century, the strongest force for Islamic secularism was the emergence of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in Turkey. He embraced all things Western and turned the Aya Sofia mosque into a museum.

Today the West and Islam have reached a watershed in their relationship. The next few years are crucial to the development of an Islamic-Western reconciliation. The clash of the past 20 years or so between the USA and Iran should be discarded as a paradigm. The West should press Muslim countries toward political pluralism and then accept the results of free and fair elections. The history of the last fifty years clearly shows that although, theoretically, the West has preached the virtues of democracy to third world countries, sometimes, in practice, it ended up promoting totalitarianism instead. Now is the time to encourage and not obstruct democracy in Islamic countries, especially where feudalism and autocratic governments still hold power and religious exploitation is still the name of the game.

Finally, when millions of Muslims have migrated to Europe and America and need to be equal partners in the Western culture, it is imperative that the West outgrows its intolerant and negative attitude towards Islam.

At the same time, Muslims world-wide have to rediscover the liberal roots of their Islamic tradition which Japanese Islamologist Sachiko Murata defines as "gentleness, love, compassion and beauty".

As mankind approaches the end of the millennium, people all over the world must widen their horizons beyond their geographical, cultural and religious boundaries. Already a few are finding inspiration in more than one religion and these few have adopted the faith of another culture. For centuries, the Jewish people suffered at the hands of Christian Europe and were exiled from city to city and country to country, but finally the anti-Semitic prejudices seem to have been overcome after Hitler's Nazism and the Holocaust.

"The fundamental weakness of Western civilization," wrote Wilfred Smith in 1956 "is its inability to recognize that it shares the planet not with inferiors but with equals. Unless the West learns to treat others with fundamental respect, it will have failed to come to terms with the 20th century."

From the time of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), Muslims have recognized that Islam and the West share a common tradition, but the West has failed to do so. No doubt, the Muslim peoples need to set their houses in order and resolve their manifold domestic ideological, political and economic problems. The West, too desperately needs to rid itself of its ancient hatreds and prejudices. In the long run, Christians and Muslims are friends not antagonists.

Notes

1. In fact they were the faults of the misguided believers - Editor