

ISLAM AND THE WEST: THE NEED FOR MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Mohammed Abdou Yamani

On the verge of the twenty-first century, the world witnesses an unprecedented instability. Wars and culture conflicts widen the gap between the various civilizations and sow the seeds of hatred between individuals. Islam, with its universal precepts of peace and respect for the dignity of humanity, was and still is the most misunderstood religion. When represented in the West, it is always associated with negative images that repel westerners from seeing what Islam really is. Hence the great necessity for a peaceful and enlightened dialogue between the world of Islam and the West.

A great deal has been said and written on the subject of Islam and the West and many conferences have been convened, yet no discernible progress has been made in bringing a better understanding or dampening the assault on Islam and the Muslims in the western media. Prince Charles noted in his lecture at Oxford:

The depressing fact is that, despite the advances in technology and mass communications of the second half of the twentieth century, despite mass travel, the intermingling of races, the ever-growing reduction—or so we believe—of the mysteries of our world, misunderstandings between Islam and the West continue. Indeed, they may be growing.

The misrepresentation of Islam, which was limited in the past to the printed word, has now mushroomed to all forms of mass communication. The entertainment industry, news telecasts, radio shows, the movie industry, children's television programs, and even commercials on billboards all have become vehicles for propagating the misrepresentation of Islam in the West. Literary fiction and nonfiction remain among the most insidious vehicles for permanently damaging the image and concept of Islam in the minds of non-Muslim readers.

Despite the age-old admonition not to believe everything they read, westerners are inclined to do so.

Likewise, with a virtual monopoly of satellite stations, the West's misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims is beamed internationally and is received in the Muslim world without any form of counterbalance. This in itself leads to further misunderstanding and mistrust. A growing number of Muslims tend to think that the West's traditional hostility toward Islam is being reinforced at a time when Muslims are defenseless victims of genocide and wars in their own homelands. The relations between the Muslim world and the West can be analyzed on three levels: religious, economic, and cultural.

The Religious Dimension

On the religious level, the bond is much stronger than most westerners realize. In fact, religion is the cornerstone of the evolving Muslim-Christian-Jewish relationship. Together, Muslims, Christians, and Jews are the People of the Book. We worship the same God, Who created us and holds us accountable for our actions in this life and in the life to come.

Islam, which means total submission to God, is the religion of all of the prophets before Muhammad, each one of whom preached the same principle of total submission to God. Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad received the same divine message: That there is no god but God and that all humanity should worship none but Him. Islam is therefore the universal religion sent for the good and benefit of all humanity.

The messages of the prophets Moses and Jesus (Judaism and Christianity, respectively) came before Islam, but the word *Judaism* is not even mentioned in the Torah or in the Mishnah. It was created by non-Jews in Palestine who were saying, disparagingly, that the religion followed by the Jew in Judea was Judaism. Moses did not mention the term, and David and Solomon did not use it at all. Likewise, the term *Christianity* is never mentioned in the Bible, nor did Jesus ever say that he is the Christ. The one common message that all prophets sent by God have preached is total submission to God, and this is exactly what the term *Islam* means. Islam is not a new innovation of history nor an accumulation of earlier philosophies or trends of thought; it is the religion of God sent to humanity through each of His prophets and completed and perfected by the Prophet Muhammad as the seal of the earlier prophets. The Qur'an, which is the divine message sent to Muhammad, teaches the same fundamental principle that the earlier prophets taught: total submission to God alone.

The Qur'an confers a special status on Christians and Jews by referring to them as the "People of the Book." It instructs us to deal gently and respectfully with them:

And argue not with the People of the Book unless it be (in a way) that is better, save with such of them as do wrong, and say: "We believe in that which has been revealed unto us and revealed unto you; our God and your God is One, and unto Him we surrender." (Qur'an 29:46)

Say: "O people of the Book! Come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: "Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him)." (Qur'an 3:64)

Say (O Muslims): "We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the Prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered." (Qur'an 2:136)

Early Muslim Support of the Christians. To see how Muslim history has been closely linked with Christian history from the earliest times, let us recall the power struggle in the Middle East at the turn of the seventh century, when the message of the Prophet was just starting to become known in 610 C.E. At that time the two main reigning powers were the warring Christian Byzantine empire ruled by Emperor Heraclius and the Persian empire under Emperor Khusraw Parwiz (Kisra). By 611, the Persians achieved sweeping victories over the Byzantines and captured Aleppo, Antioch, and Damascus. When Jerusalem fell to the Persians in 615, the city and its churches were burnt and pillaged and Christians were massacred. After taking Egypt, the Persians went westward as far as Tripoli (in present-day Libya), while in the east their army was on the outskirts of Constantinople, the seat of the Byzantine empire.

The Arabian peninsula was never conquered by either party, even though its outlying parts came under the control of one or the other at various times. Yemen's coastal areas were contested between Persia and Abyssinia (the latter had had close cultural and political ties with Arabia for many centuries). In this contest of power and domination, the pagan Qurayshī Arabs sided with Zoroastrian Persia and rejoiced at the defeat of the Byzantines, thinking that the destruction of Christian power would check the spreading message of the Prophet. Economically, the Qurayshīs benefited from the defeat of the Byzantines by taking control of trade within the Arabian peninsula from Yemen to Damascus and

other parts of Arabia. The Prophet and the Muslims sympathized with the Byzantine Christians and were quite grieved by their setback. Everyone believed that the Byzantine empire had finally been crushed, but the Qur'anic revelation stated that this was not the case. The Muslims were informed that the Persian victory would be short-lived and that within a few years the Byzantines would rally and defeat the Persians. In Qur'an 30:2-3, we read:

The Roman Empire [Byzantium] has been defeated. In a land close by: But they, (even) after (this) defeat of theirs, will soon be victorious, within a few years. With God is the decision, in the past and in the future. On that day shall the believers rejoice.

The Prophet and the Muslims were ridiculed when this particular verse became known. Seven years later, however, the prophecy was fulfilled and the Muslims rejoiced at the victory of the People of the Book (the Byzantine Christians) over the Zoroastrian Persians. That fraternal relation between the Muslims and the Byzantines was disrupted when the Byzantines began to fear a threat to their political and economic interests in the area from the emerging Muslim power in Makkah. Trying to stifle the growing Muslim power in its infancy, Byzantine troops were mobilized near the city of Tābūk. In self-defense, the Prophet countered by mobilizing the Muslims. A peaceful settlement was negotiated, and both sides disengaged their troops. A close examination of this incident reveals that the main cause of the conflict was economic compounded by Byzantine suspicion and fear of the growing Muslim power.

A second attempt to crush the Muslim power was made by the Byzantines during the reign of the 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. After the Muslim conquest of Syria and Palestine, 'Umar came in person to receive the key to the city of Jerusalem. Upon entering the city, he refused to pray in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher for fear that some, misinterpreting Islam, might use the occasion to build a mosque on that great Christian site. Moreover, 'Umar ordered that the Christian community be protected and that soldiers hurt no individual, slaughter no animal, and cut down no trees.

These are but a few glimpses of tolerance in Islam and Muslim history, the best testimony being the coexistence of Christians and Jews with Muslims in the Muslim world until the present day at a time when no Muslim was left in Spain after eight centuries of an enlightened Muslim civilization there.

Since the formative years of the Prophet's mission, Muslims have cherished a sense of fellowship with Christians. When persecuted by their fellow Makkans, a number of them, including the future caliph 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, sought asylum, at the behest of the Prophet, under a

Christian king in Abyssinia. Later, wherever the Muslims ruled, Christian and Jewish communities flourished. As Karen Armstrong points out in her recent *History of God*, Muslims never sought to proselytize among Christians and Jews. Edward W. Blyden, an ordained Presbyterian clergyman in Liberia who served as the Liberian ambassador to the Court of St. James in London and president of Liberia College (1880-88), writes in his *Islam, Christianity and the African Race*:

Under the Moorish Governments of Spain, when Islam enjoyed political ascendancy, the large masses of native Christians were protected by wide toleration, not as a political expedient, but in conformation with the laws of Islam. The Christians were permitted to have their bishops, churches and monasteries, and to be judged by their own laws and tribunals, whenever the question at issue was one that related only to themselves. (p. 123)

We need to point out these positive relations between Muslims and Christians and to build on them a new harmonious relationship rather than focus on the negative aspects of our common history.

The Western View of Islam and Muslims. The Prince of Wales ruled out ignorance on the part of the West as a cause of the continued misunderstanding between Islam and the West:

There are one billion Muslims worldwide. Many millions of them live in countries of the Commonwealth. Ten million or more live in the West, and around one million in Britain. Our own community has been growing and flourishing for decades. There are nearly five hundred mosques in Britain. Popular interest in Islamic culture is growing fast.

Furthermore:

The corollary of how we in the West see our history has so often been to regard Islam as a threat—in medieval times as a military conqueror, and in modern times as a source of intolerance, extremism, and terrorism.

I may add that the way European writers and travelers of the early modern times represented Islam and Muslims is embedded deeply in today's complex and strained relations between the West and the Muslim world. Western scholarship on Islam has been motivated mainly by politicoeconomic agendas that result in the creation of certain negative images of Islam that have become deeply ingrained in the western sub-

conscious. In the words of Kail Ellis, director of the Institute of Contemporary Arab and Islamic Sciences at Villanova University and editor of *The Vatican, Islam, and the West*:

The old tendency of Western Orientalists to deny Islam its originality and divine inspiration by attributing the major components of Islamic beliefs and practices to borrowings from Judaism and Christianity has given way to a new tendency, signaled by references to such terms as "Islamic revolutionaries," "Mullah regimes," "Islamic fundamentalists," and "Islamic Jihad," to describe those seeking an Islamic identity as at best obscurantist, and at worst as evil, backward, anti-Western fanatics." (p. 19)

This may be illustrated by examining two issues: the concept of jihad and the position of Islam in France.

The first case, that of jihad, represents one of the most distorted doctrines of Islam in the past and at present, for it has come to mean in western parlance a "holy war against infidels." In Arabic, *jihād* means "exertion of effort" and, in its verb form, "to strive or exert an effort or struggle against odds." Islamic doctrine distinguishes between the "greater jihad" and the "lesser jihad." The first (and more important) one means self-restraint and self-control against temptation, whereas the second means to fight in self-defense with the intention to repel aggression and injustice and to provide people the right to choose Islam without compulsion, for the Qur'an states: "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256) and "To you be your way (religion) and to me mine" (109:6).

To see how the concept of jihad has been distorted historically, let us consider the following dissertation that appeared in Edward W. Blyden's *Christianity, Islam, and the African Race*. According to Major Osborn, an Englishman who lived among the Muslims of India,

The one common duty laid upon the faithful is to be the agents of God's vengeance on those who believe not. These are to be slaughtered till they pay tribute, when they are to be allowed to go to hell in their own way without further molestation. When Mohammad interdicted the faithful to prey upon each other, he was compelled to find occupation for their swords elsewhere. Out of this necessity sprang the command to inherit heaven by fighting on the path of God. This is the doctrine which has rendered Islam so fascinating a faith to savage and barbarous races. It exacts from them no endeavours after a higher life. It tells them that they can win an immortality of sensual bliss by merely giving free scope to their most imperious passions The Muslim still conceives himself to be the elect of God. He regards

not with compassion—that word is too humane—but with contempt unspeakable, as “logs” reserved for “hell fire,” the votaries of all other creeds. Wherever he has the power, he holds it to be his mission to trample upon and persecute them. The ninth sura is that which contains the Prophet’s proclamation of war against the votaries of all creeds other than Islam. (p. 121)

The electronic media in the West, especially in the United States, plays a damaging role with respect to Islam and Muslims. Such a role tends to reinforce misunderstanding with the West. In November 1995, a journalist with well-known anti-Muslim sentiments produced a “documentary” called “Jihad in America,” for the Public Broadcasting Station (PBS). Despite American Muslim protests, PBS aired the film, which it also partially funded. Muslims were not allowed to prescreen the film before airing and were only allowed to comment on it after the telecast in the presence of the producer, who was afforded a second chance to rebut Muslim charges. With the bombing of the World Trade Center being the opening scene of the film, the producer’s message and agenda was clear cut—to cast the spectrum of terrorism on Islam and Muslims. Insensitivity to Muslim feelings was also shown when other reputed television networks featured the producer and his film.

It is noteworthy to mention here the constructive approach taken by another American journalist, Stephen Barbosa, in his recent *American Jihad: Islam After Malcolm X*. In that book, the author documents the jihad, in its sense of self-striving, of some fifty-five American Muslims to create a Muslim identity for themselves.

The second issue is that of Islam in France, a nation that cherishes a deeply rooted historical relationship with the Muslim world. It incorporates the largest Muslim community in Europe, which has enjoyed fair treatment and justice. Many of them, because they were born in France, have become French citizens with all their rights duly respected. Recently, however, the situation of Muslims in France has been deteriorating dramatically and a relentless war is being now waged against them. The attack on the wearing of the *ḥijāb* (head-scarves) by Muslim school girls is a clear manifestation of renewed prejudice.

This current battle is in sharp contrast with the principle of freedom, upon which the edifice of the French revolution was founded. The ministerial ban on the *ḥijāb* contradicts the freedoms of conscience and religion as stated in the Declaration of Human Rights and the French constitution. As Francis Lamand puts it:

The decision by the French Ministry of Education bans the wearing of “all ostentatious religious symbols in public schools, but the controversial point is that, in this decision, the ministry

assumes that wearing a headscarf is ostentatious in itself, as opposed to wearing a cross. Therefore, the Muslim girl who is wearing a scarf has no possibility of showing her intentions: she is simply assumed to be provocative. This gives the impression that France doesn't understand the meaning of the scarf, or hijab, as part of religious practice and not only as a religious sign.

These successive threats are due to what he calls "Islamophobia" a growing fear of Islam accompanied by a hostility to Muslims.

Dialogue with the West on Human Rights in Islam

By way of indicating the degree to which the Muslim world is desirous of a peaceful and mutually productive relationship with the West, I take note of a series of conferences initiated in Riyadh and followed up in Vatican City, Geneva, and Strasbourg on the subject of Islam and human rights between 1972 and 1974.

Credit goes to the Franco-Saudi Association for initiating the first Conference on Human Rights in Islam, which was convened in Riyadh on 22 March 1972. The conference engaged the Human Rights Division of the European Council, which consists of several European professors, intellectuals, and jurists, along with their Saudi counterparts and submitted a memorandum to the conference on Human Rights in Islam and their application in the kingdom. Impressed with its findings, the European Council proposed to Saudi Arabia that further studies be undertaken and that more conferences be convened in Europe to inform western opinion of what the European Commission had learned about Islam and its protection of human rights. It was felt that this would lead to mutual understanding and a more active cooperation in the domain of human rights for the benefit of all.

The first conference, "Islamic-European Dialogue," was arranged in Vatican City between Pope Paul VI and a group of clergymen representing the European side and a delegation of Saudi ulema, scholars, and jurists, among them the late Sheikh Mohammad al-Harakan, Sheikh Mohammad ibn Jubair, Sheikh Rashid ibn Khunain, Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Musnid, Sheikh Fadl Agile, Dr. Maruf al-Dawalibi, and myself. Among the issues discussed was the need to bring a halt to missionary work among the Muslims. The Pope stated in unequivocal terms:

We don't support sending missionaries to Muslim countries to proselytize, but there are some extremists who would like to undertake that in much the same way as you do have extremists in the Muslim world. What we seek is to cooperate with the objective of educating those who do not know God at all. And indeed there are a great number of them in the world, a fact

which calls on us to co-operate so that we can draw them to worship God.

Two more conferences were hosted in Paris and Geneva, followed by the Strasbourg conference.

The European Council hosted the Strasbourg conference on Human Rights and Unity of Mankind in Islam at the premises of the Human Rights Division. The Islamic delegation expressed its appreciation for the council's work toward the unity of the European family and stated its desire to cooperate with the council toward the larger unity of the human family and the need to safeguard the human rights of all people. It was pointed out that this was in line with the Qur'anic instruction:

O Mankind! Lo! We have created you from male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of God, is the best in conduct. (Qur'an 49:13)

Since the world now witnesses violations of human rights on a scale unprecedented since the end of World War II, with Muslims being the main casualties, it is instructive to have an overview of what Islamic provisions on human rights are. Muslims view these provisions as sacred, for they are ordained by God in the Qur'an and were revealed to His prophet Muhammad, who confirmed them in word and deed. The dignity of every human being has to be safeguarded in conformity with Qur'an 17:70:

Verily we have honored the children of Adam (mankind); provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure, and conferred on them special favors, over a great part of Our creation.

Righteousness and piety are the only measures of distinction according to the Qur'an: "The noblest of you, in the sight of God, is the best in conduct" (49:13) and any distinction based on class, race, color, wealth, or national origin has no place in Islam for, according to the hadith, "There is no distinction of an Arab over a non-Arab, or of a white man over a black man except through piety."

Muslims have an added responsibility to protect the lives and rights of non-Muslims in an Islamic state. The Prophet says: "Whoever causes harm to a *dhimmī* (i.e., a non-Muslim citizen of the Islamic state), he is in fact causing harm to me; whoever causes harm to a *dhimmī*, I shall be a prosecutor against him on the Day of Judgment."

Islam places special emphasis on the prevalence and maintenance of justice in all human dealings and the protection of the rights of the underprivileged. The following are a few Qur'anic instructions in this respect:

God does command you to render back your trusts to whom they belong and when you judge between man and man, that you judge with justice. (Qur'an 4:58)

O you who believe! Stand out firmly for God, as witnesses to fair deal, and let not the hatred of others to you make you deal unjustly. Be just: that is nearer to piety. And fear God, for God is all-aware of what you do. (Qur'an 5: 8)

Say: "My Lord has commanded justice." (Qur'an 7:29)

The Economic Dimension

The Muslim world, with a population of more than one billion and a command of considerable mineral and natural resources, offers great potential for increased economic and commercial cooperation with the West. The West's dependence on oil supplies from the Muslim world is well recognized. Understandably, the security of these supplies is a major concern of the West. The Muslim world needs western technology and know-how for its development. The best way to exploit that potential and safeguard the interests of both parties is to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect of each other, for this will facilitate the removal of the psychological barriers between the West and the Muslim world.

Furthermore, the economic philosophy upon which Islam is based can be integrated into the philosophy of the new world economic order. Islam, upholding the belief that humanity is the vicegerent of God on Earth, puts economic resources at His service and not the other way around. Lamand, in his closing speech at the 1986 Paris conference "Facing the New International Economic Order" (organized by the Islam and the West Association), puts it beautifully:

Economic action is only one part of the whole, bound to divine oneness. It is just at the point where the West begins to discover that development cannot be restricted to the economic field and that the objectives for growth need equally to be defined in terms of cultural values—it is just at this point that Islam offers the world its conception of economics as indissociable from its essential goal—a goal which is not only profit, but man, God's creature.

Cultural Dimension

Crisis in Western Social Fabric. In our ever-shrinking interdependent world and with the greater mobility of people, ideas, and goods, social diseases are easily communicable over the entire globe. Therefore, when I speak of a crisis in the western social fabric, I do so not from the stance of a critic but as a concerned person who sees in the

welfare of the West our own welfare and vice versa. For whatever good is there in any part of the world, it is for the well-being of humanity, and whatever negative is there has a detrimental effect on us as well. We are all too aware of the social crisis in the West, particularly in the United States, as it relates to the culture of crime, violence and fear, drugs and alcoholism, teenage pregnancies, children born out of wedlock, homeless and street children, and rising racism. By way of illustration, consider 1994 cover stories featured by *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines:

- Newsweek*: "Growing Up Scared: How American Kids Are Robbed of Their Childhood."
10 January 1994
- Newsweek*: "Bloodbath: Can the West Stop the Horror? (Marketplace Massacre in Sarajevo)"
14 February 1994
- Newsweek*: "Spare the Rod: Is the West Too Soft on Crime? (A Flogging Case in Singapore Whips up a Storm)"
18 April 1994
- Newsweek*: "Trail of Blood: An American Superstar Is Charged with Murder."
27 June 1994
- Newsweek*: "Drugs In Europe: America's Scourge Crosses the Atlantic."
4 July 1994
- Newsweek*: "Murder: A Week in the Death of America."
15 August 1994
- Newsweek*: "Suicide Cult: The Fiery End of the Order of the Solar Temple."
17 October 1994

In its special cover story report on murder, *Newsweek* gives the following information under the caption *A Crime as American as a Colt .45*:

Body Count on Homicides in the U.S.:			
Year	Homicides	Year	Homicides
1970	16,000	1985	18,980
1975	20,510	1990	23,440
1980	23,040	1993	24,500

It is alarming to see that more young people are likely to kill today than before. A decade ago, young men aged 18 to 24 were the most likely to kill. But now a much younger group, aged 14 to 17, has picked up its pace by 161 percent; the 14 to 24 year age group commits more than half of the crimes in the United States, a trend that started in 1992. We are told that this is just the tip of the iceberg.

The Sublime Values of Islam

The fundamental Islamic moral and social values have the potential to bring to the West a way to restore the social order, which is a set of rules upon which the structure of the society is established.

For the past thirty years, the West has undergone a dramatic decline of morals. The dignity of the human being, an essential principle in Islam, stems from the idea that humanity is the vicegerent of God on Earth. Islam gives humanity a status more venerated than any trend of thought or philosophy could ever give it.

Similarly, in the West, the sanction of moral faults has decreased to such an extent that western society has become too permissive and far less repressive. It has lost the need for punishment. The execution of law in the West has lost its effectiveness. In Islam, the Shari'ah (Islamic law) has maintained the continuity of the moral code through an effective implementation of sanctions. The principle of the forbidden (*ḥarām*) is still alive in the Muslim conscience and could be used by the West to restore its moral values by giving the moral code its due respect; the moral code is in fact divine commandments.

Furthermore, from a sociological and moral viewpoint, the family is disappearing from some western societies. Parental authority and children's respect for their parents are things of the past in some places. In Islam, the family has preserved its unity as the founding element of the community. The place of the mother and the father in the children's life remains highly respected as long as they are alive. Once the children are grown, the parents' role becomes one of guidance rather than interference in their private lives. Mutual respect and obedience to elders are sacred things in the life of the Muslim family.

No doubt, the points of convergence between Islam and the West are many, and both worlds are capable of offering their effective contributions to dissipate the clouds of misunderstanding and pave the way for a better mutual cooperation for the benefit of the human race. It is indeed the irony of the age that, along with the miraculous advancement in mass communications, the world is still a slave to unprecedented ignorance. The consequence of this ignorance is the wrong use of rich resources, not at the service of humanity but to its detriment.

If we are to find common ground between us, we must show tolerance, trust, and mutual respect. If this is done sincerely and with good will, I am confident that we will be able to create a better world for our future generations—a world free of hatred, suspicion, fear, war, social disease, hostility, injustice, and crime.