

WESTERN MISPERCEPTIONS AGAINST ISLAM AND THE MUSLIMS:

Its Impact on Today's world and What Muslims Can Do About It.

By

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History always present two snares, one to the historian and the other to the man of action. The historian finds it difficult not to read the past into the present events; the man of action too readily ignores the past, and is content with the surface appraisal of what confronts him.

Hamilton Gibb

If Christianity is quintessentially a religion of love, Islam is foremost a religion of communality and social justice.

Malise Ruthven

The Prophet Muhammad once was asked, "What is religion? He answered, "One's regard and conduct towards other"

Even before all the flames of the bombed out Federal Office building in Oklahoma City, in April 1995, had been put out, many major American publications, journalists and news networks immediate reaction were to point the finger of guilt at Muslims, the Middle Eastern involvement. They had no evidence at that time because the investigation hadn't even begun. But that did not stop them from going to the presses accusing Muslims of carrying out this dastardly deed. These blind accusations are not empty words but have serious practical implication. For example Brabanti cites that following the Oklahoma incident an American citizen of Jordanian ancestry traveling from Oklahoma City to the Middle East was apprehended in London and returned to the United States for questioning. He was released without prejudice though the only apologies came from television news broadcasters and talk show hosts. This episode revealed not only the stereotyping of terrorism as Middle Eastern. Many mosques also receive threats. None even bothered to apologize once they confirmed that this dastardly deed had nothing to do with the Muslims."¹

¹ Ralph Brabanti, Circle of Antagonism Popular Culture, www.ispi-usa.org/braibanti/braibanti2.html.

Why did they immediately point the finger at Muslims? Why do they think of us Muslims so contemptuously? Why?

After the September 11 incident which the American insist not only is a defining moment in their lives and live of their nation but it must become the defining moment of everyone lives and history that now has to be divided to pre and post 9-11. In one of the discussions on 9-11 in the American media, the Boston Globe's Beverly Beckham declared

“One thing is clear: ‘They hate us, these people from a culture we don’t know and don’t understand and never gave much thought to until now.’ Moreover she contended this hatred is not like any other. ‘We have people who hate right in our own back yard, whole group of haters, who lash out against blacks and gays and Catholics and Jews. But this hate directed at All Americans is bigger and deadlier because it’s fueled by rage that is calculated, then unleash, no matter what the cost.’”²

From the Muslims asking the question of why the West feels so contemptuous towards us the Muslims, to the soul searching question of the West through the eyes of Beverly Beckham of why do they hate us (Americans) so?, we seek answers on how did we get here and what can we do about this pathetic situation.

The question is complex to answer. Nonetheless, the small world we now find ourselves in, where what occurred in one corner of the world is instantaneously known and affects another corner of the world even though there are thousand of miles separating the two places, has brought these questions of how we perceive each other and how our perception of the other impacts the other to a higher significance then at anytime before.

In an interfaith Forum entitled “A Forum on Civility: The Resources of Different Religious Traditions,” held at the University of Chicago,

²Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, Why do People Hate America, United Kingdom, 2002. 8.

“The question on the floor was posed to the faculty panel by moderator Daniel Brudney, associate professor of philosophy: “Why should I have respect for someone who believes my view to be pernicious?” How, he pressed, can civility be maintained in an academic setting? And what can the teachings of the three major monotheistic faiths—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—lend in finding an answer?”³

Until and unless we can address Daniel Brudney question raised above, it is difficult to proceed. Brudney addresses the issue of why should I want or even care to know the other especially since the other thinks my own view is wrong. Can I benefit in any way such an exchange of ideas with people who think I am wrong? If one were to answer no, the discussion stops there. However, if one could see pass one’s views and try to explore and challenge oneself maybe then, we can expand our own understanding of not only the other but of ourselves, thus achieving true learning. At the very least one may be surprise to see how others have made a mistake and got everything wrong thus only reconfirming and strengthening one’s own belief. Or we could learn something new from them and improve ourselves. Without true believe overcoming test, how could one really be sure.

David Tracy argues that

“If Christian thought is to contribute to this discussion, it can do so only in a welcome, pluralized world, where the desire is not to proselytize but to articulate what love and justice mean to the Christian and to see if that is helpful for the other: Jews, Buddhists, Muslims. Yet courtesy and respect, he said, are only part of what’s needed for civil discourse.”

Rasheed Hosein, a doctoral candidate in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations studying early Islamic history says

³ Sharla Stewart, Civility and the Pursuit of Truth, in The University of Chicago Magazine, February, 2003. 16

“The five pillars of Islamic faith—prayer, pilgrimage, fasting, charity, and declaration of faith—are, he said, “both intensely personal and intensely communal,” creating the “mortar of the civilization.” The 29th chapter of the Koran, Hosein continued, addresses civility across faiths: “Be courteous when you have discourse with people of the Book [i.e., Christians and Jews]... That which is revealed to us was revealed to them. We all surrender ourselves to one God.” And come Judgment Day, he concluded, “the heaviest thing on the scale is how you conduct yourself” within the community (the underline is for emphasis).”⁴

Michael Fishbane giving the Jewish perspective,

“The Talmudic notion of *tikkun olam*, he explained, outlines an obligation to maintain order so that life is sustained and flourishes within a community. “Scripture and religious traditions cannot say everything,” he said. “You have to enter every situation without the claim of total truth, and as a result, a huge amount of space is opened to the cultivation of equity” and, therefore, civil exchange.”⁵

Returning to the scriptures to find theoretical answer is fine. It describes the ideals and does serve as a starting point but the real world falls far short of the ideals and it is in this real world, which we have to deal with. What do we do then?. “What do we do about evil?” asked one man. “We’re all trying to be good Christians, Jews, and Muslims, but what do we do about those who aren’t?”⁶ That’s the real problem and dilemma we are facing today.

Our knowledge and perception of ourselves and of others not only affect us but also the other. Thus in a way, like it or not, since we influence positively or negatively not only our own lives but the lives of others, we become responsible not only of

⁴ Sharla Stewart, Civility and the Pursuit of Truth, in The University of Chicago Magazine, February, 2003. 17.

⁵ *ibid.* 17

⁶ *ibid.* 17.

our own action but how our action influence and affect the lives of the rest of the world. Thus, it has become our duty and obligation to know about the other since we influence the lives of others, like it or not. The power and the might that the West currently possesses over the rest of the world makes its worldview paramount and its perceptions or more its misperceptions having a great impact on the rest of the world. Thus, its responsibility is greater and its accountability is even higher, and it is here to a large extent it has failed. Thomas Fried points out

“As President Bush meets other world leaders this weekend, and tries to patch things up between America and the rest of the planet, I find myself looking back and asking: What's been going on here? After 9/11 people wondered, "Why do they hate us?" speaking of the Muslim world. After the Iraq war debate, the question has grown into, "Why does everybody else hate us?"

During the 1990's, America became exponentially more powerful — economically, militarily and technologically — than any other country in the world, if not in history. Broadly speaking, this was because the collapse of the Soviet empire, and the alternative to free-market capitalism, coincided with the Internet-technology revolution in America. The net effect was that U.S. power; culture and economic ideas about how society should be organized became so dominant (a dominance magnified through globalization) that America began to touch people's lives around the planet — "more than their own governments," as a Pakistani diplomat once said to me. Yes, we began to touch people's lives — directly or indirectly — more than their own governments.

As people realized this, they began to organize against it in a very inchoate manner. The first manifestation of that was the 1999 Seattle protest, which triggered a global movement. Seattle had its idiot side, but what the serious protesters there were saying was: "You,

America, are now touching my life more than my own government. You are touching it by how your culture seeps into mine; by how your technologies are speeding up change in all aspects of my life, and by how your economic rules have been `imposed' on me. I want to have a vote on how your power is exercised, because it's a force now shaping my life."⁷

The more the rest of the world is coming to realize that the Western views are dominating them some because of their own choosing but many simply imposed on them rarely through brute force with the recent exceptions of the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq but mainly through the economic might impose through the World Trade Organization, the IMF etc and the Western powers propping up of elites in the countries that support with their assistance, creating regime very sympathetic with towards Western viewpoints even at the detriment of their own people and majority views, the more they demand their voices be heard some even resorting to violent means. Thus, if the West wants to influence and tell people how to live, therefore, affecting their lives, we then demand a say in their decision making process, culminating in the Thomas Friedman adage, "I want to have a vote on how your power is exercised, because it's a force now shaping my life.

Akbar Ahmad points out that in the West in the past, Islam was the other however that is no longer the case, He says,

For the last thousand years the West treated Islam as the 'other,' as 'over there.' In the main this is still true: the bulk of the Muslim population lives in Africa and Asia. But today this simple world-view has been complicated by the presence in the West of over ten million Muslims. About five or six million Muslims live in Europe and about four or five million in America; the exact numbers tend to be somewhat unreliable, since immigrants and converts sometimes

⁷ Thomas Friedman, A Theory of Everything, New York Times, June 12, 2003.

do not wish to declare their identity or register and are therefore difficult to enumerate.

Thus some so called Western Islam experts like Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes and others, who keep harping back on the outdated and not longer utilized formulations by Muslims of the way to divide the geographical world into *dar al-Islam* (the land of Islam) and *dar al-harb* (the land of the infidel) in order to show how Muslims only see the world in black or white. The formulations were done because at that time all the lands were divided base on religious communities and the non-Muslims communities did not allow other beliefs to be practice freely in their lands. On the contrary, historically demonstrated there has always been non-Muslims not only living but flourishing in Muslim lands, for example Muslim Spain versus the later reconquest of Spain.

The perceptions of the West about the Muslims have always been colored by their long history and bad blood between them, but the current misconceptions against Islam is not only fueled by popular ignorance and prejudices but also cultivated some scholars through some subtle and not so subtle writing which have few words of praise but mostly raises red flags of the incompatibility of Islam and the West and draw their readers to prejudicial fear of Islam. Picking up their que from these so called western expert on Islam, some newspaper columnist pound their readers day in day out into submission with the visions of the danger of Islam.

Bernard Lewis, declared by the Wall Street journal as the world foremost Islamic scholar, argues that the Muslims were dominant force for a long time but within a relatively short span of time everything when wrong which resulted in mounting frustration, humiliation, and resentment against the West.

“For a long time now there has been a rising tide of rebellion against this Western paramountcy, and a desire to reassert Muslim values and restore Muslim greatness. The Muslim has suffered successive stages of defeat. The first was his loss of domination in the world, to the advancing power of Russia and the West. The second was the

undermining of his authority in his own country, through an invasion of foreign ideas and laws and ways of life and sometimes even foreign rulers or settlers, and the enfranchisement of native non-Muslim elements. The third -- the last straw -- was the challenge to his mastery in his own house, from emancipated women and rebellious children. It was too much to endure, and the outbreak of rage against these alien, infidel, and incomprehensible forces that had subverted his dominance, disrupted his society, and finally violated the sanctuary of his home was inevitable. It was also natural that this rage should be directed primarily against the millennial enemy and should draw its strength from ancient beliefs and loyalties”⁸

Lewis here tries to promote the idea that the Muslim are mad because they lost their power on the world stage and has lead them to be irrationally envious of the West because of taking it over from them, culminating in rage when the Muslim mastery of his own house is challenged by Western ideas adopted by his own people. The sources of rage among Muslims stemmed from their frustration with the decay of their own civilization. Thus, the Muslim are not only envious of the West but they envy has turn dangerous into a blind rage against the West. The attack of Lewis began long before the 9-11 attack, and 9-11 has added even greater credibility to his prophecies warning the dangers of the Muslims, and thus now the Western audience is far more attentive and receptive to his misleading ideas. Lewis continued his attacks on Islam by writing two recent best sellers after 9-11, **The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror (2003)**, and **What When Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East(2001)**. In both books, Lewis tries to tie violence and rage to Islam.

“Most Muslims are not fundamentalist, and most fundamentalists are not terrorist, but most present-day terrorist are Muslims and proudly identifies themselves as such. Understandably, the Muslims complain when the media speak of terrorist movements and actions

⁸ Bernard Lewis, The Root of Muslim Rage, The Atlantic Monthly, 1990.

as “Islamic” and ask why the media do not simply identify Irish and Basque terrorist and terrorism as “Christian”. The answer is simple and obvious-they do not describe themselves as such.”⁹

In this sweeping statement, he connects Islam with violence and terrorism.

He however seem to contradict himself in very next few lines of the book. Usama and his Al-Qaida followers may not represent Islam, and many of their statements and their action directly contradict the basic Islamic principles and teachings, but they do arise from within the Muslim civilization...”¹⁰

Lewis himself recognizes that these extremist groups’ statements and action contradict the basic teachings of Islam, thus how is it possible that they become the true presentation of Islam. He continues to also recognize that these extremist groups while claiming that they represent the true teachings of Islam are very selective in of sacred text and therefore only utilize verses which seem to support their position while neglecting the true purport of the sacred text as a whole.

“All three different extremist groups sanctify their action through pious references to Islamic text...and all three claim to represent a truer, purer, and more authentic Islam than that currently practiced by the vast majority of Muslim endorsed by most though not all of the religious leadership. They are however selective in their choice and interpretation of sacred text”

Thus, even Lewis recognizes that these groups do not represent the majority of Muslims and even misconstrue the sacred text to support their positions. Therefore they do not necessarily reflect Islam even though they claim their actions in the name of Islam, as many American have demonstrated in the street of Washington and else where protesting their own government’s action in their name thus declaring that these actions are not because of us even though they may claim so. However, Lewis adds that “terrorism only require a few” and these few who are driven by Islam even though they have misconstrued it are sufficient to wreak

⁹ The Crisis of Islam, New York,2003. 137.

¹⁰ The Crisis of Islam, 137.

havoc. Thus, Islam is still to blame for driving them to do these things. Lewis's logic is indeed baffling.

Compare this logic of tying terrorism to a religion just because the violence committed by one is supposedly inspired by their commitment to the religion when inspired by this case because of his commitment to his understanding of Christianity and its demands on him to act.

The arrest of alleged Olympic bomber Eric Robert Rudolph may finally allow authorities to answer a question that has loomed since the beginning of the five-year hunt for him, but that has taken on deeper resonance since Sept. 11, 2001: Is he a Christian terrorist"? The question is not just whether Rudolph is a terrorist, or whether he considers himself a Christian. It is whether he planted bombs at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, two abortion clinics and a gay night club to advance a religious ideology – and how numerous, organized and violent others who share that ideology may be.

There is no question what drove him to carry out such actions. However it would be wrong to conclude that Christianity drove him to these actions. Instead James Aho provides a plausible answer.

“An expert on such groups, Idaho State University sociology professor James A. Aho, said he is reluctant to use the phrase "Christian terrorist," because it is "sort of an oxymoron.

"I would prefer to say that Rudolph is a religiously inspired terrorist, because most mainstream Christians consider Christian Identity to be a heresy," Aho said.

If Christians take umbrage at the juxtaposition of the words "Christian" and "terrorist," he added, "that may give them some idea of how Muslims feel" when they constantly hear the term "Islamic terrorism," especially since the Sept. 11 attacks

"Religiously inspired terrorism is a worldwide phenomenon, and every major world religion has people who have appropriated the

label of their religion in order to legitimize their violence," Aho said.”

Lewis’s logic is faulty because he tying the individual’s misinterpretations of a religion and making it the fault of the religions. It is the fault of the individual and can be rectified through better comprehension of the religion and not through aversion to the religion.

Lewis attacks on Islam are subtle. However, Robert Spencer attacks are blunt and crude mincing no words nor bothering with logical analysis. Citing a review of his book *Islam Unveiled*,

“Planes crashing into the World Trade Center, bombers blowing themselves up in crowded supermarkets, female genital mutilation, the imprisonment of rape *victims*, polygamy: the media claims that all these are results of the "hijacking" of Islam, "the religion of peace." But here at last is a book that dares to tell the truth about Islam - and to show you exactly why this religion is so easy to "hijack," and what Islamic authorities really teach about such barbarities! “

Here is list the sins of Muslims and tries to argue against many who have said these sins are committed by those who have misunderstood the religion. Spencer will hear none of these counter-arguments. Instead he proceeds to argue that Islamic fanaticism and terrorism are rooted in the *Qur'an* and core Islamic traditions.

“Exploding dozens of PC myths, Robert Spencer goes beyond the media's shallow distinction between "true" Islam and terrorist Islam to demonstrate - in the words of Muslims themselves - that *Islamic fanaticism and terrorism are rooted in the Qur'an and core Islamic traditions*. He shows that since Muslim radicalism stems from elements at the religion's heart, Islamic moderates (and cowardly Western multiculturalisms) will never convince the Muslim world at large that there is no place for violence in Islam.”

Arguing there is no hope to convince the majority of Muslim that there is no place for violence in Islam, if this is true the world itself has no hope for peace since Muslims constitute 27% of the world population. However, history clearly demonstrates the contrary. The world is not being attack by one third of it population and to reach such a conclusion is clearly absurd and laughable. Daniel Pipes a former Harvard professor tries to draw attention to danger of Muslims living in the West to the Western way of life. In his explosive new book "*Militant Islam Reaches America*, he presents compelling, disquieting evidence that extremist Muslims are bent on nothing less than the destruction of the United States and the eradication of Western culture. Even worse, he shows how the U.S. Government, rather than mobilizing against this threat, has become Islam's biggest patron."

Here Pipes is trying to drum up fear of the Muslims. The Muslims are dangerous. They are not only living far far away lands ruining their own countries, but they have come here among us living in the West. They must be dealt with post haste.

The number of books that are openly against Islam is too numerous to mention. However, their tone has become blatant and their argument more sinister and crude but that is because their audience is now very receptive and no longer makes them work hard to prove their point. People in the West want to believe what they say. The question remains what can we do about it to change this image? What are our responsibilities and contribution?

The columnists do not fare much better than the scholar, which they utilize to assist their own propaganda. In the immediate aftermath of the 9-11 incident, the editor of the National Review came up with this shocking solution: "Nuke Mecca" and force the remaining Muslims to accept Christianity. This extreme solution is certainly not representative of the Western columnist but does demonstrate the extreme that some have gone to. Shocking extremes.

Thomas Friedman a columnist for the New York Times in trying to show how different they are to us comments on the US invasion of Iraq says,

“Such encounters made clear to me that America was not just at war with Saddam, but with Saddamism: an entrenched Arab mind-set, born of years of colonialism and humiliation, that insists that upholding Arab dignity and nationalism by defying the West is more important than freedom, democracy and modernization.”

Here he argues that they are different from us. They don't think like us. They are irrational and can't see these values like us. They would insist on Arab dignity over freedom, democracy and modernization. Such a backward people. The wall of Saddamism, which helped bad leaders stay in power and young Arabs remain backward and angry, is as dangerous as Saddam.

"The social, political, cultural and economic malaise in this part of the world had become a threat to American security — it produced 9/11," said Shafeeq Ghabra, president of the American University of Kuwait. "This war was a challenge to the entire Arab system, which is why so many Arabs opposed it. The war to liberate Kuwait from Iraq [in 1991] was outpatient surgery. This war was open-heart surgery."

Not only are these people different and backward because of their social, political, cultural and economic malaise, but their backwardness is dangerous to us because it is not confined to their region but the lashing out against us in our own back yard, the West. Thus, we cannot simply ignore them, because that would be dangerous, we have to deal with them and change them, at least pacify them if possible if not subjugate them.

Even in politics, this fear of the Muslim is openly said without any feeling of need to justify and total contempt. Danish People's Party, declared war against Islam from the podium of Danish Parliament on 5th October. The member of European Parliament from Denmark, Mogens Carme at his party's annual meeting said: ” **All western countries are infiltrated by Muslims. Some of them are nice people, who are waiting to kill us all when they will be sufficient in numbers**”.

Attorney General John Ashcroft urged Congress on Thursday to expand the new anti-terror law to permit the government to hold more suspects indefinitely and extend the death penalty to more people accused of terrorist crimes

He also said the current anti-terror law, which critics say is cramping citizens' legitimate rights, needs to be expanded to let prosecutors bring charges against anyone who helps or works with suspected terrorist groups as "material supporters."

Ashcroft held up what he said were copies of terrorist declarations of war against America. One quoted Nasser al-Fahd, a prominent Muslim cleric known to be sympathetic to al-Qaida, as saying it would be permissible if a bomb killed 10 million Americans.

Even Attorney General John Ashcroft , as recent as June 5, 2003 openly declared that the terrorism is the supported and initiates attacks because of their belief and justified by fatwas by certain clerics interpretation of Islam and thus tying terrorism to Islam, making it a dangerous religion.

Is it any wonder why the Western popular masses fear Islam. Because of the propaganda some scholars, columnist, politicians etc., is it any surprise that this contempt for Islam has crept in Western culture without people realizing how racist these ideas are to extend that even the innocent cartoon which we and our children watch are not spared from being the tools of outrageous propaganda. The movie *Aladdin*, an animated feature film produced by the Walt Disney Studio, was the most financially successful animated film ever made. Released in 1993 in both theater and home video format, it had lyrics, which originally read:

Oh I come from a land
From a faraway place
Where the camel caravans roam
Where they cut off your ear
If they don't like your face
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.

After meetings with the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, the fourth and fifth lines were changed to read:

*Where it's flat and immense
And the heat is intense.*

However, the word "barbaric" was not changed. Even the New York Times editorialized that the Aladdin lyrics were racist. Deploring "nasty generalizations about ethnic bigotry retains an aura of respectability in the United States: prejudice against Arabs. Anyone who doubts this has only to listen to the lyrics in a song from the animated Disney extravaganza 'Aladdin'."¹¹

Esposito in his book, The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality? concludes that the selective presentation of facts and biased interpretation of Islam have shaped the misperceptions of Islam in the mainstream western society.

“As a result Islam and Islamic revivalism are easily reduced to stereotypes of Islam against the West, Islam’s war with modernity, or Muslim rage, extremism, fanaticism, terrorism. The “f” and “t” words, fundamentalism and terrorism have become linked in the minds of many. Selective and therefore biased analysis adds to our ignorance rather than our knowledge, narrows our perspective rather than broadening our understanding, reinforces the problem rather than opening the way to new solutions.”¹²

Esposito comments here epitomizes the current western misperception toward Islam and the Muslims. Their selective and biased presentations of Islam and the Muslims have allowed them to build a picture that Islam and the Muslims have an undeclared war against the West. They are people unable to deal with modernity and what to turn the clock back to their good old days. Unable to do so, they have

¹¹ Ralph Brabaiti, Circle of Antogonism Popular Culture, www.ispi-usa.org/braibanti/braibanti2.html.

¹² See John L. Esposito, The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality, New York, 1992. 172.

become angry, culminating in rage, which is unleashed in the form of terrorism. It is this misperception that must be seriously challenged.

Towards a Building a Positive World View of Islam: Collective and Individual Responsibility and Contribution.

The long litany of charges lambasted by the West currently against Islam is nothing new. The charges have been there in different forms for ages. It is somewhat humorous that we can find the answers in Lewis that the conflict arises between Islam and the Western civilization influence by Christianity is actually of their similarities instead of their different. Lewis says “Christendom and Islam are two religiously defined civilization that were brought into conflict not by their differences but by their resemblances.”¹³

However, what has change after 9-11 is that the intensity of the attacks has increase dramatically. More importantly, the receptions of these ideas have vastly increased by leaps and bound. People in the West now simple accept without question the negative claim thrown against Islam no matter how silly and ridiculous it is. They want to now believe the worse concerning the Muslim and have willed themselves into believing anything so long as it is bad about Islam. What more now since these misconceptions are have gained credibility because it is being peddled by no less that the so call experts on Islam such as Bernard Lewis and company, with the columnist such as Thomas Friedman pounding these ideas into the nation wide readership to of the New York Times and other like in other newspapers. The Bush White House is receptive to these ideas demonstrate by Bush’s Attorney General John Ashcroft , unashamingly claiming that the terrorism is the supported and initiates attacks because of their belief and justified by citing a fatwas by certain clerics interpretation of Islam, thus Islam in itself a dangerous religion, not only it misinterpretation of Islam.

¹³ Lewis, Crisis in Islam, 43.

Although the actors are different the same chorus is repeated over and over again until it reaches such a crescendo that no one doubts that it could be wrong unless and until these ideas challenge and made bare for the absurdities that they are. This is our task. No one else can do it for us. Failure is not an acceptable option. Sitting on our hands hoping it will blow over is not an option. Tackling it head on is the only recourse left. The question is how to achieve this?

Self Reflection and Reform (islah) in Islam

In order to counter the Western misperceptions about Islam, we have to ask ourselves two questions. Firstly, do we contribute in anyway to these false stereotypes. Second, what are our collective and individual responsibility and contribution to rectify these misperceptions and harm it causes our fellow Muslims. Before we can pontificate against errors of the West which Karen Armstrong easily concedes when discussing the Western-Muslim relationship saying “ We in the West must come into terms with our own inner demons of prejudice, chauvinism and anxiety, and strive for greater objectivity”¹⁴, we must see that our own house is in order and that we are not contributing to this negative perception.

Chandra Muzaffar , the president of JUST world in Malaysia pleads for the Muslims to reflect on themselves and not deflect their own errors on to others and never learn themselves.

“At the same time, as the West evaluates itself, so must the Muslim world examine itself critically. The rise of Islam with all its emotional power it commands makes it incumbent upon us to ask some searching questions about certain Muslim attitudes and priorities. Is Islamic resurgence giving enough attention to some of the crucial challenges confronting the Ummah-challenges pertaining to poverty, hunger, disease and illiteracy ? Have the Islamic resurgence gone beyond rhetoric in addressing issues of education and knowledge, science and technology, politics and administration,

¹⁴ See Karen Armstrong, Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World , New York, 1991. 530.

economics and management in the alternative Islamic social order that they envision? Isn't it true to some extent that Islamic resurgence is preoccupied with form and symbols, rituals and practices? Isn't there a tendency within the Islamic resurgence to view laws and regulation in a static rather than dynamic manner? Does the conventional position of Islamic resurgence on the role of women in society and the place of minorities in a Muslim majority state, accord with the fundamental values and principles of the Quran and the Sunnah...Perhaps it is time that we conceded that there is also another side to the truth: we the Muslims are also responsible, to a certain degree, the negative perceptions of the religion and the community in today's world."¹⁵

Failure of the Muslims to take stock of their own understanding and actions would only be harmful to themselves. It is the strength of Islam demonstrated through its history that the Muslim have continuously assessed their performance and action to the ideals demanded by the Qur'an and Sunnah.

"...the primary meaning of the word jihad is not "holy war" but "struggle" or "effort." This is a very important religious principle. It reminds us that religion is never something achieved or finished. The revelation is given, but those who follow it have to make a constant effort, day by day, year after year, to put it into practice in a flawed and tragic world."¹⁶

The self-evaluation and reform must be continuously done. It should never be seen as apologetics but rather that Islam is a dynamic religion concern with the welfare of its adherents.

¹⁵ Chandra Muzafar, *Dominant Western Perceptions of Islam and the Muslims: A Muslim View*, unpublished paper presented in Conference on Islam and Its World View, in Kuala Lumpur, 1993.

¹⁶ Karen Armstrong, *Has Islam been hijacked*, in *Taking Back Islam*, ed. Michael Wolfe, U.S.A., 2002. 11.

Building a Positive Image of Islam

The West must come to realize that Muslims are an integral part of Europe and even the United States. Salim Hasham says, “we (Muslim) are 15 million in Europe. We are a minority. We are being punished for a crime that we did not commit. We did not fly the planes,” aptly setting the problems Muslims are facing in Europe.

The negative views towards Islam in the West is due to their ignorance encouraged by biases because of the conflicts in history between Islam and Christianity, Western colonialistic mentality contemptuous of the other because of the idea of their superiority supported by ideas of the white man’s burden to change the world for its betterment but reaping the reward with his desire to control the world resources for his own benefit. The solution is to remove this ignorance through education about Islam, the religion as well as Islam civilization that has contributed to shaping the world as it is today.

Pierre Durrani, a member of the Swedish Young Muslims said, “the key to integrating the Muslims into Western country and culture is make them part of the process and to educate the others about Islam.” Durrani then went on to suggest that Sweden create a European conference on increasing education about Muslim identity. Durrani’s call for the Swedish government to realize that the Muslims are here to stay in the West and thus, the Swedish governments should make the best of it. However, it might be wishful thinking to expect the West to take the major steps. Hopefully it will happen, but till then it is up to the Muslims to take the initiatives in their own hands and make the best of the current situation. Osman Bakar suggest these initiatives,

1. Muslim individuals, organizations, and governments should give support intellectual, moral and material to all those who are actively engaged in activities to the task of preparation in engaging the West.
2. Efforts should be made to win new ‘friends and sympathizers to Islam’ in the West so that their current small number will increase substantially.

These new friends and sympathizers should come mainly from among the academia, the mass media, the policy makers, and the business community.

3. Muslims and Westerner interested in civilization dialogue and co-existence should seek to establish a bridge between the West and the Muslim World
4. Efforts should be made to impress upon the Western public that the Western heritage is not simply Judeo-Christian, but rather it is Judeo-Christian-Islamic.
5. There is a need for the Muslim Occidentalism that is primarily dedicated to a better understanding of the perception of Islam in the West.¹⁷

All these suggest demonstrate that we must engage and keep engaging the West. Never must we retreat and shy away and hide. It would be the worst thing to do.

Poston a sympathetic Christian scholar adds these suggestions with the emphasis on Muslims living in the West. He says

- (1) The need to develop an indigenous American leadership: American converts should be trained quickly and thoroughly for positions of leadership in order to avoid the categorization of Islam as a foreign 'cult'.
- (2) The stereotypical negative image of Islam must be transformed through proper use of the media.
- (3) Provocative anti-Christian polemics should be avoided lest they provoke a strong reaction among Christians (whether practicing or non-practicing).
- (4) Muslims should attempt to reach more achievable goals by promoting co-operation among themselves instead of focusing their concern on homogenizing diverse Muslim ethnic groups.
- (5) Muslim individuals should become involved in dawah (social welfare and missionary) activities in order to

¹⁷ |Osman Bakar, Towards a Positive World View of Islam, unpublished paper presented in Conference on Islam and Its World View, in Kuala Lumpur, 1993.

overcome the powerful assimilative influence of the American mainstream.”¹⁸

In addition to all these suggestions mentioned to respond to Western misperceptions against Islam, it is helpful to report that there have been some successes in cooperation between Muslims and Christian activist. For example in America, Muslims and Christian church groups have cooperated to remove drugs crime and prostitution from the streets of their neighborhoods to make it safe place for their children to live. These activists have form groups to patrol their neighborhood. They have been quite successful in reaching their objectives.

The other successful endeavor is the project in rewriting material concerning Islam and Muslims in children textbooks in America. The Muslims there has been successful in getting numerous school boards to revamp and rewrite where necessary those material concerning Islam and Muslims. These materials then is either approved by Muslims or the Muslims themselves are asked to write and present their views. We need to expand this project to include children textbooks to all countries especially in Europe. While the children are young and innocent is the best time to present the true picture of Islam and Muslims.

Muslims also must be sensitive that we don't the same injustices that we accuse the West of by polluting our children minds with unfair and misrepresentative image of the West. We must seek to stop stereotyping the West. It is not only to be fair, but it is the right thing to do.

Where we Muslims can work with other religions, we should capitalize and build on this. After all, we all seek to build a better world for ourselves, our children, our communities, and we can never do this alone. Inevitably, this sort of cooperation will change our perception of each other, improving it dramatically.

¹⁸ Akbar S. Ahmed *Living Islam, From Samarkand to Stornoway*, , London, 1993..

All these suggestions are practical and sensible. Many Muslims may have reached these conclusions themselves. However as communities we are still very far from implementing them. Muslim need to do more serious thinking, planning and cooperating to solve this major problem facing the not only those Muslims living in the West but the whole Ummah since the Western perceptions affects the whole world.

The Challenges facing Muslims Living in the West.

Melaine Phillips aptly summarizes the Western fear of Muslim living in the West. She beliefs that the Muslims living in the West not only despises the Western secular values but having the hidden ingrain desire to transform it.

“Muslims not only despise Western secular values as decadent, materialistic, corrupt and immoral. They do not accept the distinction between the spiritual and the temporal, the division which in Christian societies confines religion to the margins of everyday life. Instead for Muslims, the whole human life must represent a submission to God

This means that they feel a duty to Islamicise the values of the surrounding culture. Since most of the mass immigration now convulsing Europe is composed of Muslims, it is therefore hardly surprising that anti immigrant feeling is anti-Muslim feeling. The sheer weigh of numbers, plus the refusal to assimilate to Western values, makes this unprecedented crisis fro Western liberalism”¹⁹

What are these Western values we Muslims living in the West are against ask Abdullah Saeed .

¹⁹ Abdullah Saeed, Islam in Australia, Australia, 2003. 199

One may ask, ‘what are the secular values of the West that the Muslims are claimed to despise so much? If these values are the rule of law, democracy, human rights, equality, pluralism, a fair go for all, the truth of the matter is that Muslims around the world, including many in Australia, are often yearning for exactly these values.²⁰

Saeed argues that the key values, the positive values of rule of law, human rights which form key to preservation of the dignity of man, all Muslims uphold especially Muslims living in the West who some of them have left their own countries because of persecution due their fight for human dignity and justice. However, it is the perversions of human dignity which Muslims have problems. Even the West doesn’t admire these undesirable effects of Western freedom but they do little to try to solve these problems, which are human tragedies.

If what is referred to as Western secular values are values such as commercialization of women’s bodies (or, for that matter men’s bodies), licentiousness, drunkenness, gambling , alcohol or drug abuse, extreme individualism, family breakdowns, disrespect for the law, sexual harassment or nudity, it would be unfair to attribute all of these and similar values to all Western values or all Australian and to say that these are the secular values we cherish and on which Australian society is based... If Muslims reject these values they are not unique; in fact they would in agreement with a significant number of Australians who practice a number of religions, Christian among them.²¹

The claim that the Muslims despise Western values is in actual fact myth perpetuated by ignorant people. All positive values that uplift human dignity are considered good in Islam. It’s the negative by-product of Western values, its excesses that Muslims cannot and should not accept.

²⁰ Abdullah Saeed, Islam in Australia, Australia, 2003. 199

²¹ Abdullah Saeed, Islam in Australia, Australia, 2003. 199.

Muslims in living the West accept and are committed to the laws of the land that they live in. In countries where the Muslims are minorities, so long as the Muslims can practice their religion, you will find that the Muslims are the extremely law abiding. In countries where they have some problems to practice their faith openly they express their disagreement like anyone else in a democratic society who has a grievance. They desire to change certain prejudicial laws through the democratic process of freedom speech and the ballot box like anyone else.

“Those who want to engage in certain practices and hold certain values should have the freedom to do so. Similarly, those who do not want to adopt them should also have the right not to do so.”²²

It is the right and duty of every one in the community to express him/herself especially if is for the concern and benefit to that society. Each and every individual should try to contribute to the betterment of society if he/she beliefs that he/she knows a re better way.

Conclusion.

Changing entrenched misperceptions reinforced over the years because of ignorance encouraged by prejudices and biases is no easy task and cannot be achieve over night. However, not doing anything is the worse thing one could do. Yes, it is the West’s misperception, but it is up to the Muslims to rectify it. One may conclude that why should we care what they think of us? The Western dominates over the world today is overwhelming. If the West has misperceptions, it will have a very negative impact on those they have a misperception of. It is their fault, but it is the Muslims who will have to pay the price. Thus, we must actively and continuously engage the West.

Ingrid Mattson the vice president of the Islamic Society of North America and professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary points out the duties of Muslims towards others by saying,

²² Abdullah Saaed, Islam in Australia, Australia, 2003. 200-1.

“... who has the greatest duty to stop the oppression of Muslims committed by other Muslims in the name of Islam? The answer, obviously, is Muslims...Who has the greatest duty to stop violence committed by Muslims against innocent non-Muslims in the name of Islam? The answer, obviously, is Muslims”.²³

The task at hand is indeed great, but failure is unacceptable option. Voluntary separation of Muslims and non-Muslims is no longer an acceptable option. We have to learn live with each other. This action will only enrich our lives the Muslims and the non-Muslims.

Syed Hussien Nasr sees the current crisis an opportunity because we Muslims have attentive audience interested in who we are and what we think

These world wide events associated with Islam , while giving rise to a bewildering array of mis-statements and misrepresentations, at the same time provide an unparalleled opportunity to explain the teachings of Islam to a much larger audience than was previously possible.²⁴

It is up to us, the Muslims to pick up the gauntlet, take the challenge and do a good deed for Islam and humanity.

²³ Ingrid Mattson, American Muslim's Special Obligation, in Taking Back Islam, ed. Michael Wolfe, U.S.A., 2002.

²⁴ S. H. Nasr, “Islam in the Islamic World Today: An Overview”, Islam in the contemporary World, edited Cyriac K. Pullapilly, Notre Dame , Indiana, 1980.pp1-2