MYTH OR REALITY? MUSLIM'S IMAGE AT THE CROSSROAD

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Abstract

Despite the fact that Islam is a cosmopolitan religion with over 1.5 billion followers with extreme ethnic diversity and a wide range of cultures and languages, Western media presents a stereotype in which Muslims are a static, barbaric, and uncivilized people. Islam is often perceived in media reports as a major obstacle to the advancement of globalization, with followers holding beliefs incompatible with the modern life. Muslims constantly find themselves in a defensive struggle, having to answer to the perceptions, misconceptions and even prejudices of others. They are frequently questioned about their morality, history and even their intentions. These perceptions, which verge on paranoia and Islamophobia, are accompanied by persistent ignorance of Islam, its teaching and its diversity.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western strategists have continuously discussed the question of who will be the next challenge to the West. With the events of 9/11 and later, the question of the loyalty of Muslims in Western societies and the possibility of peaceful coexistence has come under heavy scrutiny. Today, recognizing the extent of globalization and the role that media plays in influencing and manipulating world opinion, it becomes crucial to re-examine, and maybe to re-construct, the Muslim image.

This paper attempts to explore the formulation of the current image of Islam and Muslims in the West and the role media plays in shaping the global image of Muslim. In doing so, the following specific factors will be discussed:

(1) the influence of the media in creating Islamophobia, (2) the acute ignorance in the West of Islam and Muslim cultures; and finally, (3) Muslims own contribution in sketching such image.

Keywords: Islam and the West, Muslim's image, Media, Islamophobia, Western media

Introduction

With the advent of Islam and the claim of another prophet post Christ, another word of God after the New Testament, and a new world religion after the Christian church, Christianity had one of two options: either to recognize Islam as a true and a valid religion or to denounce it as false religion and a form of Christian heresy. Unfortunately the latter option was to dominate. The perception Christians had of Islam was therefore prejudicial from the beginning and still is overwhelmingly shadowed by ignorance.

With the extensive spread of Islam during the 7th century and later, reaction towards it took a more aggressive approach. Watt noticed that western historians have rarely interpreted Islam expansion as the natural movement of an advanced civilization into a weaker and less developed neighbouring area. (Watt, 1972). Instead, Islam was portrayed as unnatural event and the image that emerged by the 12th and 13th centuries was that of an enemy. Islam was seen as an alien and demonic religion and its prophet was pronounced as an imposter, a sensual barbarian who spread religion by sword. (Comfort, 1940). (Bayle, 1826), (Humphrey, 1697).

Edward Freeman, for instance, defined the west as progressive, legal, monogamous and Christian, and the East as arbitrary, stationary, polygamous and Mahometan, (Edward, 1856).

Islamic teachings was seen as incompatible with those civilized way of life.

Media influence in Creating Islamophobia

Media have always played a significant role in enforcing prejudice and Islamophobia trends. 17 For centuries the main form of media was writing and literature. As Bauschke noted, Islam was presented to western psyche through such imminent figures such as John of Damascus (750), who considered Islam to be a heresy and Mohamed as the precursor of the Antichrist. Martin Luther (1546) went a step further and identified Islam with the Antichrist. For Luther, Islam was as bad as the roman papacy. Both were the devil's work and, in his opinion, the sign of the imminent last days: "The Pope is the soul of the Antichrist, the Turk is the flesh of the Antichrist." (Bauschke, 2007). For centuries such judgments were seen as valid, that Islam is not an authentic religion, but only a Christian heresy, a diabolic distortion of Christianity. Mohamed was no real Prophet, but a

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[17] Some useful work that deal with this phenomena include Edward W. Said, *The clash of ignorance,* Nation 22 Oct.2001; and *Culture and imperialism,* Chatto & Windus. (1993). London. Sha'ban, Fuad. (1991). *Islam and Arabs in the early American thought,* Durham NC: Acorn Press. Almond, Philip. *Western Images of Islam,1700-1900*, (Australian Journal of politics and history; Vol. 49, No3, 2003, pp. 412-424

Christian heretic, a misguided monk and impostor from the Arab desert (Johannes Damascenus, De haeresibus, chapter 100).18   "Although the Encyclopaedia Britannica, (1842) used a softer tone, the meaning was still clear: "If he cannot be freed from the reproach of having deceived men by attributing to himself a divine mission which he had not received, it may perhaps be conceded that the end which he contemplated gives to his imposture a character less odious than would otherwise belong to it." (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1842). This interpretation of Islam was so widespread that Dante (1321) in his Divine Comedy naturally placed Mohamed in hell along with the Christian heretics. Islam was only bearable while being theologically marginalized. Mohamed could only be a pseudo-prophet on behalf of an Arab false god called 'Allah.' The Quran could only be a book full of lies, blasphemies and pseudo –revelations. (Bauschke, 2007).

Despite the fact that monotheistim is a core belief of Islam, Muslims were even accused of idolatrous worship, having Mohamed as their most important idol. The imaginative picture of Muslim faith, which became current in all the epic poems of the west, from the Song of Roland onwards, showed the Saracens uniformly as idolaters, worshiping three gods: Tervagan, Mahomet, and Apollo. (Southern, 1980)

Islam was often portrayed in the media as the source of all problems of Islamic societies. According to this belief, it was Islam, extravagant but not progressive, that had relieved the eastern mind from the discipline of improving itself, and had left it in its preferred state of untamed wildness. (Anon, 1846) Muslims and Arabs were presented not only as non progressive, but also as morally evil. With the translation and widespread distribution of the Arabian Nights, the view of Muslims and Arabs as libertines, sex fiends, and oppressors of women gained particular ascendancy, (Sha'ban, 1991) even identifying sodomy as a distinctive feature of Islamic culture.19 Such views were very apparent in novels of adventure, romance, mystery and crime, which portrayed Muslims and Arabs in general as being extremist, inherently violent, backward, lazy, anti-western, and incompatible to the civilized values and norms.20

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[18] see also, Gustave E. Von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam, A study in Cultural Orientation,* 2nd edition, the University of Chicago Press, P.43-45

[19] See, Beverley, *A Letter to Godfrey Higgins"*, p.34. See also Trowbridge, *"Mohammedanism and the Ottoman* Turks", p. 283.

20 See, Christison, Kathleen. The Arab in recent popular Fiction, Middle East Journal, Vol.41, No. 3, 1987. Terry, Janice J. (1985). Mistaken Identity: Arab Stereotypes in Popular Writing, Washington, DC: American Arab Affairs Council, and also see Simon, Reeva S. (1989) The middle East in crime Fiction; Mysteries, Spy Novels and Thrillers from 1916 to 1980s, New York: Lillian Barber Press.

For a long time in Europe, the concept of 'us' and 'them' was dominate. There is underlying discursive structure whose principle has been described by Edward Said as an ideological construction of culture as a source of identity geared to "differentiate 'us' from 'them,' almost always with some degree of xenophobia." (Said, 1994) According to Said, Orientalism led the West to see Islam, or the East, as static both in time and place, as "eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself." (Said, 1995)

Outside the imperial context, Western Europe is very new to the experience of multi-religious and multi-cultural existence. The Middle East, on the other hand, as the cradle of all three monotheistic religions, would be unthinkable without the co-existence of synagogues, churches, and mosques, however contentious that co-existence might still be. According to sociologists, until recently Muslims in Europe were usually perceived as transient immigrants, refugees, or negligible ethnic minorities, rather than as part of communities deserving their own places of worship or cultural institutions, (Avcioglu,nd) a view which further alienated the Muslim community.

This point was further elaborated by Jorgen Nielsen in his introduction of To be a European Muslim (Ramadan, 1999) claim that Europeans were reluctant to accept people who were different except on (European) terms has certainly contributed to Muslims assertion of their own distinctiveness in response; however, it is really the Muslims own attachment to their traditions which has forced local communities, politicians and academics to take them seriously and forget about the original naïve, assimilations scenarios.

According to Burak Erdenir, the need of the West for an indispensable enemy is based mainly on an epistemological model which has dominated its thought for centuries. After 9/11 Muslims who had been believed to threaten the system as immigrants began to be charged with much more dangerous attributes. The principal threat shifted from the economic burden and to the danger brought about by their culture. A new racism emerged based on cultural differences claiming the incompatibility of Muslims with the European culture. Even third generation Muslims who have been born and brought up in the West have been perceived as dangerous outsiders. The popularity of political parties such as Le Pen's French National Front, British National Party, Austrian Freedom Party, Belgian Flemish Bloc, Italian Northern League and Dutch List Party reveals the scope of reaction towards immigrants. The "Muslim card" has been the strongest asset of such parties in gaining the support of ordinary Europeans. Suspicion against Muslims turned into hostility creating an Islamophobia all over Europe. For most Europeans, Islam is believed to have a connection

with terror and violence. Muslims have been identified as an enemy within. (Erdenir, 2010)

According to (Said, 2003) Orientalist scholarship "made out of every observable detail a generalization and out of every generalization an immutable law about the Oriental nature, temperament, mentality, custom or type…' (Said, 1995)

While (Watt, 2006) suggested that it might have been from a feeling of cultural inferiority and a way of defence to show that as a religion Islam was much inferior to Christianity. (Watt, 1983)

Some historical image of Islam and Muslims in the West could be seen in the following examples; Quinn, in his Sum of All Heresies highlights that "in each era, there were landmark voices for a greater understanding and a more balanced view of Islam, such as the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (1250), who during the early thirteenth century, displayed an informed and reasonably tolerant view of Islam and curiosity about Arabic science and philosophy. (Quinn, 2008) Others include Wolfram von Eschenbach (1220), antiwar poet and author of the important anti Crusade epic Pazival; Montesquieu (1755) in his numerous Persian Letters; Voltaire (1778), who announced "The time of Araby has come at last." The English historian Edward Gibbon (1794) wrote favourably of Islam in his Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire in 1788, as did the German Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe (1832), in Mahomet and West-ostlicher Divan.Other authors favorable to Islam include Scotsman Thomas Carlyle (1881) in his famous 1840 lecture The Hero as Prophet, Adrian Reland (1718), Friedrich Ruckert (1866), and many others. (Bauschke, 2007).

It was not till 1965 in the declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the relation towards non-Christian religions that, for the first time ever, Islam was officially recognized as a respectable and, to some degree, theologically equal partner in dialogue with the Christian religion, and as that has some common theological grounds with the Christian church. (Bauschke, 2007)

W. Montgomery Watt, in Islam and the West, points out that Christians of today should realize that this distorted image dominated most European and Western and Christian thinking until the later eighteenth century and even yet has not completely lost its influence (Watt, 1973). It was not a surprise that Pope Benedict XVI, in his famous lecture (September 2006 in Regensburg, Germany) quoted the 14th century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos: "Show me what new ideas Mohamed has brought forward, and you shall only find bad and inhumane things, such as that he dictated that the faith he preaches of, is to be propagated by the sword." (Bauschke, 2007).

Today advanced media makes its much easier to paint a distorted image of Islam. In a study that researched several broadsheet Australian national newspapers found that some print media report Muslim news with provocative headlines often associated with images that showed Islam as a violent religion (Kabir, 2006).

Studies of American and European press coverage of the Muslims and Arabs showed that there is a clear bias against Muslims and Arabs by repeatedly reporting negative qualities and events with no counter response.21 Notions such as "clash of civilization" (Huntington, 1996) and similar one sided interpretation of history, played a tremendous influence in the attempt to understand the September 11th events, that some analysts argue that the problem has always lain within the Muslim world itself and Islam's inability to adapt to modern age. (Lewis, 2002) Islam is thus being selectively presented in a negative image to serve a distinct purpose – to rally people against a threatening external enemy, thus increasing the politician's power to gain more control. Other ways to spread alarm against Islam has the deliberate use of terms like Islamic bomb, Islamic fundamentalism, and Islamic jihad.

In Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence, Karim H. Karim claimed that continuous negative media coverage of Muslims has led to the creation of a general impression that Islam promotes extremism (Karim, 2000). One clear example for such negative attitude is that after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, the media immediately began to focus on Muslim and Arab influences, and the whole community was under suspicion and scrutiny. Reports even claimed the sighting of some "Middle eastern looking men" speeding away from scene. To complete the picture New York Times alluded to a Middle East links, since Oklahoma City is home to at least three mosques, as if mosques are centres of extremism and terrorism (ADC, 1995)

Another outrageous scandal was presenting images of cheerful and rejoicing Palestinian women and children celebrating the September 11th atrocities, which was shown repeatedly on major international news network. Later it was revealed that those images were fabricated; however, the damage had already been done, and those images served to confirm earlier Orientalist stereotypes and perceptions of Muslims as been uncivilized and bloodthirsty.

The 'Sun'-one of the biggest selling daily newspapers in the UK-introduced a piece of classic Islamophobia

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21 See for example Said, Edward. (1981) Covering Islam, New York: Pantheon Books. Michael C. Hudson & Ronald O. Wolfe, eds, (1980). The American Mass Media and the Arabs, Washington, DC: Center for contemporary Arab studies, Georgetown University.

For far too long we have been teaching English in a white, middle-class, racist, sexist fashion. If we want to encourage immigrants to assimilate into our society we must help them to learn our language. For this reason, the Government has decided to scrap the old A is for Apple, B is for Ball, C is for Cat method and introduce a new alphabet tailored to the needs of Muslim pupils. From next term, all schools will be required to use the following system.

A is for Ayatollah, B is for Baghdad, C is for Curry, D is for Djabella,

E is for Emir, F is for Fatwa, G is for Gaddafi, H is for Hizbollah,

I is for Intifada, J is for Jihad, K is for Khomeni, L is for Lebanon,

M is for Mecca, N is for Nan, O is for Onion Bhaji, P is for Palestine,

Q is for Q8, R is for Rushdie, S is for Saddam, T is for Tehran,

U is for United Arab Emirates, V is for Vindaloo, W is for West Bank,

X is for Xenophobia, Y is for Yasser Arafat, Z is for Zionist Imperialist Aggressor Running Dogs of the Great Satan. (The Sun newspaper, 1991)

Media sometime present women in Muslim countries as being oppressed and as being treated in an inhumane manner. This is true to a certain extent, and such actions should not be tolerated nor endorsed. However, the remaining part of the truth is that such actions have nothing whatsoever to do with Islam. On the contrary, it contradicts the basic teachings and the practical living example of its prophet. It therefore becomes the duty of scholars and community leaders in those Muslim countries to challenge and combat such cultural practices. As well, it is only fair that media reports the full truth.

Similarly, when reading a misleading headline "Family of teen Muslim invited men to rape her," (The Sunday Times, 2008) immediately creates negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims, a clear misconception that Muslims allow their children to be raped. This is absurd. When you start reading the actual story, you realized that the accident reported had nothing to do with Islam or its religious beliefs. It is a story of an abnormal family which could be found within any community, regardless to their religious affiliations. It would similarly be unacceptable if an Arabic newspaper reported the incident of a father who kept his daughter locked up for so many years and was constantly having sexual relation with her, as "Girl locked up

for years and constantly raped by her Christian father." Instead, the newspaper headline was as follows: "Incest father has sex assault conviction" (The Times, 2008). Nowhere does it refers to his religious affiliation. This unfortunately shows a clear double standards and the singling out of Islam and Muslims with negative examples.

There is also a tendency in the Western press to elevate fringe figures to a place of mainstream importance. This became a live issue. (Bunglawala, 2002a) In an analysis of the UK media post September 11, the Daily Mail printed photo of Abu Hamza, 22 on the 15th, 17th, 18th, 20th and 21st. It also printed an interview with him on the 13th September that was partially repeated on the 15th and 18th as well. The Press Association, which supplies all national and regional papers, described him as "one of Britain's best known Muslim preachers." According to Inayat Bunglawala of the Muslim Council of Britain, figures like Hamza and his associates have a right to have their views reported, as does any other citizen of this country; but too often such views are reported as representative of all Muslim communities. Moderates who sought to place them in their proper context struggled to make their voices heard. Bunglawala voiced the frustrations of many. "There are over 800 mosques in the UK and only one of them is run by a known radical. Yet this one mosque (Finsbury Park, London)23 seems to get more coverage than all the rest put together! The situation is akin to taking a member of the racist BNP (British National Party) and claiming that his views are representative of ordinary Britons." (Bunglawala, 2002a). The problem, however, is that because of the Western media's coverage of Islam, it is still fringe groups attract the headlines, as they fit the stereotypes and commonly held assumptions. (Mandaville, (2002)

Another phenomena could be called the cut and paste practice; taking a specific words or paragraphs out of their context and placing them to fit one own perceptions and interpretations in order to produce misleading information. A prime illustration of such practise was the famous movie 'Fitnah' by Geert Wilder. In this movie, verses from the Quran were snatched out of context in an attempt to deceive the viewers by presenting prejudice and Islamophobic sentiments as the representation of Islam and interpretation of its quranic verses. Future sentiments could be seen as well in a parliamentary speech that he gave on the subject Koran, Islam, and Violence, which appears to anticipate the contents of his movie.24

…The Koran's core theme is about the duty of all Muslims to fight non-Muslims, in which fight means war, jihad. The Koran is above all a

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22 A Muslim preacher known for his extreme views
23 This mosque is no longer run by the named individuals.
24 Read the full speech on "Mr. Wilderss contribution to the parliamentary debate on Islamic activism" http://www.groepwilders.com/website/default.aspx?ID=4

book of war – a call to butcher non-Muslims (2:191, 3:141, 4:91, 5:3), to roast them (4:56, 69:30-69:32), and to cause bloodbaths amongst them (47:4). Jews are compared to monkeys and pigs (2:65, 5:60, 7:166), while people who believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God must according to the Koran be fought (9:30 [9:29]). The West has no problems with Jews or Christians, but it does have problems with Islam. It is still possible, even today, for Muslims to view the Koran, which they regard as valid for all time, as a licence to kill. And that is exactly what happens.

> The Koran is a book that incites to violence. I remind the House that the distribution of such texts is unlawful according to Article 132 of our Penal Code. In addition, the Koran incites to hatred and calls for murder and mayhem. The distribution of such texts is made punishable by Article 137(e). The Koran is therefore a highly dangerous book; a book which is completely against our legal order and our democratic institutions. In this light, it is an absolute necessity that the Koran be banned for the defence and reinforcement of our civilisation and our constitutional state. I shall propose a second-reading motion to that effect.
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> The Islamic incursion must be stopped. Islam is the Trojan Horse in Europe. If we do not stop Islamification now, Eurabia and Netherabia will just be a matter of time. One century ago, there were approximately 50 Muslims in the Netherlands. Today, there are about 1 million Muslims in this country. Where will it end? We are heading for the end of European and Dutch civilisation as we know it.25

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25 In order not to fall in the same practise which I have just condemned, I have copied the full speech in the note below, "Very many Dutch citizens, experience the presence of Islam around them. And I can report that they have had enough of burkas, headscarves, the ritual slaughter of animals, so-called honour revenge, blaring minarets, female circumcision, hymen restoration operations, abuse of homosexuals, Turkish and Arabic on the buses and trains as well as on town hall leaflets, halal meat at grocery shops and department stores, Sharia exams, the Finance Minister's Sharia mortgages, and the enormous overrepresentation of Muslims in the area of crime, including Moroccan street terrorists. In spite of all this, there is hope. Fortunately, the majority of Dutch citizens have become fully aware of the danger, and regard Islam as a threat to our culture. My party, the Freedom Party, takes those citizens seriously and comes to their defence. Many Dutch citizens are fed up to the back teeth and yearn for action. Minister Vogelaar babbles about the future Netherlands as a country with a Judeo-Christian- Islamic tradition, and that she aims to help Islam take root in Dutch society. In saying this, the Minister shows that she has obviously gone stark raving mad. She is betraying Dutch culture and insulting Dutch citizens. Madam Speaker, my party, the Freedom Party, demands that Minister Vogelaar retract her statement. If the Minister fails to do so, the Freedom Party parliamentary group will withdraw its support for her. No Islamic tradition must ever be established in the Netherlands: not now and also not in a few centuries' time.

Geert Wilder's rhetoric remind us of the same sentiment that was used centuries ago to eliminate and religiously cleanse Muslims in Spain and Portugal. The famous memorandum by the bishop of Segorbe, dated July 30, 1587,26 reviews the Morisco question from the time of the fall of Granada, and it concludes that the Moriscos are indeed heretics, enemies of the church, and blasphemous against the Trinity and all the articles of the Catholic Church. They are worse than the Jews, who were expelled for lesser crimes. Thus, they should be expelled, thereby cleansing these kingdoms from the abominable sect of Muhammad (Chejne, 1984) and so it was.

This rhetoric keeps appearing from time to time, even among high ranking officials and politicians such as Dan Quayle, Former U.S. vice president, when he equated fundamentalist Islam with Nazism and Communism as the three major threats to western Civilization. (Al Marayati, 1992) Henry Kissinger, former U.S. Secretary of State, claimed that "You can't really believe anything that an Arab says."

Prejudice was at its peak after the September 11th attacks. In the UK, a total of 206 incidents were reported to the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) during that same month, ranging from serious crimes of violence (43 percent), verbal and written abuse (36 percent), to psychological pressure and harassment (8 percent), discrimination (4 percent) and miscellaneous incidents (9 per cent) (IHRC, 2001). Another survey, conducted by several Muslim groups, found that 80 percent of Muslim respondents reported being subjected to Islamophobia; that 68 percent felt

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26 The memorandum pointed out the following: (1) the Morisco were told from the outset to embrace Christianity, or leave the country; (2) they refuse to confess their sins, preferring instead to wash their heads, hands, and feet for the remission of their minor sins while believing that their major sins will be forgiven through repentance; (3) they practice polygamy and divorce; (4) they believe killing Christians will secure them salvations; (5) they commit murder, theft, and other illicit acts; (6) they have complete contempt for the church and its rites; (7) they circumcise their children and, when questioned, answer that they were born that way; (8) they use Moorish name after being given baptismal names; (9) they refuse to receive the sacraments of confirmation, unction and penitence, and mock them; (10) they perform their own prayers, ablution and other rituals; (11) they refuse to bury their dead in consecrated ground, preferring virgin land in the Muhammadan custom; (12) they do not contribute to the church, work for its improvement, in spite of the fact that they are rich and powerful; (13) they abhor representations of saints and refuse to have them in their homes; (14) they do not drink wine or eat bacon; (15) they do not pursue Christian profession at the university; (16) they abhor Christianity; (17) they conspire with Turks and north Africans for the conquest of Spain; (18) they kill priest, profane sacred places, and organize revolt; (19) they take jobs away from Christians; (20) the church and state did much for them, but this has been of no avail, since they persist in the following the abominable sect of Muhammad; (21) the evidence is overwhelming that conversion did them no good: they remain as Moorish as the north Africans; and (22) distributing them among Christians also failed, since they remain as Moorish as ever.

they had been perceived and treated differently; and that 32 percent reported being subjected to discrimination at UK airports. (FAIR, 2004). 27

Nahid Kabir, in a news poll run by West Australian, revealed that one out of four people say that Muslims are a terrorist risk (Kabir, 2006). In the U.S., a survey conducted by Cornell University found that Republicans and people who described themselves as highly religious were more apt to support curtailing Muslims' civil liberties than Democrats or people who are less religious. In Australia, The Age reported that nearly half of all Americans believe the U.S. government should restrict the civil liberties of Muslim Americans, according to a nationwide poll. Researchers also found that respondents who paid more attention to television news were more likely to fear terrorist attacks and support limiting the rights of Muslim Americans.

This phenomenon can easily contrast with ways Christian, Hindu or Jewish people are generally portrayed in the western media. They are treated as individuals and not as a representative of their religious affiliation or orientation. No one named the (IRA) actions in Ireland Christian Terrorism, nor was the term Hindu Terrorism to describe the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. It is only in the case of Islam that the terms Islamic Terrorism or Muslim Terrorist are frequently used.

Ignorance of Islam and Muslim Culture

Another reason for portrayal of such negative images is the acute ignorance in the West regarding Islam and its diverse cultures. No one can deny the tremendous role media plays in forming the perceptions of most people. This not only leads to misconceptions about Islam and Muslims, but also fosters ignorance of the contribution made by the Muslim civilization to humanity in general and to European renaissance specifically; rather, Muslims are viewed as people who lived outside of history (Leuchtenberg, 1977).

According to Susan L. Douglass, "Twenty- five years ago it was quite possible for a citizen of the United States to grow up, graduate from a major university, and pursue a career without knowing anything about Islam or Muslim world. The entire school curriculum made no more than passing reference to Muslims in history, in connection with the Crusades, perhaps, or the fall of Constantinople to the Turks. A smattering of innovative programs beginning in the 1960s introduced students to Indian, Chinese or Mesoamerican culture at the secondary level, however, Islam was excluded (Douglass, 2002).

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27 FAIR survey was based on questionnaires sent out to Muslim schools, Mosques, charities, Islamic students' societies, NGOS and members of the community. Over 200 people responded to the Survey, providing information on how they had been affected by Islamophobia.

It is quite disappointing that a world civilization that has contributed to the advancement of humanity and to European renaissance has no acknowledgment or even mention in western education. Such ignorance of Islam and Muslims was so evident that during the dispute over the Danish cartoons, westerners were sincerely puzzled and confused over why Muslims around the world were so angry? It was only cartoons! Westerners are used to seeing in their newspapers sarcastic cartons of religious figures such as Jesus, Mary, and sometime even God. So why is it a big deal with Muslims? Certainly such sentiment could only be understood with some knowledge of Islam and its moral system. In Islam, prophets are human beings, but with special standing since they were choosing by God to proclaim His message to mankind; therefore all prophets need to be addressed in the best manner and with the outmost respect. It is unacceptable for a Muslim to show any act of disrespect or humiliation to any prophet, whether it is Mohamed, Abraham, Moses, Jesus or any other prophet.

The Muslim Factor

The final element in drawing such image is Muslims themselves. In addressing the Muslim factor, we need to focus on two issues: the status of disadvantage that Muslims live in and the existence of extremist fringes within our communities.

First, Muslims overall are severely disadvantaged both in their own homelands and in minority communities in the West. In their own countries, widespread ignorance, poverty, corruption and, above all, dictator regimes oppress people and control the resources, with very few exceptions. The status of Muslims in their own countries is extremely bleak.

Muslims communities in the West are not any better off. They suffer tremendous disadvantages. Statistics show the plight of the Muslim communities in dealing with education, health, and employment. For instance, Muslims in the UK are disproportionately represented in the most deprived urban communities and experience poor housing conditions. The concentration of Muslims in the poorest areas of cities is indicative of the marginalisation of Muslims and means that the inter-faith and inter-ethnic interactions are often of a confrontational nature, resulting from fear and mistrust of the "other side." Muslim children experience high levels of the risk factors associated with child poverty. A higher proportion of working-age Muslims have no qualifications than for any other faith group. Muslims are by far the most disadvantaged faith group in the British labour market. They suffer from disproportionate levels of unemployment and inactivity and are over-concentrated in certain low-paying sectors of the economy. UK

Muslims report higher rates of illness than all other faith group and fare poorly on certain health indicators.28

The second factor is the existence of extremist fringes within our communities. Muslim communities, as to any other human congregation, contain individuals on both edges of the spectrum. It is only correct that we have to acknowledge such differences. Denying the existence of such extremist minorities would only aid to increase the delusion about us. It is essential to denounce extremism or any ill behaviour regardless of its origin or motives.

Lloyd Ridgeon and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, noted that it has been quite common for Muslims to look at the West in two ways. On the one hand, it is generally perceived by Muslims that the West is corrupt and immoral (not just in the wider sphere of international politics but in a personal sense) (Ridgeon, 2007). The alternative view is that the West is Christian, and therefore it is to be accepted to a degree, but its peoples do not have the same degree of truth or the same level of spiritually as enjoyed by Muslims. Such views can be observed in time of crisis. For example, during the Danish cartons affair, a group of protesters walked to the streets of London shouting "death to Denmark" and other fanatical slogans. Despite the fact that these protesters were too few in number to have any significant impact and that they could in no way be considered a true representation of the British Muslim community, the damage that such event can cause to the already distorted image of Islam and Muslim is catastrophic.

Some of the misconception is a result to the confusion of what is considered to be an Islamic teaching and what simply a cultural practice. Jorgen Nielsen, in his forward of To be a European Muslim by Tariq Ramadan, highlights the change in the presence of Muslims in Europe.

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28 See "Muslims In The UK: Policies For Engaged Citizens, Open Society Institute 2005, http://www.soros.org/resources/articles_publications/publications/muslims_20041122/5_Overview.pdf , R. Richardson (ed.), Islamophobia – issues, challenges and action: A Report by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, Stoke on Trent, Trentham Books, 2004, p. 29, Neighbourhood Renewal Unit 2004, Strength in Diversity: Towards and Community Cohesion and Race Equality Strategy, London, Home Office, 2004, p. 13. See: R. J. Pauly Jr., Islam in Europe: integration or Marginalisation?, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004,
See also Department for Work and Pensions. Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, Muslim housing experiences, p. 13, Table 3. The Health Survey of Minority Ethnic Groups, Health Survey for England 1999, Department of Health, http://www.statistics.gov.uk/ Office of National Statistics, Focus on Religion, London, ONS, 2004, p. 5. Muslims in the UK: Policies for engaged citizens, Open society Institute
http://www.eumap.org/topics/minority/reports/britishmuslims/sections/overview/5_Overview.pdf
http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_compendia/for2004/FocusonReligion.pdf
Abdel-Hady, Z. (2007). British Muslims…A Challenge, Journal of College of Sharia & Islamic Studies, Qatar University, issue 25.

What is happening here is that the first generation of European Muslims, those who have grown up in Western Europe, are asking fundamental questions about Islam. They have discovered that the cultural traditions of their parents, firstly, have difficulty functioning in a modern urban and bureaucratic society and, secondly, that much of that cultural tradition is not essentially Islamic in any case. In some instance some would even regard particular aspects as unacceptable in Islamic terms (Ramadan, 1999).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted that Image of Islam and Muslims in the West has been profoundly influenced by both perceptions and prejudices which have existed for centuries and continue in our day and time particularly through irresponsible actions of the media. In addition, the acute ignorance in the West about Islam and Muslims has further initiated and propagated Islamophobia and prejudice. Nevertheless, Muslims own contribution in sketching such image should not be ignored.

A systematic approach is needed to alleviate this state of ignorance and the unfair presentation of Islam and Muslims as people out of history by presenting a more balanced view of Islam and Muslims within the western education curricle and recognized Muslims' distinctive contribution to humanity and civilization. In addition, this paper is a call for the media to be more responsible presenting what is accurate and true and to avoid presenting one-sided stories or flashy misleading headlines that only increase paranoia and Islamophobic sentiments.

As for Muslims, they need to take the lead in addressing their own problems; denouncing all types of extremism and prejudices. More scholars and thinkers need to speak out against all type of aggression or inhumane practices, whether they were attributed to cultural practices or odd religious interpretations. Moreover, common generalization in perceiving the West as immoral and corrupt, both in system and in personal sense, needs to be challenged.

It is naive to assume that one set of norms or values are the exclusive points of reference in any analysis of different cultures; moreover, it is unfair to be judged according to a single set of norms. Ignoring existing communality and highlighting only differing ones can only lead to the myth of incompatibility of Islam and Muslims with the developed civilized world.

A prejudice attitude and systematic distortions of facts have manipulated the public to accept negative perceptions of Muslims. Portrayal of such images can only increase marginalization of those communities and turn them into soft targets for more islamophobic tactics and prejudice.

Finding similarities and parallels between cultures can help us recognize ourselves in the "other" and blur the distinction lead to mutual understanding and respect.

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