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The West and Islam: Back to the Future

by Samah Alrayyes Norquist

For most of America’s 200 year history, the response to the question “what do you think of Islam and Muslims” would have led to an embarrassing silence. Now it seems America thinks of little else. The horrific crime of 9/11, the London and Madrid bombings, images of beheadings, and terrorism against civilians in Jordan, Morocco, Israel, Pakistan and Indonesia – all reprehensively under the banner of “Islam” – have led to many questions about the nature of Islam and its teachings. These events have also led to misinterpretations and misrepresentations of Islam and strongly negative stereotypes of 1.3 billion human beings. At the same time, for some they have begun to create a curiosity to learn about and understand Islam.



The world has changed since 9/11. Both the “Clash of Civilizations” and the “Dialogue of Civilizations” have become lenses through which many begin to look and try to understand the relation between the West and the Muslim world.

Immediately following 9/11, many in the West asserted the “Clash of Civilization” model and pushed the argument that we are now facing a war between Muslims and the West. Most advocates of this thesis argued that pre-modern Islam is in inevitable, unreasoning and unprovoked conflict with the modern West and its values of political democracy and individual freedom.

On the other hand, more constructive endeavors followed 9/11 in the West as well as in the Muslim world, calling for the need of a “Dialogue among Civilizations” or “Dialogue of Civilizations” in pursuit of a better mutual understanding and building bridges for a common journey towards the future, despite real differences.

I will not go into theological explanations or interpretations of Islamic teachings, laws or jurisprudence. That has been done by scholars and religious clerics who spent long years studying Islamic theology and law in prominent Islamic universities and centers. Being a “Muslim” or a “specialist on Islam” doesn’t make one an expert theologian and/or a spokesperson on the interpretations of Islam and the words of God or Allah (*note: Allah is just Arabic for God. Christian and Jewish Arabs also call God “Allah”*).

To build a better future we are well served to study a key period of Islamic history that is unknown to many in the West and is neglected by many Muslims. Americans learn a great deal in high school and college about Henry the Eighth’s six wives and little of the golden age of Islam. Many Muslims focus on the grievances created by 20th century imperialism and not on the civilization that flourished in the Muslim world before the arrival of Western armies. Both America and the modern Muslim world would do well to study what Robert Briffault called in his book, *The Making of Humanity*, the “civilization of Islam” and the *Legacy of Islam* in science and medicine that Sir Thomas Arnold and Alfred Guillaume wrote about. (1) These two authors and their works highlight the contributions that the Islamic world has given to our global civilization and how by returning to its real strengths Islam may once again contribute to the next wave of development and evolution.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF ISLAM

When we think about Islam, we in the West can be guided by the western value of learning and the habit of checking assumptions. For their part, Muslims are required by their faith to search for knowledge and learning.

In 610 C.E., the Prophet Muhammad received God’s first revelation of the Quran. The first word revealed to the Prophet was “Iqra” which means “Read.” The first command from God to the prophet of Islam was not worship, it was not to pray nor was it about any of the other five pillars of Islam, but it was to “READ:”

"Read in the name of your Lord who created, created man from a clot. Read, for your Lord is most Generous, Who teaches by means of the pen, teaches man what he does not know" (96: 1-5). (2)

The Prophet Muhammad later in his life said ***“the ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of martyrs,”*** and he also said ***“He who leaves home in search of knowledge, walks in the path of God.”*** (3)

Muslim rulers, scholars and thinkers acknowledged that their faith encouraged them to seek reason and study. Human beings were created capable to think and analyze. There is no contradiction between the word of God and seeking the knowledge of God’s creation. It has been pointed out that much of Western Culture—the writings of the Greeks such as Plato and Socrates—were lost to the West and maintained by Muslim scholars who returned those works back to Europe.

Throughout six centuries (dated from the 8th to 13th century), Muslims expanded not only its number of adherents but also the entire field of human knowledge and built libraries, universities and centers for learning. While Europe was in the Dark Ages, Muslim cities like Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo and Cordoba became centers for science, philosophy, literature, arts and architecture. In 870 C.E., the “House of Wisdom” was founded in Baghdad to translate ancient Greek, Indian, Persian and Chinese works into Arabic to learn from all parts of the world and present new scientific findings and theories. This resulted in the thriving of science and knowledge in the Muslim world that contributed to the entire human civilization later.

Muslim scientists and scholars such as Avicenna, Averroes, Rhazes, Algorismus, Alkirmani of Toledo, Geber, Al-Idrissi, and Alhazen made important contributions to philosophy, medicine, mathematics, chemistry, geography and astronomy. These included the discovery of smallpox, measles and the human immune system, the map of Roger (world map), the *Book of Optics*, the introduction of scientific methods, the discovery of the Principle of the Pendulum to measure time, the discovery of various elements in chemistry, the construction of the first Observatory, the foundations for modern medicine with *the Canon of Medicine* by Avicenna, the invention of spherical trigonometry, and the development of algebra and algorithms to name some. (4) This can be seen in that a great number of terms used in chemistry such as alcohol, alembic, alkali and elixir which all have Arabic origins, thus Islamic.

George Sarton, the father of the history of science, acknowledged Muslim scientists in the *Introduction to the History of Science*:

"It will suffice here to evoke a few glorious names without contemporary equivalents in the West: Jabir ibn Haiyan, al-Kindi, al-Khwarizmi, al-Fargani, al-Razi, Thabit ibn Qurra, al-Battani, Hunain ibn Ishaq, al-Farabi, Ibrahim ibn Sinan, al-Masudi, al-Tabari, Abul Wafa, 'Ali ibn Abbas, Abul Qasim, Ibn al-Jazzar, al-Biruni, Ibn Sina, Ibn Yunus, al-Kashi, Ibn al-Haitham, 'Ali Ibn 'Isa al-Ghazali, al-zarqab, Omar Khayyam. A magnificent array of names which would not be difficult to extend. If anyone tells you that the Middle Ages were scientifically sterile, just quote these men to him, all of whom flourished within a short period, 750 to 1100 A.D." (5)

When the House of Wisdom was established in Baghdad and became a premiere learning center, Muslims in Southwest Asia took advantage of the Chinese invention of paper and started the development of paper-making, using cotton, linen and plant fibers in order to produce good-quality paper. This new technology made possible the process of producing books. The making of paper allowed Muslims to write, collect and preserve books with thousands of volumes containing their works and discoveries. (6)

To store all these books that flowed from south Asia across Africa to Andalucía, educational centers such as libraries, schools, universities were built in Baghdad, Fez, Cairo, and Cordoba, for teaching, studying and researching. Many of these universities were founded centuries before those in Paris or Oxford. Hospitals also emerged to put into practice great discoveries in the field of medicine.

As Europe started its rise from the Dark Ages, many books and discoveries by Muslims were translated into Latin. Scholars, students and traders traveled to universities and centers established by Muslims, especially in Spain, to acquire Arab and surviving Greek knowledge and make it available to Europe. (6)

Many of the institutions and approaches to learning that are central to what we know as Western Civilization first emerged in the Muslim world. It would be helpful for both the West and the Muslim world to recognize the many contributions the Muslim world has given the West. Recent polling data shows us that these contributions to the world by historical Islam are largely unknown in the West—especially in the United States.

WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW ABOUT EACH OTHER

As we work to create a world where we can live together it is important we start by understanding what Muslims and Americans think they “know” about each other.

In December 2005, the Gallup polling company surveyed Americans in the United States and Muslims in 10 predominately Muslim countries (Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Jordan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Morocco) to explore how the two worlds perceive each other. (7)

Americans' attitudes towards Muslims

When the Gallup Poll asked Americans what they admire the most about the Muslim world, their answers were 32 percent, "Nothing" and 25 percent, "I don't know." The next most popular answers suggest that Americans do not all buy into the "clash of cultures" argument—22 percent admired Muslims' faithfulness to their religious views and 12 percent admired Muslims' "preservation of their own culture and traditions."

Asked what they least admired about Muslims, Americans first response was "Extremism/Radicalism/Not open to other ideas."

Interestingly, the same question asked for Muslims found that "many" Muslims surveyed in those 10 countries "also mentioned extremism in response to the question of what they admire least about the Islamic world." (7)

Muslims' attitudes towards Americans:

When the Gallup polling company asked Muslims about what they admire most and least about the United States, the most common positive answer was "technology" and the second most common answer was "liberty and democracy."

And that which Muslims admired the least about the West was, in their view, that Westerners "hate or degrade Arabs or Muslims."

Discussion:

American views are largely negative but not hopelessly fixed. While about one-third of Americans say that they have an unfavorable opinion of Muslim countries, another third say they have neutral opinions and one-fourth has favorable opinions." Gallup reports that 57% of Americans in 2007 say that they know either nothing or not enough about "the opinions and beliefs of people in the Muslim countries". Sadly, little real understanding has taken place in the past six years as these attitudes have changed so little from a similar Gallup Poll in 2002. (8)

On the positive side, Americans can and do change their views with more information. Gallup found that Americans hold more favorable views of Muslims and Islam if they know at least one Muslim or if they gain more knowledge of Muslim countries. (9)

When Gallup polled the ten most populous majority Muslim countries that make up 80% of the global Muslim population – Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Jordan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Morocco – they found that 7% of respondents believed that the 9/11 attacks were "completely" justified and 92% said that the 9/11 were "not" justified. When asked about the reason for their answers, the 92% of Muslims that viewed 9/11 as unjustified cited humanitarian or religious reasons for their response paraphrasing verse 5:32 of the Quran: "killing one life is sinful as killing the whole world." The seven percent that viewed the 9/11 attacks justified cited U.S. policies and not the Quran for their views of 9/11. As Dr. John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed sum up in *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*: "The real difference between those who condone terrorist acts and all others is about politics and not piety." (10)

WAYS FORWARD

The world has changed since 9/11. Americans are no longer isolated from the rest of the world, particularly the Muslim world. With American presence in Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of the Muslim world, the need for mutual understanding will be needed for many years to come. There needs to be a constructive interaction implying building bridges based on common interests, the joint discovery of solutions to global problems with both an understanding of and a respect for each other, all with an eye on creating a prosperous future.

Americans and Muslims are in agreement on the need to fight terrorism, its evil-doers and the hatred that it breeds. Muslims can work to make their condemnation of terrorism clearer and better understood in the West and must remind themselves of the unconditional condemnation by Islam of violence against innocents -- regardless of their faith or race. Americans can find a better and deeper understanding of the Muslim faith, its history and its contributions to the world, especially those in the sciences and humanities. Americans do not have to travel halfway around the globe to learn about Islam and Muslims. Most Americans only have to walk down the street or visit the nearest city as there are now millions of Muslim-Americans. Dialogue need not take place in academic halls of great universities---it can occur in the neighborhood diner, at work and at soccer practice. Starting a conversation is not the task of the Secretary of State; indeed every American can begin a conversation that may lead to greater understanding and trust. The growing American Muslim population consists of doctors, professors, teachers, university and college students, artists, journalists, businessmen and women, members of the U.S. military, and federal and state elected officials. This community of “ambassadors” will both help to lessen the prejudices and help develop more mutual respect.

The terrorists claim that they want to bring back the glory of Islam. There was a Golden Age of Islamic learning and civilization. But it was never claimed through the murder of innocent civilians, and Islam, for sure never claimed glory through suicide bombings of other Muslims at mosques, weddings, schools and shopping markets.

Osama bin Laden’s stated goal is political and not religious. All his and his collaborators’ statements address geo-political questions such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the attacks against Pakistani leaders, the situation in Kashmir, and the dislike of Arab presidents and monarchies’ leaders. He has attempted to hijack Islam. Like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) that attempted to hijack Catholicism or Yigal Amir who assassinated Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, to hijack Judaism, Osama bin Laden and his followers use religion as a banner to justify terror.

The Golden Age of Islam that lasted for six centuries and its incredible contributions to science, arts and education defined a significant period of Islamic history. It can be revived among Muslims and appreciated by the Western world. If the Muslim world recognizes itself as a major contributor to the very things it expresses admiration for in America, i.e. technology and political democracy, this will help the Muslim world extricate itself from some of the more dangerous pre-modern and unsustainable modern worldviews that now hamper its further development. Perhaps it can even help the Muslim world to lead itself into a modern renaissance in which the Prophet’s words about seeking knowledge are taken to heart and true believers thus help unleash a quest for knowledge: the next scientific, medical and humanities revolution. The examples of Nobel Prize winners such as Najib Mahfooz in literature, Ahmed Zewail in chemistry, Abdus Salam in physics, and Nobel Peace Prize recipients Shirin Ebadi and Mohamed ElBaradei, are attestations to what Muslims still achieve and contribute to the human knowledge and civilization.

That flourishing history can be the foundation of an American-Muslim partnership for a common future. Education and educational exchanges bring to societies opportunities for dialogue and to surpass borders and barriers to serve humanity.

The terrorist attack of 9/11 was the first time many Americans thought about Muslims and Islam. Obviously, it did not create a positive first impression. It will take time and great deal of work on all sides to build – not rebuild, but build for the first time – a conversation between America and the Muslim world that can and will create a better future. Bin Laden and his ilk, who wish a “clash of civilizations” between all Americans and all Muslims, will attempt to obstruct this dialog. They are aided by a fifth column in America that for its own reasons wishes to promote a permanent hatred between America and the Muslim world. But those hoping for hatred and division are outnumbered.

If both Americans and Muslims, including Muslim Americans, focus on the history of Muslim accomplishment that demonstrates that learning, science and religious tolerance are compatible with the faith of Islam and its practice during Islam’s golden age, and then examine some contemporary polling into American and Muslim views today, we see a path towards dialogue rather than “clashing.” The path of dialog will allow people to humanize one another, seek common ground, and transcend various limitations on all sides; this is the necessary first step to discover creative and sustainable solutions to the various challenges we face. At this time of mass travel and increased immigration, with worldwide satellite television bringing the other side of the planet into our homes instantaneously, we can better understand those we meet and what we see so that we learn more and presume less. The West and the Muslim world can ill afford to continue to nurse grievances, maintain preconceptions, and mourn the loss of a mythologized past. We can study and learn from the strengths of both cultures by having the courage to ask, rather than guess or assert, what “they” think.

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *What outlooks, attitudes, and practices in which we engage on a daily basis, create either a "clash of civilizations" approach (Samuel Huntington's term) or a "dialogue of civilizations" engagement among cultures that differ from one's own? What can be the tangible benefits to a "dialog" approach?*
- *Compare daily life in an Islamic nation with daily life in a Western nation, considering their urban areas as well as their rural regions. What features of each lifestyle might an open-minded person find attractive? Will either lifestyle become more pervasive in 2025? (also see Keslick article, this issue)*
- *Norquist states that Americans and many Muslims learn little about the Golden Age of Islam. How will the imperative for cross-cultural dialog change education in your part of the world and elsewhere – especially the teaching of history, geography, and religion?*
- *How do other parts of the world view Islam and the US – and what is the basis for their views?*
- *Various religions other than Islam have had their own militant fundamentalists at various times; some still do. Furthermore, the "clash of civilizations" model does not readily extend to US relationships with Indonesia and Malaysia, both predominantly Islamic. With these points in mind, and considering also Norquist's discussion of the Gallup poll findings, what other factors might underlie relationships between the US and parts of Southwest Asia?*
- *Considering the Golden Age of Islam, in what ways might Islam contribute to the next wave of development and evolution if it returns to its real strengths as Norquist suggests?*