

Touchy Issues in Muslim - West Relations: An Attempt at an Overview

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the sour relationship underlying Muslims and their Western counterparts; a relationship that spanned several centuries and traversed regions and climes. The paper surveys the long years of contact between Islam and the West and shows how, despite the long years of contact and interactions, the relationship has continued to remain sour, not so cordial and often replete with conflict, clashes and at times, wars and bloodshed. The paper surveys this age-old relation and shows how it is punctuated by animosity, mutual distrust, bigotry, fear and uneasy calm. The Paper concludes by debunking the treachery, the sinister motives as well as the pathological hatred of anything Muslim and Islamic that is often exhibited by the West on the nation of Islam.

Keywords: Islam, West, Muslim-West Relations

1. Introduction

Relations between the Muslim world and the West has for long been sour, perhaps worsening right from the opening years of the twentieth century to date. This souring of relations between Islam and other revealed or even man-made religions has taken quite some time, perhaps it could be dated to the very dawn of the religion when Islam first made its debut. But right from the appearance of Islam in the seventh century, perhaps up till today, neither Christianity nor Judaism - the world's two major religions - ever accepted Islam as a religion, nor does any of them ever recognized the prophet hood of Muhammad right from the time he declared his call up to the present day. While Islam has continued to recognize these two major religions and dealt with them justly and fairly with all sense, of decorum, Christianity and Judaism continued to treat Islam and the old Muslims to this day, with disdain.

The religion, Islam, is often considered backward, the Shariah, the very way of life of the Muslim, is seen as archaic and moribund; while the Muslim, the adherent of the religion is often viewed by the two religions with contempt. Often the Muslim view point is considered fanatical, rigid, unscientific and heretical. The Judeo-Christian world could tolerate the turban of a Sikh but at the same time question that of the Muslim.

2. World Religions and Tolerance

As regards religious tolerance, the religion of Islam, perhaps more than any other religion, grants more religious freedom and is more tolerant than perhaps any religion practiced anywhere on this planet. This, arguably, makes it more tolerant and more accommodating than the other older religions. No Muslim will have a complete faith if he does not believe in Moses and his Torah, nor is his Islam complete if he does not believe in Jesus and the Bible. If he speaks ill of these prophets or their books then he has blasphemed and; to come back to Islam, he has to renew his faith and seek God's forgiveness.

The rabbi could keep his beard up to arm's length and travel unmolested to the four comers of the globe; but a Muslim's beard is subject to serious scrutiny right within the confines of his home country. All these things happen in a scientific, civilized, twenty first century world that believes in all the democratic ideals of human right, social justice, equality and empirical objectivity. It leaves one dumbfounded to go into the polemics of what turban could rightly be accepted as *the turban* and what beard could be accepted as *the correct beard*.

This pathological intolerance or hatred of Islam appeared to have no bounds as is often exhibited by these two religions. Even the computer, a harmless, neutral, scientific, inventive genus of mankind has been infected by this incurable virus of bias and prejudices. A little example will shade some light. Type the following words on any computer (especially such as are equipped with the spell-correct software): **Christianity, Christians, Judaism,**

Islam, Muslim, Shariah, and Muhammad. Find out which of these words have been accepted by the computer as a proper noun and therefore begins with a capital letter. You will find to your dismay, all begin with capital except the last four: **Islam, Muslim, Shariah and Muhammad.** The computer is taught to accept the first three - **Christianity, Christian and Judaism;** just as it has equally been taught to question the last four - **Islam, Muslim, Shariah and Muhammad.** It has been taught to mark them by underlining each with a red ink to indicate to you that the computer does not recognize them.

3. Muslim - West Relations

In essence, Islam, or Shariah, is a global phenomenon which has a universal appeal. It emerged, spread and flourished in an atmosphere of increasing hostility, then and now. The fall of communism which signaled the end of the cold war brought Islam into the limelight of disfavour and exposed it and its adherents to the excruciating crucibles of the West. Today despite the hatred and the ever increasing hostility, it is the energy of the Muslim world which is powering Western industrial technology. A fact, which no amount of hatred can deny.

It is in the light of this development that I wish to make a survey of the touchy issues in Muslim - West relation, an issue which makes headlines in the media, often blown out of proportion, sometimes bringing the two sides to the point of confrontation. The paper attempts to analyse these issues and show how they variously affect the two ideological blocks. The study arguably sees dialogue, tolerance and greater cooperation as important avenues to cement over differences and move towards healthier relationship.

4. The Uniting Force

It needs no gainsaying that today the Muslim world produces over 70% of the world's oil and more than 50% of its gas needs. This concentration of over one billion people unfortunately could not be redeemed by the succor and bounties provided by these tremendous resources. In the final analysis, the Ummah continues to remain increasingly backward; and its people becoming chronically poor, disease-stricken and impoverished.

5. Touchy issues in Muslim - West Relations.

In order to understand the Shariah in its global context, there is the need to analyse some of the touchy issues in the Muslim-West relations each of which brings the two sides often to the brink of confrontation.

Age-old denigration of Islam, Muslims and Muslim institutions

Since its inception in the seventh century, Islam, its adherents and its sacred institutions have suffered various forms of denigrations in the hands of its adversaries. The personality of the holy prophet indeed suffered the most. This trend did not change despite the tremendous transformation human civilization has undergone over the centuries. History bears witness to the tremendous confidence the holy prophet enjoyed in his youth among the Meccan inhabitants. It was because of his honesty he was nicknamed *-Al-Ameen-* the trustworthy. But ironically, this degree of confidence started to change immediately he began to call his people to the new religion.

The society that was hitherto calling him Al-Ameen, quickly began to shift gear. Not long afterwards, the same community began to address him in a new garb as someone who is "possessed", "mad", "lost", etc. One would wonder at this sudden change of attitude. When things reached crisis however, the Meccan aristocracy decided to bribe prophet Muhammad with a Meccan title and a shareholding entitlement in the city's booming idolatrous pilgrimage proceeds, an offer, the prophet flatly rejected. Next come threats, marginalization, blockade, ostracization, persecution and eviction. The question one may ask is what has so far changed when compared with the way Islam and Muslims are treated in present day world? As a matter of fact, today quite a lot has remained in form of sanctions, threats, missile attacks, occupation, and detention in maximum security prisons across the globe -Guantanamo, Abu Ghareb, and such others in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Morocco.

6. Secularism and Irreligiousness

Secularism is today the most dominant culture in the West. It is based on the most common adage, "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's."

In the Christian-dominated Western societies the secularist thesis of the separation of religion and politics is, despite the voices of dissent, an established fact of the public sphere. Similarly, the avowed religious basis or orientation of the state of Israel does not, in practical- that is, in matters of law and policy- negate that principle. Muslims have to explain, in more than simplistic terms, where they stand on the issue.

According to the secularist philosophy, religion stands distinct from politics and the two are separate one from the other. Under this dispensation, religion and by inference Christianity, would not enjoy such position of prominence as it were once enjoying in the middle ages. Before Christianity imposes the stringent laws of the inquisition, it

was enjoying an enviable place in the lives of people, regulating all aspects of spiritual as well as mundane aspects of life. But from the moment Christianity began to descend its sledge hammer on the inquiring spirit of the early men of science - Galileo, Copernicus etc, it became quite obnoxious in the lives of people and indeed a very fearful thing. Many opted to abandon Christianity than to be identified with its primitive, reactionary and backward postulations on life and modern scientific inquiry.

Is it any wonder if the modern man, and by inference, the modern Christian westerner, shuns such a religion and abhors such a god that tends to deny life and by extension puts it in harm's way? No wonder then the west, in the first half of the twentieth century fought two wars that cost humanity no less than one hundred million lives and scores of communist revolutions (Russia and China) which swept along with it more than seventy million souls. The remaining 146 little wars which were fought from 1945 to date, despite its staggering rise and geographical spread, led to the death of thirty million people in all. Secularism today has become a universal principle, a sovereign ideology for almost all nations of the world.

Religion, hitherto condemned by Karl Marx as the opium of the masses, occupies a secondary place and in some more advanced nations of the west, a third place; it plays quite an insignificant role in the life of the average westerner. No wonder, churches are empty and often times, sold, rented or auctioned. Marriage, -*them* important institution in all human societies, is now seen, as Marx once said, "a club trap", of little or no consequence and therefore no longer necessary.

The family, fundamental as it is at all times and in all ages, is today broken down in the west; and the single parent, an aspect unknown in all human civilizations of old, is today resurging in the west to the point of forming a cartel. In other words, the single parent is gradually becoming a prominent element in western societies. All these developments happen because of the state of irreligiosity in which the western society has found itself. In lieu of religion, western societies have now found solace in promiscuity, licentiousness, drug addiction, crimes and violence. These elements have now become the cardinal principles of western religion.

7. Arab - Israeli Conflict

The Middle East has been home to many conflicts and crises over a long period of time. It has been a region with one of the longest history, stretching over 7,000 years. It is equally believed to be the cradle of human civilization as it houses the ancient Mesopotamia, the region where the Euphrates and Tigris - two great important rivers - are situated.

There were indeed age - old crises in the distant past as ensued between Pharaoh and the children of Israel as well as wars involving nations in the region. But the point of conflict in recent times has to do with the creation of the state of Israel inside Palestine in 1948.

From that time till today, the region has enjoyed very little peace. At various times since then, the region has witnessed several fratricidal conflicts as well as full scale wars. Wars ranging from those that took many months to those that take days-like the Six Days War. The last war that was fought in the region was between Israel and Hezbollah of Lebanon in 2006 which lasted thirty two days.

Since 1948, both sides, Israel as well as the Arabs, have recorded serious losses of both human and material resources. No side could claim, with any degree of certainty, the achievement of any meaningful victory over the other in the final analysis. In her desperate bid to exist, or perhaps to prevail, Israel is unfortunately creating conditions that may jeopardize its very existence. The 2006 war with Hezbollah and the December 2008 encounter with Hamas are cases in point.

8. The War in Afghanistan

The U. S. traced the September 11 attack to Osama Ben Laden who, through American pressure in 1996, was forced to leave the Republic of the Sudan to Afghanistan, then under the rule of the Taliban, a Pakistani supported Muslim Afghan group that had taken over power at that time. America attacked Afghanistan because the regime has failed to handover Osama Ben Laden.

The ousting of the Taliban government did not see the end of the conflict nor end the "terror" posed by the Taliban. What followed went beyond what the Americans and their allies ever anticipated-that by destroying the Afghan military capabilities and dealing their soldiers deadly blows, then within a week all will be over.

The war is now in its seventh year and despite the proxy stance of the NATO which is currently fighting the war on behalf of the U.S. (that first started the war), the Taliban controlled more than two third of Afghanistan today. Security is at its lowest ebb, Karzai (U.S. - imposed President of Afghanistan) and the coalition forces fall easy preys to booby traps, assassination attempts and incessant suicide bombings almost on a daily basis. At every

passing hour, Afghanistan is increasingly becoming a pariah, or to say the least a failed state while NATO forces continue to suffer serious reversals both at the war front and inside their military bases. The tragedy of the Afghan conflict is that the country is more and more impoverished while basic infrastructures have been virtually destroyed and peace continues to elude all. In addition, the United States government is spending one hundred million dollars daily to fight the Afghan war. The recent call by the NATO Secretary on member states to send more forces to Afghanistan is an indirect admission that despite the colossal amount that is daily spent and the large military presence, the West is gradually losing the war; a fact attested by the outgoing British military commander.

9. The Iraq War of 2003

Before the 2003 war, Iraq was a victim of an allied attack in 1991. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, operation desert shield was coined to tag a military gang up comprising of America, Britain, France and their allies from more than thirty countries in order to dislodge the Iraqis out in a devastating war which lasted nearly a month and a half. The war left the country totally devastated; its economy crippled, its currency devalued and its population (especially children and infants) highly impoverished. It took the Iraq twelve years of great struggle before it could stand on its feet again as a sovereign nation.

Again in March 2003 Iraq, without the mandate of the Security Council, came under a heavy, this time more devastating attack by the U.S. and her allies in a war which is still persisting. The reasons this time were many and varied. The foremost reason why Iraq must be fought was the allegation that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, WMD (something which was later proved wrong).

Next was the fundamental necessity to unseat Saddam Hussein whose “reign of terror” and “undemocratic rule” were “causing untold hardship on his people especially the Kurds”. Another reason was that, the ruling Sunni groups who were at that time “a minority” were continually pursuing a terror rule over a “helpless” Shia majority and tiny pockets of kurds; this balance of power, so said George W. Bush, must change. The undeclared reason ofcourse being, Iraqi’s tremendous oil wealth; a fundamental necessity to a nation that guzzles three-quarter of the world’s resources.

As a matter of fact, the U.S. and her allies carried out this attack in 2003, without the mandate of the Security Council; nor was such a mandate ever granted at any point in time. Speaking about the unjust war in Iraq, Enver Mas'ud has this to say:

War planes aboard the USS Enterprise, combined with more than 200 cruise missiles from eight navy warships converged on Iraq targets....300 strike fighters, bombers and support aircraft flew 600 sorties, more than half of them at night. Another 40 ships took part in the attack with 10 of them firing cruise missiles. More than 600 bombs were dropped, 90 cruise missiles fired from the air and another 300 from ships at sea.

All these were done to a country that was having less in population than four out of the fifty American states, whose defense budget is only 1% of America's. In terms of size, where America is the third largest in area in the world, Iraq is 57th.

Questioning this naked savagery on innocent people, one of America's Presidential candidates, Patrick J. Buchanan says:

It is time to ask how grave a threat Iraq is to America. We launched the round-the-clock air strikes with 2,000 planes for six weeks; Iraq fired back a handful of scuds. Iraq killed scores of Americans; we killed thousands of Iraqis. Yes, Saddam "makes war on his own people", but who inflicts the greater suffering - Saddam or US-led embargo that has claimed the lives of 239,000 children, 15 years old and under, since 1990?

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