

SINCE 9/11 the sale of the holy Qur'an and biographies of Prophet Muhammad has gone up in America. Students in colleges and universities are more inclined towards learning Arabic and taking courses to learn about the history and theology of Islam. This has opened up a door for people to pay attention to the Middle East, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and other Muslim majority countries. As the US troops marched into Afghanistan and Iraq, the two mostly spoken languages of the region became of high interest. Studying Persian in the academia is being more valued more than ever. University of Pennsylvania for example, recently opened a Centre for Persian studies. Scholars are being hired from overseas to teach Persian and Arabic at the university. Pashto has also become increasingly important. American academia is now looking closely and studying the Islamic world and civilisation.

For Americans new insight is necessary to contextualise and justify the recent turmoil in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is also necessary for them to learn the language, religion, culture, and history of whom they fight against. As Bankim Chandra Chatterjee pointed out a long time ago, 'knowledge for the West means power, for us it means salvation.'

Many scholars argue that the British invasion of India was far more powerful than the previous Muslim rule as the British not only subjugated India economically and politically, but the uniqueness of British invasion lied in their intellectual and moral subjugation of India. When the enemy is morally defeated, half of the battle is already won, and the effects remain long lasting.

The US is using a similar approach in learning about the Muslim world. What alarms me to no end is: today those who are learning about Islam are those who believe in a fascist rule based on a fractured understanding of Islam. Those of us who are Muslims and do not necessarily feel comfortable with the politicisation of Islam are simply sitting inactive, and worst of all, some of us are denying that the problem exists altogether.

Today, some of us are ashamed to call ourselves Muslims, but is it also fair to just sit idle while others play

Reclaiming Islam

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a tug of war over our faith? Our ignorance of Islam would not be a problem today given we were all atheists. But alas, we are a strange breed of religious creatures that blindly follow a faith without understanding adequately its origin, history and theology. We follow the Qur'an without reading it in Arabic and understanding it for ourselves. Rather, we base our understanding on the preaching of the so called religious scholars, the *ulamas*, and now the political leaders who speak in Islamic idioms.

Our politicians, secular, fundamentalist, left, right all have used Islam to win their political battles. Bangladeshi people's deep affinity with their spiritual lives and deep rooted faith in Islam had been exploited by the leaders. As a result, whatever that was sacred have been stripped away, leaving us with a religion which is nothing but a skeleton of few rules and rituals. Even whose bones are falling apart with the fractured and deliberately misleading reading of the Qur'an, Hadith and the history of Islam.

If one does a comparative study of religions and looks closely at the history of Islam and the life of the Prophet, it becomes clear that Islam is as liberal as it gets when it comes to 'organised religions.' The revelations of the Qur'an are supposed to be interpreted in light of a particular

time and not to be taken on its face value. Qur'anic revelations were sent from Allah 1400 years ago based on the socio-economic-political-cultural framework of Arabia. One simply cannot take those rules on their face value and apply them to Bangladesh 2006, when the socio-economic-political-cultural framework is utterly different. This provision is permitted by *ijtihad* in the Islamic authorities.

Some people argue that the concept of secularism does not exist in Islam. This statement is misleading because in the West the concept of secularism arose due to the separation of the Church and the State, whereas, in Islam there is no Church, so the concept of secularism does not arise as such in the West. This does not mean that the concept and ideology of secularism does not exist, but it is inherently inadequate to find a literal Arabic translation for the word 'secular.'