

## Understanding Islam Perspectives of two college students in the United States

SAJID HUQ and MOHAMMAD BYDON

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, anti-Islamic experts (and I use the term loosely) have bombarded our TV screens and radio waves with the haunting images of the "oppressive and jihad-oriented" faith we know as Islam. It is a religion, according to the reactionary Daniel Pipes, that is more dangerous than either fascism or communism. Judith Hayes who had publically described Muslims in prayer as those who "stick their asses in the air five times a day" said that after the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, Islam has finally "been exposed for the violent, primitive, barbaric, Mickey Mouse religion that it is." The warning of the late William Muir seemed dead on: "[T]he Qur'an is one of the most stubborn enemies of Civilization, Liberty, and the Truth which the world has yet known."

Most Americans reject the agenda-driven analyses of these pop experts (the same ones incidentally who insisted that the Oklahoma City bombing was the work of Middle Eastern terrorists on a jihad). But many continue to believe that Islam is oppressive of women, supportive of dictatorships, and encouraging in one way or another of terrorist attacks that target the livelihood of infidels.

Combine the Islamophobic sentiments with the fact that this faith of folly has somehow raced to become the world's second largest and fastest growing religion and we have a recipe for hate crimes. America beware: Muslims now outnumber Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Mormons, and Jews, and they are more numerous than Quakers, Unitarians, Seventh-day Adventists, Mennonites, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Scientists combined. To make matters worse, over half of America's Muslims do not come from abroad, but are converts. And since the majority of the four million converts are not militant, disgruntled, or terrorist-supporters (John Walker being a statistical exception), something must be going on here. There must be more to this faith than its stereotypical image when respected professionals like Cat Stevens and two consecutive Italian ambassadors to Saudi Arabia convert to Islam, or when an attractive Southern belle and radio broadcaster adorns the veil as her "liberation" and successfully lobbies for a US Postal Service stamp commemorating a Muslim holiday.

The disastrous conflict between East and West, or more recently Islam and America, is no longer some battle in a far away land through deserts or caves. Regardless of the applicability of the clash of civilizations theory, we have in the United States today a situation in which millions of Americans subscribe to a misunderstood and in some contexts despised religion. All over the Christian world, Muslims are growing in number. In Europe and the United States as well as sub-Saharan Africa, Islam is the second largest and fastest growing faith. The sheer millions involved puts to rest any paranoid theories of these converts being brain-washed and casts doubt on the stereotypes associated with Islam. Why would so many men and women, rich and poor, convert to a faith that harshly oppresses women, that forces people to live under dictators, and that supports the brutal murder of innocent civilians? They would not. Theirs is not the Islam of Osama bin Laden or the media sensationalists.

Most often, we hear accusations from anti-Islamic scholars who claim that the Qur'an inspires young Muslim warriors to kill infidels in a jihad. Nevermind that Jews and Christians (and later Zoroastrians and Hindus) are not infidels: the Qur'an calls them "peoples of the book" who are to be tolerated and granted complete freedom to practice their religions. Nevermind that a jihad may only be declared by a state against another state in which Muslims may not freely practice their faith, thus making it impossible to declare a jihad against America. Nevermind that a jihad is a spiritual struggle and if used in the military sense, may only apply to self-defense. Nevermind that during a jihad, a Muslim fighter is strictly forbidden from killing women, children, the elderly, or noncombatants of any kind and is not to cut down a single tree or kill a single animal.

Just as anti-Islamic scholars have taken to quoting violent or chauvinistic Qur'anic passages out of context, scholars on the other end of the spectrum have argued that the Bible (in both the Old and New Testaments) contains passages that are more violent and more chauvinistic. A few of the most often quoted Biblical passages include the following:

"And the Lord said, "Go through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have you pity. Slay utterly old and young, both maids and little children, and women." (Ezekiel 9:5)

"And the Lord said unto Moses, "Avenge the children of the Mid'an-ites . . . They warred against the Midianites, as the Lord commanded Moses, and they slay the males. And they took all women as captives, and their little ones, and took the spoil of all their cattle, and all their flocks, and all their goods. And they burnt all their cities wherein they dwelt, and all their goodly castles with fire. Moses said, "Have you saved all the women alive? Now kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that has known a man by lying with him, but all the young girls keep alive for yourselves." (Numbers 31:1)

"I [God] will send my terror in front of you, and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come." (Exodus, 23:27).

"I [Jesus] am come to send fire on the earth . . . Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division." (Luke 12:49-51)

"As for the towns of [your enemies], you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them . . . just as the Lord your God commanded." (Deuteronomy, 20: 16-17).

Some have attempted to argue that the Bible does indeed justify the intolerant violent actions committed by some followers of Christianity. Historically, we are all familiar with the Crusades, the Inquisition, the witch-hunts, and the missionaries who attempted to "save the souls" of Native Americans and the natives of Africa. In our modern age, we have seen misguided Christians blow up abortion clinics; assassinate abortion doctors; burn crosses with the Klu Klux Klan; massacre 8,000 Muslims in the Bosnian town of Srebrenitza; take over a complex in Waco, Texas; and commit one of the largest mass suicides in history under the guidance of Minister Jim Jones, a once influential church leader from San Francisco.

In the Christian world, we have seen the emergence of home-grown terrorist groups like the FARC in Columbia and the ETA Basque separatists of Spain (who have killed more people than Hamas and Islamic Jihad combined). In America, we have seen the secular terrorism of the Unabomber, Terry Nichols, and Timothy McVeigh (adjusted for population, the human loss in Oklahoma City is equivalent to over 3,000 New York City deaths). We have also seen Irish Catholics fight a Protestant power by blowing up civilians on London subways and supporting militant factions of the IRA, a terrorist group whose funds have been traced to Catholic churches right here in America.

In Rwanda, the 1994 genocide which took hundreds of thousands of lives

**'But Islam has a still further service to render to the cause of humanity. It stands after all nearer to the real East than Europe does, and it possesses a magnificent tradition of inter-racial understanding and cooperation. No other society has such a record of success in uniting in an equality of status, of opportunity, and of endeavours so many and so various races of mankind . . . Islam has still the power to reconcile apparently irreconcilable elements of race and tradition. If ever the opposition of the great societies of East and West is to be replaced by cooperation, the mediation of Islam is an indispensable condition.'**

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also had a religious element. A report on the genocide commissioned by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) says that "within Rwanda itself, those with the heaviest responsibility were the Catholic and Anglican hierarchies." The report found that Rwandan Church leaders did not use their authority to demand an end to the violence between Hutus and Tutsis (both overwhelmingly Christian) and may have taken advantage of the situation for their own political ends. In the village of Nyange, survivors claim that Reverend Athanase Serumba ordered and encouraged his Hutu followers to attack the Tutsis. The International War Crimes Tribunal for Rwanda has indicted a Seventh Day Adventist minister. The French government has charged a Catholic priest with war crimes. Other church leaders have been accused of war crimes and are in custody, including two nuns accused of encouraging the killing of Tutsi refugees in the village of Shyorongi.

While many of the aforementioned believers have used the Bible to justify their terrorist (or even genocidal) actions, most reasonable scholars and the overwhelming majority of faithful Christians will quickly point out that the Bible does NOT tolerate such crimes. In all due fairness, no one can or should blame a great faith like Christianity for the actions of individual Christians, even if those individuals claim they are acting in the name of Jesus. It is a great misrepresentation to take Biblical quotes out of their historical and textual context. The Bible must be seen in its entirety: it is a holy text that has justified violence in specific contexts, but one that also introduces a diety who commands us to turn the other cheek. It remains a message of love and tolerance; doing unto others as you would have done unto yourself. It is inaccurate to cite violent passages of the Old and New Testaments without acknowledging the many peaceful verses of the Bible. Jesus Christ, who essentially founded passive resistance, told the world that "blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God." (Matthew 5:9).

By the same token, it would be wrong to blame Islam, a faith that is 1600 years old and one that has a following of 1.4 billion people, for the actions of nineteen individuals on September 11, 2001. Not only did Muslims perish in the World Trade Center, but leaders in the Islamic world were quick to denounce the attacks. Every Muslim nation except Iraq (which has a secular leadership) publically voiced its opposition to the attacks on America. The Organization of Islamic States

(OIS)—the most powerful body in the Islamic world—also denounced the attacks, as did Nation of Islam leader Louis Farakhan and the influential Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, as well as the Mufti of Saudi Arabia and the head of Al Azhar. The one scene of a small Middle Eastern crowd celebrating the attacks was an exception. In Lebanon, thousands went to the American embassy in Beirut to give their condolences. In the capital of Iran, tens of thousands marched into the streets in a show of sympathy for the victims of the 9/11 attacks. In Jerusalem, the American consulate reported receiving 12,000 letters of sorrow from Palestinians.

Here in the United States, we have been bombarded with anti-Islamic experts who quote passages from the Qur'an, telling us that Muslims kill themselves so they can have sex with 72 virgins in heaven. What they do not mention is that the Qur'an states clearly and unequivocally that suicide is a grave sin and that the killing of civilians is strictly forbidden (even in a war of self-defense). They also fail to remind us that the suicide bombing is a young phenomenon in the Muslim world, the first having occurred as late as 1983. Before that, suicide bombings were utilized by Cuban anti-Batista rebels and more famously by Japanese kamkaxis. Today, the group which has conducted the highest number of suicide bombings in the world (with the highest death toll as well) is the Tamil Tigers group of Sri Lanka, whose members are overwhelmingly Hindu.

We also hear that Islam commands its followers to kill the infidels. The so-called experts (who have benefited most from the Jerry Springerization of cable news) are guilty of the same faults that can be found among the harshest critics of Christianity: they take holy verses completely out of their historical and textual context. The quote which is most often cited in attacking Islam, by journalists and anti-Islamic scholars alike, is one from the Sura of Repentance: "Slay idolators [infidels] wherever you find them!" (Qur'an 4: 89). But experts and war-hungry terrorists alike quote selectively based on their arguments or (in the case of bin Laden) their personal agendas. If you read one verse beyond the aforementioned quote, you will find the following: "But if they let you be, and do not make war on you, and offer you peace, God does not allow you to harm them" (4: 90). Almost every Qur'anic passage that deals with warfare includes a call to peace. The word Islam itself means "to lay down one's weapons" (in submission to God) and is related to the Arabic word *salam*, meaning "peace." In the Qur'an, God says that He told previous nations to seek revenge, eye for eye and tooth for tooth, but "if any one remits the retaliation by way of charity, it is an act of atonement for himself." (Qur'an 5:45). The Qur'an specifies that a human being may only fight in self-defense or in face of persecution. "Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits, for God loveth not transgressors . . . [And] if they cease, God is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful." (Qur'an 2:190-192).

In this global environment where the world is becoming a village, we must understand our neighbours. If East and West are ever to be reconciled peacefully, we must do our part in understanding Islam for what it is. Thus far, what we see of this faith is based on the actions of terrorists in the Middle East, the brutal treatment of women in Afghanistan, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. As Prince Charles of Great Britain eloquently states, "Our judgement of Islam has been grossly distorted by taking the extremes to be the norm. That, is a serious mistake. It is like judging the quality of life in Britain by the existence of murder and rape, child abuse and drug addiction. The extremes exist, and they must be dealt with. But when used as a basis to judge a society, they lead to distortion and unfairness." To truly understand Islam, we have to accept that as in all faiths, Islam has its fanatics and its puritanically obsessed followers. But there is another side to this faith, the

larger side, that exists in almost every country in the world.

Outside of the Wahabi penal code that dominated the Taliban's Afghanistan, there is an Islam that flourishes. It is an Islam that is spiritual and peaceful. It is an Islam that gives hope to the oppressed and requires governments to be responsible to their people. True Islam requires democracy; indeed the first four Caliphs of Islam were elected, by both men and women. Robert Crane, a one-time foreign-policy adviser to Richard Nixon and Muslim convert, says that the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights were implicitly based on the Islamic principles of equality and justice for all. He concludes that the democratic nature of the United States and Islam are totally compatible: "To be the best Muslim is to be a good American, and to be the best American is to be Islamic."

There is an Islam that empowers women, that was the first faith to give women property rights, that banned female infanticide, forced marriages, sexual exploitation, and that requires men to "live with [women] on a footing of kindness and equity." (Qur'an 4:19). The four largest Muslim countries in the world (Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia, Bangladesh) have each had a woman head of state recently. As of this writing, two of those countries (Indonesia and Bangladesh) have female heads of state. Both women are practicing Muslims in nations which contain well over 100 million Muslims each.

Islam is also a faith that told Muslims there is no compulsion in religion. In the Sura of Misbelievers, the Qur'an tells Muslims to say members of other faiths, "I do not serve what ye serve; nor will ye serve what I serve . . . ye have your religion, and I have my religion!" The Qur'an also tells Muslims, "And dispute ye not with the People of the Book [Christians and Jews], but say, "We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our God and your God is one; and it is to Him we bow." (Qur'an 29:46). It is a religion of kindness. One that H. G. Wells called a faith

"replete with gentleness, courtesy, and fraternity."

In his last sermon, the Prophet Muhammad, the orphan who became a prophet and whose spiritual faith has founded twenty great terrestrial empires, spoke to all people: "O People! Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you. Remember that you will indeed meet your LORD, and that he will indeed reckon your deeds . . . All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action. Do not therefore do injustice to each other. Remember one day you will meet God and answer your deeds."

It is this tradition of tolerance that inspired Donal Rockwell, a Colonel in the United States military, to learn more about Islam. "The universal brotherhood of Islam, regardless of race, politics, colour or country, has been brought home to me most keenly many times in my life -- and this is another feature which drew me towards the Faith."

Speaking of Islam's prophet, George Bernard Shaw said, "I have studied him - the wonderful man and in my opinion far from being an anti-Christ, he must be called the Savior of Humanity . . . I believe that if a man like him were to assume the dictatorship of the modern world he would succeed in solving its problems in a way that would bring it the much needed peace and happiness."

From the Atlantic coast of Africa to the mountains of western China, the crescent of Islam, over a billion people strong, resides. We should strive to truly understand this faith, not only because it is the faith of one fifth of the world's population, but also because it is the faith of millions of Americans.

Sajid Huq is a sophomore at Dartmouth College. Born and raised in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Sajid is the only Bangladeshi of his entering class. Mohammad Bydon is a senior at Dartmouth College. Born in Lebanon and raised in Dearborn, Michigan, Mohammad is noted for his passion for Islamic issues.

**'O humanity! We created you from a single of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other).'**

(Qur'an 49:13)

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