

SOURCES OF TENSION BETWEEN THE WEST AND THE ISLAMIC WORLD

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There will always be some stress between the historically Christian West and the world of Islam, if only because of normal and predictable religious disagreements. But shared theological territory exacerbates the doctrinal differences between them. Just as, at least in the era before air-power, nations have traditionally needed common geographical borders or territories in order to fight each other, religions fight much more effectively and fiercely if they share theological common ground. Christians and Muslims have much to quarrel over because they share belief in the God who created the universe, placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and revealed himself to a series of prophets—including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. By contrast, in a sense, Buddhists and Christians have far less basis for fighting each other, for the straightforward reason that they share less theological territory and, accordingly, have fewer disputed claims over which to compete.

The geographical boundaries historically shared by the Islamic world and Christendom have led to multiple conflicts between the two civilizations, including those of the multicentury Iberian Reconquista in the West and the long struggle for Constantinople in the East. Most notable among these struggles, though, because of their continued resonance down through the years, are the Crusades. While these European invasions actually had relatively little impact upon the Near East when they were underway—Arab historians made less of a fuss about them than did their Western contemporaries, and they were fairly transient affairs in any event—the potency of the Crusades as a historical symbol and rallying cry in the Islamic world has tended to grow with the passage of time. In recent years, accordingly, ‘Usama b. Ladin exhorted his audience to fight “the Crusaders and the Zionists” as if Muslims were still confronted by the aggressive Christian Europe of the twelfth century.

By contrast, modern Westerners don’t think about the Crusades very much—truth be told, we don’t typically think about history very much—and we only dimly remember the etymological connection between the English words *crusade* and *cross*. That link, however, is much clearer in Arabic, in which the Crusades are the *hurub al-salibiyyin*, from the word *salib* (cross). Thus, a few years ago, when President Bush innocently pledged a “crusade” against terrorism, Arabic-speaking Muslims literally heard him promise a new “war of the cross.”

Another obvious source of resentment and strife is the history of European colonialism that commenced in the eighteenth century, gained strength in the nineteenth century, and continued well into the twentieth century. Britain and France, for example, came to dominate large areas of the Islamic world—with the influence of the latter (in Algeria and Lebanon) proving particularly baneful.

Related to this earlier colonialism is the very real problem of the alliances of necessity that the West, and the US in particular, felt obliged to form with many defective regimes throughout the Near East and the Islamic world in order to contain the Soviet threat during the Cold War. Although these alliances may well have been necessary, our professed commitment to democracy and freedom often rings hollow in the ears of people subjected to the autocrats whom we supported as necessary allies.

There are, moreover, two special cases where our foreign policy actions have had quite unintended, negative consequences for Western-Islamic relationships. First, our support for Israel, motivated by genuine sympathy as well as by Cold War realpolitik, has earned us hatred throughout not only the Arab world but well beyond, among Muslims of many nations. They are aware of the enormous sums of money that we have given and continue to give to Tel Aviv as aid, and they are acutely conscious of the American-made weapons used to maintain Israeli security among (or, as they see it, dominance over) hostile Muslims. Second, our support for 'Usama b. Ladin and the other *mujahideen* in Afghanistan, using them as proxies in our battle with the Soviets, trained dedicated enemies and encouraged them to believe that, just as they had successfully fought one superpower, they could eventually defeat a second. This is, of course, a misreading of the Afghan War, which, though it manifestly damaged the Soviet Union, did not, contrary to Muslim fundamentalist imaginings, bring it down. But there is no question that the Islamically motivated *mujahideen* and the Islamically motivated Iranian revolution that occurred roughly at the same time restored a sense of pride and power to many Muslims that had been lost through decade after decade of feckless and corrupt secular rule.

Despite all the contact between Muslims and the West over the centuries since the rise of Islam in the seventh century and its rapid expansion thereafter (which was itself an example of imperialism and colonialism, though typical of its times and so far in the past that it is no longer typically felt as such), both civilizations are characterized, to a remarkable degree, by mutual ignorance. Western knowledge of Islam and Islamic civilization, for instance, is minimal, even shockingly lacking, in the general population. (At least, though, thanks to more than a decade of greater or lesser military involvement, many Americans can now find the Middle East on a map; one recalls Ambrose Bierce's cynical definition of war as "God's way of teaching Americans geography.") There is still a tendency, even though we're now aware that there are Shi'ite Muslims and Sunni Muslims, to think of Islam as an undifferentiated monolith and to throw our hands up in despair before a complex of cultures, histories, attitudes, and, yes, varying beliefs that we haven't really troubled ourselves to try to understand.

On the other side, after the initial expansion of Islam in its first few centuries—which was intellectual as well as geographical—Muslim society eventually lost its once almost insatiable appetite for Greek medicine, science, mathematics, and philosophy and settled into an incurious complacency, secure in the knowledge that it was the most advanced civilization on the planet and smugly confident that it would remain so. (The historical record is an invaluable treasure house of such cautionary tales so long as we recognize that we have no immunity to the mistakes that we love to point out in others.) As Bernard Lewis has observed in books like *The Crisis of Islam* and *What Went Wrong?*, Muslims failed to notice the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. They simply weren't paying attention.

When some of us heard that Abu al-Hasan Bani-Sadr, the first president of the post-revolution Islamic Republic of Iran, had earned his doctorate in economics at the Sorbonne in Paris, we hoped that his understanding of European culture might bode well for some kind of eventual rapprochement between Iran and the West. Disappointingly, though, we soon learned that his tenure in France had been spent entirely in lecture halls, the library, and his flat and in transit back and forth between them while he pursued a narrowly technical degree. He had experienced little or nothing of European culture and values; he wasn't interested. In this regard, he was only slightly ahead of the Muslim masses, among whom widespread illiteracy has led to an oral culture that too often feasts on rumors and, frankly, paranoia about the West and about other matters.

Unfortunately, though, not all of what many Muslims think they know about the West is actually untrue. We could wish that it were all ignorance, but it isn't. Western decadence is no myth, and many Muslims feel it powerfully in both its seductiveness and its repulsiveness. Moreover, that combination is psychologically very potent, as those who feel themselves allured by the attractions of the West hate themselves and the West for that very attractiveness.

In that light, let me comment upon the common (and, to Westerners, often rather comical) notion of the US as "the great Satan": We fail to understand that phrase, I think, if we have in mind the supernatural monster of evil who inspired Auschwitz, the Gulag, and the Cambodian

killing fields. Rather, we should think of a diabolical tempter, a fallen angel, a smooth and attractive seducer. Here is the centrally relevant text, Sura 114 (the last chapter) of the Qur'an, in my rough-and-ready translation:

Say: I take refuge with the lord of the people,
 The king of the people,
 The God of the people,
 From the evil of the lurking whisperer
 Who whispers into the breasts of the people
 Among the jinn and the people.

The reference is clearly to the devil. But now listen to the sound of the original Arabic, as nearly as I can reproduce in Roman letters without including distracting diacritical marks. Notice the hissing *s* sounds, and think of the seductive tempter in the Garden of Eden:

Qul: A'uudhu bi-rabb an-naass,
 Malik an-naass,
 Ilaah an-naass,
 Min sharr al-wasswaass al-khannaass
 Aladhi yuwasswissu fis-sudur an-naass
 Min al-jinna wa'n-naass.

America is dangerous not because it is loathsome but precisely because of its very attractiveness, its wealth, its comfort, and its power, which threaten to seduce believers away from fidelity to God.

And to make things worse, Muslims are frustrated because their civilization—which was for several centuries the most advanced on the planet and that was founded, according to their belief, on the final divine revelation—has become, by and large, an economic backwater, a technical and scientific consumer rather than a producer, and a political pawn. Its scholars, scientists, and philosophers were once the foremost in the world, but its schools and universities are now, on the whole, mediocre. To put the case in Latter-day Saint terms, the Islamic “final dispensation” has gone awry.

When the Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran from his exile in France, during which he had smuggled his messages to his followers via

Western-made cassette tapes, he flew to Tehran in a Boeing jet and climbed into a Chevrolet in order to drive into the city from Mehrabad Airport. Western hegemony is inescapable. And, from the perspective of many Muslims, the future is not especially promising. If, for instance, fossil fuels (an ever-diminishing and irreplaceable resource) and their derivatives were left out of the picture, and all the Arab nations were somehow joined together in a single country (call it "Arabistan"), the gross national product of that country would rank just below the GNP of Finland.

The result is a deep sense of humiliation among many Muslims of having been wronged and, in some circles, a sense of anger and a desire to get revenge. These feelings sometimes make it very difficult for even sympathetic Westerners and very intelligent representatives of Islamic culture to engage in meaningful conversation. There is too much baggage. There are too many psychological obstacles. And the situation isn't helped by language differences. Knowledge of Near Eastern and Islamic languages in the West is very rare; I'm told that, at the time of the Iranian revolution in the late seventies, fewer than five Americans on the staff of the huge American embassy in Tehran could comfortably read and converse in Persian. And on the other side, the state of Arabic publishing is extraordinarily weak, and there are few Arabic translations from Western languages. This is no recipe for curing an intercivilizational crisis that rests, to a very large degree, on mutual incomprehension.

And to make conditions worse still, the Near East is densely populated with failed or largely failed states whose governments have a strong interest in scapegoating and misdirection, and there is no free press to hold them accountable. Nor has there been an adequate effort on the part of the US or the West in general to tell our story. Yet, if it were well and properly told, that story would have much (including the religiosity of many of our people and a tradition of religious tolerance that allows Muslims to flourish in our midst) that could help to overcome the negative stereotypes that many residents of the Islamic world have about our society.

The rise of "fundamentalist" Islam (which comes in various flavors and goes by a number of names, including *Salafism* and *Wahhabism*) represents a new threat and source of tension. Promulgated through vast networks of schools (*madradas*) and backed by petrodollars, this form of

Islam misreads the lessons of the past. In trying to return to the days of Islamic greatness, it fails to recognize that in those days, greatness came in large part because of the openness of Islamic society to foreign ideas (e.g., in connection with the famous translation “movement” of the eighth and ninth centuries). ‘Usama b. Ladin, hiding in the mountains and caves of Afghanistan, represented a path to nihilistic irrelevancy, not to the revivification of Muslim strength and glory.

Nevertheless, Islamic fundamentalism is a genuinely powerful force, as every Western observer now realizes. Confident predictions of global secularization have been proven wrong. Religion may not move the intellectual and political elite in the West, but it continues, despite prophecies to the contrary, to exert enormous influence upon such elites elsewhere and upon ordinary people everywhere. Stalin’s famous question “How many divisions has the Pope?” has been answered: The Vatican still commands the allegiance of hundreds of millions of people, as it has for centuries. The Soviet Union lasted well under a hundred years; Stalin’s commissars no longer control even the Kremlin. And dreams of a renewed caliphate inspire millions and terrify many millions more.

Though, just at the time that Islam is on the rise and, in many areas, newly militant, the West appears to have lost its nerve and its faith. (With an eye strictly on the fanatics and not all Muslims, the famous line of William Butler Yeats comes to mind: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”) Europe seems to be dying. Or, at least, the Europeans are. Demographic trends on the continent appear to promise what some have called “Europistan” or “Eurabia.” And interreligious dialogue often tends to be one-sided, with assertive Muslims faced only by apologetic and tenuously Christian conversation partners.

Such trends are or should be worrisome for the West, and, in my opinion, aren’t even good for Muslims. Islam is in serious need of redefinition in a pluralistic world. Adaptation is always necessary for religions. Western tradition itself recognizes the concept of a Christian church that is *semper reformanda*, “always reforming,” and Muslims commonly teach that a *mujaddid*, a renewer, is sent by God in every century to revivify Islam. But the necessity for believers to faithfully rethink their faith is surely more urgent in Islam at the moment than in any other major religious

tradition. It needs to decide what the status and function of *shari'a* will be, and particularly so for Muslims of the diaspora, living outside of traditionally Islamic lands. It needs to confront the issue of what Pope Benedict XVI has called “reciprocity”: Will the religious freedom of the West, which allows the construction of mosques and conversions to Islam, be matched by corresponding freedoms in the Islamic world? Will conversions from Islam remain capital crimes? Will Christian communities be as free to build churches in Islamic countries as congregations of Muslims in the West are to build houses of worship? And where are the moderate Muslims?

Reform of Islam will have to come from within, from Muslims. But it would be helpful for would-be Islamic reformers, on the issues just sketched here as on many others, if they had strong, informed, Western and Christian dialogue partners for support and encouragement and even for example and advice. It will be most unfortunate if—just at the point when some Muslims might be trying to show that Islamic belief can be reconciled with, and thrive within, a pluralistic and tolerant social order—the onetime Christian West seems to demonstrate by its own religious collapse that such hopes are illusory and dangerous.

I have, I realize, seemed quite negative. I blame this on the topic that I was asked to address, which was the sources of tension between the West and the Islamic world. It would be Pollyanna-ish and misleading to ignore such obstacles and difficulties. But I do not want to end without asserting my strong belief that these obstacles need not have the final say. There is also considerable reason for guarded optimism. Good things can be and are being done.