

Muslims and the West after September 11

Pervez Hoodbhoy

Pervez Hoodbhoy is professor of nuclear and high-energy physics at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad. This article is based on a speech delivered at the Center for Inquiry International conference in Atlanta, Georgia, 2001.

America has exacted blood revenge for the Twin Towers. A million Afghans have fled US bombs into the cold wastelands and face starvation. B-52s have blown the Taliban to bits and changed Mullah Omar's roar of defiance into a pitiful squeak for surrender. Usama bin Laden is on the run (he may be dead by the time this article reaches the reader). But even as the champagne pops in the White House, America remains fearful—for good reason. Subsequent to September 11th we have all begun to live in a different, more dangerous world. Now is the time to ask why. Like clinical pathologists, we need to scientifically examine the sickness of human behaviour that impelled terrorists to fly airliners filled with passengers into skyscrapers. We also need to understand why millions celebrated as others died. In the absence of such an understanding there remains only the medieval therapy of exorcism: for the strong to literally beat the devil out of the weak. Indeed, the Grand Exorcist, disdainful of international law and the growing nervousness of even its close allies, prepares a new hit list of other Muslim countries in need of therapy: Iraq, Somalia, and Libya. We shall kill at will, is the message.

This will not work. Terrorism does not have a military solution. Soon—I fear perhaps very soon—there will be still stronger, more dramatic proof. In the modern age, technological possibilities to wreak enormous destruction are limitless. Anger, when intense enough, makes small stateless groups and even individuals extremely dangerous.

Anger is ubiquitous in the Islamic world today. Allow me to share a small personal experience. On September 12th, 2001, I had a seminar scheduled at the department of physics in my university in Islamabad, part of a weekly seminar for physics students on topics outside of physics. Though traumatized by events, I could not cancel the seminar because sixty people had already arrived, so I said, "We will have our seminar today on a new subject: on yesterday's terrorist attacks." The response was negative. Some students mindlessly rejoiced in the attacks. One said, "You can't call this terrorism." Another said, "Are you only worried because it is Americans who have died?" It took two hours of sustained, impassioned, argumentation for me to convince my students that the brutal killing of ordinary people who had nothing to do with the policies of the United States was an atrocity. I suppose that millions of Muslim students the world over felt as mine did, but heard no counter-arguments.

If the world is to be spared what future historians may call the "Century of Terror," we must chart a perilous course between the Scylla of American imperial arrogance and the Charybdis of Islamic religious fanaticism. Through these waters we must steer by a distant star towards a careful, reasoned, democratic, humanistic, and secular future. Else, shipwreck is certain.



Injured innocence

"Why do they hate us?" asked George W. Bush. This rhetorical question betrays the pathetic ignorance of most Americans about the world around them. Moreover, its claim to injured innocence cannot withstand even the most cursory examination of US history. For almost forty years, this "naiveté and self-righteousness" has been challenged most determinedly by Noam Chomsky. As early as 1967, he pointed out that the idea that "our" motives are pure and "our" actions benign is "nothing new in American intellectual history—or, for that matter, in the general history of imperialist apologia."

Muslim leaders have mirrored America's claim and have asked the same question of the West. They have had little to say about September 11 that makes sense to people outside their communities. Although they speak endlessly on rules of personal hygiene and "halal" or "haram," they cannot even tell us whether or not the suicide bombers violated Islamic laws. According to Dr. Taha Jabir Alalwani, chair of the Virginia-based (and largely Saudi-funded) Fiqh Council, "this kind of question needs a lot of research and we don't have that in our budget."

Fearful of backlash, most leaders of Muslim communities in the US, Canada, and Europe have responded in predictable ways to the Twin Towers atrocity. They have proclaimed first, that Islam is a religion of peace; and second, that Islam was hijacked by fanatics on the September 11. They are wrong on both counts.

First, Islam—like Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, or any other religion—is not about peace. Nor is it about war. Every religion is about absolute belief in its own superiority and its divine right to impose itself upon others. In medieval times, both the Crusades and the Jihads were soaked in blood. Today, Christian fundamentalists attack abortion clinics in the US and kill doctors; Muslim fundamentalists wage their sectarian wars against each other; Jewish settlers holding the Old Testament in one hand and Uzis in the other burn olive orchards and drive Palestinians off their ancestral land; Hindus in India demolish ancient mosques and burn down churches; Sri Lankan Buddhists slaughter Tamil separatists.

The second assertion is even further off the mark: even if Islam had in some metaphorical sense been hijacked, that event did not occur on September 11, 2001. It happened around the 13th century. Indeed, Islam has yet to recover from the trauma of those times.

A dismal present

Where do Muslims stand today? Note that I do not ask about Islam; Islam is an abstraction. Moulana Abdus Sattar Edhi and Mullah Omar are both followers of Islam, but the former is overdue for a Nobel Peace Prize while the other is a medieval, ignorant, cruel fiend. Edward Said, among others, has insistently pointed out that Islam carries very different meanings to different people. It is as heterogeneous as those who believe and practice it. There is no "true Islam." Therefore it only makes sense to speak of people who claim that faith.

Today Muslims number one billion, spread over 48 Muslim countries. None of these nations has yet evolved a stable democratic political system. In fact, all Muslim countries are dominated by self-serving corrupt elites who cynically advance their personal interests and steal resources from their people. No Muslim country has a viable educational system or a university of international stature.

Reason too has been waylaid. To take some examples from my own experience: You will seldom encounter a Muslim name as you flip through scientific journals, and if you do, chances are that this person lives in the West. There are a few exceptions: Abdus Salam, together with Steven Weinberg and Sheldon Glashow, won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1979 for the unification of the weak and electromagnetic forces. I got to know Salam reasonably well—we even wrote a book preface together. He was a remarkable man, terribly in love with his country and his religion. And yet he died deeply unhappy, scorned by his country and excommunicated from Islam by an act of the Pakistani parliament in 1974. Today the Ahmadi sect, to which Salam belonged, is considered heretical and harshly persecuted. (My next-door neighbour, also an Ahmadi, was shot in the neck and heart and died in my car as I drove him to the hospital. His only fault was to have been born in the wrong sect.)

Though genuine scientific achievement is rare in the contemporary Muslim world, pseudo-science is in generous supply. A former chairman of my department has calculated the speed of Heaven: it is receding from the earth at one centimetre per second less than the speed of light. His ingenious method relies upon a verse in the Qur'an which says that worship on the night on which the Qur'an was revealed is worth a thousand nights of ordinary worship. He states that this amounts to a time-dilation factor of one thousand, which he plugs into a formula belonging to Einstein's theory of special relativity.

A more public example: one of two Pakistani nuclear engineers recently arrested on suspicion of passing nuclear secrets to the Taliban had earlier proposed to solve Pakistan's energy problems by harnessing the power of genies. The Qur'an says that God created man from clay, and angels

and genies from fire; so this highly placed engineer proposed to capture the genies and extract their energy. (The reader may wish to read the rather acrimonious public correspondence between Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood and myself in 1988 on this subject, reproduced in my book *Islam and Science—Religious Orthodoxy And The Battle For Rationality*, published in 1991).

A brilliant past that vanished

Today's sorry situation contrasts starkly with the Islam of yesteryear. Between the 9th and the 13th centuries - the Golden Age of Islam - the only people doing decent science, philosophy, or medicine were Muslims. For five straight centuries they alone kept the light of learning ablaze. Muslims not only preserved ancient learning, they also made substantial innovations and extensions. The loss of this tradition has proved tragic for Muslim peoples.

Science flourished in the Golden Age of Islam because there was within Islam a strong rationalist tradition, carried on by a group of Muslim thinkers known as the Mutazilites. This tradition stressed human free will, strongly opposing the predestinarians who taught that everything was foreordained and that humans have no option but to surrender everything to Allah. While the Mutazilites held political power, knowledge grew.

But in the twelfth century Muslim orthodoxy reawakened, spearheaded by the cleric Imam Al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali championed revelation over reason, predestination over free will. He refuted the possibility of relating cause to effect, teaching that man cannot know or predict what will happen; God alone can. He damned mathematics as against Islam, an intoxicant of the mind that weakened faith.

Islam choked in the vicelike grip of orthodoxy. No longer, as during the reign of the dynamic caliph Al-Mamun and the great Haroon Al-Rashid, would Muslim, Christian, and Jewish scholars gather and work together in the royal courts. It was the end of tolerance, intellect, and

science in the Muslim world. The last great Muslim thinker, Abd-al-Rahman ibn Khaldun, belonged to the 14th century.

Islam under Imperialism

Meanwhile, the rest of the world moved on. The Renaissance brought an explosion of scientific inquiry in the West. This owed much to Arab translations and other Muslim contributions, but that fact would matter little. Mercantile capitalism and technological progress drove Western countries rapidly to colonize the Muslim world from Indonesia to Morocco. Always brutal, at times genocidal, it made clear, at least to a part of the Muslim elites, that they were paying a heavy price for not possessing the analytical tools of modern science and the social and political values of modern culture - their colonizers' real source of power.

Despite widespread resistance from the orthodox, the logic of modernity found 19th century Muslim adherents. Modernizers such as Mohammed Abduh and Rashid Rida of Egypt, Sayed Ahmad Khan of India, and Jamaluddin Afghani (who belonged everywhere) wished to adapt Islam to the times, to interpret the Qur'an in ways consistent with modern science, and to discard the Hadith (the traditions, or ways of the Prophet) in favour of the Qur'an. Others seized on the modern idea of the nation-state. It is crucial to note that not a single 20th century Muslim nation-



alist leader was a fundamentalist. Turkey's Kemal Ataturk, Algeria's Ahmed Ben Bella, Indonesia's Sukarno, Pakistan's Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Iran's Mohammed Mosaddeq all sought to organize their societies on the basis of secular values.

However, like other anti-colonial nationalist currents across the Third World, Muslim and Arab nationalism included the desire to control and use national resources for domestic benefit. Conflict with Western greed was inevitable. Imperial interests in Britain and later the United States feared independent nationalism. Anyone willing to collaborate was preferred, even ultraconservative Islamic regimes like that of Saudi Arabia. In time, as Cold War pressures rose, nationalism became intolerable. In 1953, Mosaddeq of Iran was overthrown in a CIA coup and replaced by Reza Shah Pahlavi. Britain targeted Nasser. Indonesia's Sukarno was replaced by Suharto after a bloody coup that left a million dead.

Pressed from without, corrupt and incompetent from within, secular governments proved unable to defend national interests or to deliver social justice. As they failed they left a vacuum which Islamic religious movements grew to fill. After the fall of the Shah, Iran underwent a bloody revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini. General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq ruled Pakistan for eleven hideous years and strove to Islamize both state and society. In Sudan, an Islamic state arose under Jaafar al-Nimeiry; amputation of hands and limbs became common. Decades ago the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was the most powerful Palestinian organization, and largely secular; after its defeat in 1982 in Beirut, it was largely eclipsed by Hamas, a fundamentalist Muslim movement.

The lack of scruple and the pursuit of power by the United States combined fatally with this tide in the Muslim world in 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. With Pakistan's Zia-ul-Haq as America's foremost ally, the CIA openly recruited Islamic holy warriors from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Algeria. Radical Islam went into overdrive as its superpower ally and mentor funnelled support to the mujahideen, whom Ronald Reagan feted on the lawn of White House, lavishly praising them as "brave freedom fighters challenging the Evil Empire."

After the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States walked away from an Afghanistan in shambles, its own mission accomplished. The Taliban emerged; Usama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda made Afghanistan their base. Other groups of holy warriors learned from the Afghan example and took up arms in their own countries.

At least until September 11th, US policy-makers were unrepentant. A few years ago Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's U.S. national security adviser, was asked by the Paris weekly *Nouvel Observateur* whether in retrospect, given that "Islamic fundamentalism represents a world menace today," US policy might have been mistaken. Brzezinski retorted: "What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?"

But Brzezinski's "stirred up Moslems" wanted to change the world; and in this they were des-

tinued to succeed. With this we conclude our history primer for the 700 years until September 11, 2001.

Facing the future

What should thoughtful people infer from this whole narrative? I think the inferences are several—and different for different protagonists.

For Muslims, it is time to stop wallowing in self-pity: Muslims are not helpless victims of conspiracies hatched by an all-powerful, malicious West. The fact is that the decline of Islamic greatness took place long before the age of mercantile imperialism. The causes were essentially internal. Therefore Muslims must introspect, and ask what went wrong.

Muslims must recognise that their societies are far larger, more diverse and complex than the small homogenous tribal culture that existed in Arabia 1400 years ago. It is therefore time to renounce the idea that Islam can survive and prosper only in an Islamic state run according to Islamic sharia law. Muslims need a secular and democratic state that respects religious freedom and human dignity, founded on the principle that power belongs to the people. This means confronting and rejecting the claim by orthodox Islamic scholars that in an Islamic state sovereignty does not belong to the people but, instead, to the vice-regents of Allah (Khilafat-al-Arz) or Islamic jurists (Vilayat-e-Faqih).

Muslims must not look towards the likes of bin Laden; such people have no real answer and can offer no real positive alternative. To glorify their terrorism is a hideous mistake—the unremitting slaughter of Shias, Christians, and Ahmadis in their places of worship in Pakistan, and of other minorities in other Muslim countries, is proof that all terrorism is not about the revolt of the dispossessed.

The United States too must confront bitter truths. It is a fact that the messages of George W. Bush and his ally Tony Blair fall flat while those of Usama bin Laden, whether he lives or dies, resonate strongly across the Muslim world. Bin Laden's religious extremism turns off many Muslims, but they find his political message easy to relate to—stop the dispossession of the Palestinians, stop propping up corrupt and despotic regimes across the world just because they serve US interests.

Americans will also have to accept that the United States is past the peak of its imperial power; the 1950's and 60's are gone for good. U.S. triumphalism and disdain for international law is creating enemies everywhere, not just among Muslims. Therefore they must become less arrogant and more like other peoples of this world. While the U.S. will remain a superpower for some time to come, inevitably it will become less and less "super." There are compelling economic and military reasons for this. For example, China's economy is growing at seven percent per year while the U.S. economy is in recession. India, too, is coming up very rapidly. In military terms, superiority in the air or in space is no longer enough to ensure security; in how many countries can U.S. citizens safely walk the streets today?

Our collective survival lies in recognising that religion is not the solution; neither is nationalism. Both are divisive, embedding within us false notions of superiority and arrogant pride that are difficult to erase. We have but one choice: the path of secular humanism, based upon the principles of logic and reason. This alone offers the hope of providing everybody on this globe with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.