

War, Negation and Muslim Identity Revisited

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A Muslim writer begins an article with, “who says the campaign for animal rights was started in the West ..” She goes on to argue that Islam provided the original treatise on the humane treatment of animals. Her case was poorly constructed, inadequately executed, although the essence of her idea was to a degree, accurate. Islamic tradition has indeed laid a foundation, with clear boundaries regarding the humane treatment of animals.

But why did the author, like so many others, choose to turn what should have been a constructive argument, into a diatribe? Was it necessary to charge Western discourses, resorting to the ever predictable classification of “us and them”, instead of trying to find a common cause?

The same point can be made regarding other discussions, whether pertaining to human rights (women’s rights in particular), the environment, labor rights, and many others.

In her defense, Amirah Sulaiman was simply following an existing pattern, commonly used to delineate one’s cultural or religious progression, at the expense of another.

But it’s more than that, it’s also a defense mechanism, a haunting reminder that the alleged civilizational clash, although more imagined and politicized, than real, pervades many aspects of our perception of ourselves and of others.

Among Muslim intellectuals, as in societies, this paradigm is omnipresent.

Cultural animosity, collective defensiveness, racism (and Orientalism), among other overriding cultural trends existed long before distained US foreign policy in the Middle East became the defining norm, before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan. But these events emboldened existing arguments on both sides, with Muslims solidifying as a collective victim, and the US, from a Muslim point of view, seen as a vulgar, but true representation of the West.

Of course, Muslims and Islam had their own ominous representations in the US, thus ‘Western’ media, culture and psyche – the dagger wielding bearded man, who abuses women, whenever he takes time away from blowing up infidels. As comical as I intended this to sound, as disturbingly true such a depiction is in the minds of many.

It would be utterly unfair and largely inaccurate to equate the ‘Western’ misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims, with the latter’s misrepresentation of the West. The former approaches its caricatured depiction from a chest thumping, Fox News mentality of militarily powerful and economically stable countries. Its view of the other is largely hegemonic and its standard solution to bringing wars to an end is with military surges and the increasing of

military assistance (with Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan being the current cases in point.)

Collective Muslim identity however is largely fragmented, between governments that only represent themselves, and peoples facing many forms of oppression: political tyranny at home, external repression (war, foreign interventions, etc), economic uncertainty (fuelled by inequality and compounded by unfiltered globalization), and extremism.

The so-called war on terror, for obvious reasons, cemented that fragmentation. On one hand, it reinforced many Muslims' growing sense of victimization; a notion that itself resulted in both submissiveness and extremism. On the other it inspired a re-think, positive at times, self-negating at others: it kindled a affirmative sense of identity and pride among a generation desperate to identify itself according to its own priorities and on its own turf, while, on the other hand, it led to a (minor) movement of intellectual migration, which sought in the 'West' an escape from the oppressive reality, of which, of course the 'West' is equally responsible.

But it was not war alone (and in itself) that shaped Muslim perceptions of the 'West'; it was rather the US' and (to lesser extent Britain's) insistence that their war championed an essentially Western discourse on democracy and human rights. Such arguments took place in an already hostile atmosphere: incessant media and academic mutterings about Islam's shortcomings, and a growing right wing, racist tendencies in various Western countries targeting immigrants and minorities, many of whom are Muslims.

When such political, military and intellectual encroachment is backed by such statements as that made by US Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, Lieutenant General William G. Boykin (now retired), then the plot thickens, and the collective polarization of both societies grows. Boykin, author of "Never Surrender: A Soldier's Journey to the Crossroads of Faith and Freedom," became famous for his infamous quote, several years ago, in reference to a Muslim militant in Mogadishu: "I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol."

This was a lone quotation, of course, in a sea of bigoted references that defined many officials and media pundits during the Bush Administration. Such voices are now, somewhat mute, although, its hard to believe that the advent of President Barack Obama has altered a culture in its entirety.

It takes generations for genuine trust to take hold, and the countdown cannot possibly start as long as one US soldier is stationed in a Muslim country for the purpose of conducting war and occupation.

Yet again, there is more to all of this. Reversing intellectual dogmas and collective realizations is too convoluted a process; it requires time, action and good will.

In the meantime, Muslims, who insist on living in the shadow of the 'West' as unreserved aficionados or obsessed detractors must redefine their own discourses. As for the latter, they must not allow war alone, MTV consumer media culture, hegemonic globalization and racist remarks by a politician or a born again evangelical to taint their entire view of what are essentially unique, diverse and in many ways impressive civilizations that have done much good. Indeed, there is the like of Boykin, but there are millions of others who are peace-loving, ordinary people, some of whom are ardent advocates of human rights, anti-war campaigners, including the thousands who have repeatedly broken the siege on Gaza,

and previous to that Iraq. Muslims too must quit caricaturing them, reducing them to enemies, juxtaposing Muslims' essential righteousness with 'Western' essential depravity. Not only are such reductions inaccurate and self-defeating, they also break down possible alliances between the forces of good in this world, in a time when they are of essence.

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