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Islam, Globalization, and Freedom of Expression

Muhammad Daiyabu Hassan

The exercise of freedom of expression by a segment of the secular establishment, mainly among members of the literary and intellectual elite in the West, in relation to Islam, constitutes a major obstacle in the search for common grounds between the Islamic world and the West. Due to historical factors, the church seems to have assented to the continuous secular attacks on Christianity. Some examples in this regard are Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* and Martin Scorsese's film adaptation of Nikos Kazantzaki's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. To this segment of Western secular cultural thinkers, nothing is sacred. The publication of a series of cartoons satirizing Prophet Muhammad by the Danish newspaper, *Jyllad Posten*, marked a new height in the secular assault on the taboos of Islam since the publication of Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* in 1988. The various reactions this event engendered from across the Muslim world and the controversy that ensued, point to a new dimension on the strained relations between Islam and the West, shaped by interactions between forces of religion, globalization, and liberalism.

**Introduction**

Islam and secularism are rested on diametrically opposed worldviews. While Islam encompasses all aspects of life based on the *Shari'ah*, accepted by Muslims as divinely sanctioned absolute truth, established once and for all times, the ultimate goal of secularism is the modification of society according to human standards. The concept of revivalism is central to the goals of *Shari'ah*. Islamic revivalism entails the reaffirmation (*tajdeed*) of the teachings and practice of Islam. Islam's core values encrypted in the *Shari'ah* are safeguarded against
subversion, infiltration of non-Islamic practices and/or corrupt tendencies in the religion, whether internally evolved or externally induced by the *ulama* (clerics) through the instrumentality of revivalism.

Islamic revivalism (which is mainly carried out through groups or movements) is not a new phenomenon. It has been an important part of the history of Islam all through the centuries. For example "...during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, revivalist leaders and movements had sprung across the Islamic world: Mahdi (1848-85) in Sudan... Wahabis (1703-92), in Saudi Arabia" (Esposito, 1992, p. 50), the Danfodio’s Jihad (1804) in Northern Nigeria, etc.

The origin of most of the contemporary Islamic movements and groups that sprung across the Muslim world can be traced to the “Muslim Brotherhood” of Egypt and “Jama'at Islami” of the Indian sub-continent. The founding fathers of these movements in Esposito’s words are the “trailblazers or architects of contemporary Islamic revivalism, men whose ideas and methods have been studied and emulated from Sudan to Indonesia” (Esposito, 1992, p. 120).

Although these 20th century pioneers of Islamic revivalism—Hassan al Banna, Sayyid Qutb and Abul Ala Maududi, drew their inspirations from early revivalists such as Ibn Taymiyyah, there is a marked difference between them. While the sources of the factors that inspired most of the early revivalists were mainly from within, for example, moral decadence within the *ummah*, the factors that inspired the 20th century revivalist movements were essentially from without: either induced or imposed.

The diagnosis of Sayyid Qutb (1906-66), the more charismatic leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, (whom Ruthven attributed the aestheticization of suicide bombing to) on the ills that have afflicted the *ummah* is instructive: the abandonment of *Hakimiyya* (the sovereignty of God) in legislation and administration and its replacement with Western secular ones. This provides the basis of the mission statement of the Brotherhood—The Qur’an is our constitution, the Prophet is our leader.

Maududi made the same analysis of the problems facing the Muslim *ummah*:

There are two basically different in fact mutually opposed attitudes to life: one of accepting God as sovereign and law giver, as such responding to Him as His slave and servant; the other of defiance and rebellion against God and arrogate to one self or to others than the one true God of authority to command (Khurshid & Ansar, 1979, p. 13).
Based on this, therefore, their object is the return of the ummah to the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet. In other words, the rejection of Western secular ideas, values, and institutions.

This marks the period when the seeds of the current waves of Islamic revivalism were sown. According to Samuel Huntington, “beginning in the 1970s Islamic symbols, beliefs, practices, institutions, policies and organizations won increasing commitment and support throughout the world of 1 billion Muslims stretching from Morocco to Indonesia and from Nigeria to Kazakhstan” (Huntington, 2002, p. 111).

This increase in commitment and support referred to by Huntington is encompassing in a nexus of a complex relationship between Islam (the religion), Islamic Revivalism (a basic characteristic of Islam), the ulama (guardians of Shari'ah) and the Muslim ummah. This bond explains the successes achieved by Islamic movements across the Muslim world.

It is our contention that the current antagonism between the Muslim world and West is in the incompatibility of Islam's fundamental values with core Western liberal values, which are rooted in secularism. One of these is the exercise of freedom of expression.

This ongoing antipathy in our view has been resuscitated and is sustained by the forces of neo-liberalism in response to the phenomenal growth and successes achieved by Islamic reviverist movements in countering the secularization of the Islamic world.

In this article, our objective is to examine the impact and consequences of the new interface between Islam, secular assault on religion, and the exercise of freedom of expression, particularly in Western societies. To this end, the article is divided into two parts. Part one traces the origin of the current aversion between the Islamic world and the West. Part two examines the current issues that polarize and widen the rifts between the two sides, and assesses their implications on regional and global security. Finally, our conclusion is centered on the search for ways to avert what some scholars predict to be the inevitable clash of civilizations.

**Part I: Origin of the Mutual Distrust**

Historically, the strained relationship between the Islamic world and the West is best explained from the perspective of Melanie Ulrich's “discordant relations theory,” where each part is said to be actively involved in the process of “alterity” (Otherness). This involved psychological and cultural distancing
which leads to dehumanizing and demonizing and ultimately violence.

The idea of “Othering” is rooted in racism that in order to preserve identity, enemies are necessary. Quoting Michael Diddin “unless we hate what we are not, we cannot love who we are,” Huntington, reminds us that after a century, we painfully are rediscovering “these... old truths” (Huntington, 1992, p. 20).

Europeans regarded the Orient, particularly Islam before the Victorian era, as the antithesis of what Europe represents then. Consequently, Islam was “the spiritual and political enemy against which Christians should fight” (Bennett, 1992, p. 6). To this end, myths and stereotypes became necessary tools of distancing. One of the enemy images of the Prophet Muhammad that was created during medieval period was that he was an imposter. He was widely believed to be “a renegade cardinal from Rome, who having failed to achieve the object of every cardinal’s desire, fled to Arabia and founded a rival religion in a fit of pique!” (Bennett, 1992, p. 8).

This representation of Islam and the prophet was maintained all through the European enlightenment era. Martin Luther, leader of the Reformation movement, was quoted to have said, “if the Pope is anti-Christ, the Turk is the Devil incarnate” (Bennett, 1992, p. 8).

According to Edward Said, although most Orientalist scholars had obtained a sizeable amount of knowledge about Islam and Muslims during the Renaissance period, they chose to maintain the distorted image of Islam and Muslims; thus, the Prophet “Mohammad was generally seen as a false prophet [and] a sewer of discord...” (Said, 1985, p. 5). Bennett therefore concluded that whatever were the original motives of the crusaders who were the first to create these images, they have “created vast misrepresentation and misunderstanding on both sides and permanently embittered relations between Christians and Muslims” (Bennett, 1992, p. 6).

This has been what characterizes the relationship between Christendom and the Islamic world before the colonial subjugation of most of the Islamic world by Europe. It has consisted in the words of Bernard Lewis of “...a long series of attacks and counterattacks, jihads and crusades, conquests and reconquests” (Lewis, 1991, p. 19).

According to Roudolph Peters, this “Devil theory of Islam” was later replaced:

The image of the dreadful Turk, clad in a long robe and brandishing his scimitar, ready to slaughter any infidel that might come his way—has been a stereotype in Western literature for a long time. Nowadays that image has been
replaced by that of the Arab “terrorist” in battledress, armed with a Kalashnikov gun and prepared to murder in cold blood innocent Jewish and Christian women and children (Peters, 1979, p. 4).

In other words, the media and the film industry have overtaken general literature and the visual art in this regard. In addition, Enver Masud, contends that negative media coverage of Islam and Muslims particularly in the United States has been intensified especially after the Persian Gulf War of 1991. Muslims are portrayed as backward, savage, intolerant and obscurantist (Masud, 2001, p. VII).

On the other hand, the film industry is said to be waging a much more devastating war on the image of Muslims. Sardar and Davies maintain that Hollywood films as popular sources of entertainment with global audience are by far the most effective means of spreading what they described (borrowing from Norman Daniels) as “knowledgeable ignorance.” They argue that fictional stereotypes have the power to fill in the gaps in people’s minds about a reality they did not know or know little about. Some of the films they cited which were deliberately made to misrepresent Islam and the Arabs include “The siege,” “True Lies,” “Delta Force,” “Executive Decision,” and “The Rules of Engagement,” which was described as “the most vicious anti-Arab racist film ever made by a major Hollywood studio” (Sardar & Davies, 2003, p. 200).

On the side of the Muslim world, most of the bashing of the West began with the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. In a bit to distance the Muslim ummah from Western secular lifestyles, the West and particularly the United States of America were portrayed as the embodiment of everything evil. After his return from his sojourn to the United States from 1948-50, Sayyid Qutb intensified his portrayal of the West as morally bankrupt. His criticisms of individualism and materialism in the West represent examples of some of the most severe criticisms of the West.

His own version of “unless we hate what we are not, we cannot love who we are” revolved around attacking those Western oriented Muslims whom he accused of suffering from acute inferiority complex because of their insatiable appetite of everything Western. These anti-West comments gained a lot of ground, aided by other factors such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; thus the current level of antagonisms between the Muslim world and the West.

Other factors usually identified to be responsible for sustaining the current level of tension between the West and the Islamic world are very important. For example, the United States foreign policy machinery has been under the control of different kinds of hawks over the years; also, the activities of the powerful Israeli lobby groups and big businesses. And, in spite of the growing
influence of anti-Western clerics in the Muslim world, we are convinced that the new dimension created by the interface between ultra-secularists attacks on Islam and the responses of Muslims, which is reenergized and sustained by the forces of globalization, portends greater threats to the search for common grounds between the West and the Islamic world.

Secularism vs. Islam

Before the advent of the present phase of globalization, there were three discernible levels of contact or points of secular cultural invasion of much of the Islamic world. The first level, which can be called the official level, involves Western governments' attempts to implant Western liberal/secular tenets in Muslim societies, particularly in the period after colonialism, albeit with a caveat: a further separation of the Mosque and State. The battle line here is mainly drawn between the clerics and secular oriented Muslim leaders as exemplified by the events in Egypt, Turkey, Iran, etc.

The second level involves the invasion and spreading of Western secular culture and lifestyle across the Muslim world, especially among the youth. This, too, is being fought back by the clerics. The two levels of incursion have persisted to the present day. Globalization has enhanced and accelerated these two levels of secular cultural invasion. Assessing the impacts of globalization on Muslims, Mahathir Mohamed contends that the invasion of Western secular ideas, values and moral codes, which are alien to Muslims, would be worse than military invasion. He wrote, "Every aspect of our lives will be invaded. Our minds will be invaded. Even our religion will be invaded" (Mohamed, 2002, p. 56).

The new dimension to this is the increase of the number and scope of the points of contact between what is considered secular and profane, and Islamic religious values across the Muslim world. Globalization is linking up all cultures and peoples from every corner of the globe. The revolution in information and communication technology has connected even the most conservative Muslim communities with Western culture and lifestyle. Islamic moral values have never been so vulnerable to the corrosive impacts of secular values and standards.

The third level is the focus of this article. This involves the activities of ultra secular individuals and groups, mainly agnostics and atheists. Their main objective is to obliterate religion, all religions, completely from society. They are the modern upshots of the anti-clerical movements of pre-reformation Europe and inheritors of the outcomes of the French revolution. They appear to have
a huge influence among western cultural thinkers, members of the literary and intellectual elite. Some examples of the leading names of this category of secularists are: Richard Dawkin, a Darwinian biologist and author of several books, the latest entitled The God Delusion; Sam Haris, a neurologist who authored the book, The End of faith; Dannel C. Dannet, a philosopher and author of Breaking The Spell; and Maryam Namazie of the Communist party of Iran.

Islam is very sensitive to issues relating to sacrilege or blasphemy. There is virtually no difference between satire and blasphemy in Islam. As mentioned above, due to historical differences, it is highly unlikely for the Islamic world to ignore attacks from anti-religious groups or individuals, attacks that the Christian church and Christians had assented to over the years. Although the magnitude of the offence against the person of the prophet, as contained in the novel of Salman Rushdie, The Satanic Verses, were much greater than the offensive cartoons published by the Danish newspaper, Jyllad Posten, it was obvious that, the outrage and responses caused by the cartoons were much deeper and bigger in scale. This can easily be attributed to globalization. The world has now shrunk, all barriers are being obliterated, hence globalization has intensified and amplified areas of tension that may in the past go unnoticed. In other words, Muslims from all parts of the globe have never been so connected to each other. Thus, what used to be isolated incidences can now within a few minutes assume global dimensions.

It is, therefore, obvious that among all the various groups and interests that may harbor one grudge or another across the Western world against Islam, the activities of ultra secular groups or individuals would remain the most potent in terms of maintaining and exacerbating tension and mutual distrust between the West and the Muslim world. The Muslim world might not be monolithic; however, as previous incidences have shown, nothing unites the Islamic world in contemporary times than the need to defend the religion when it comes under attack.

Secularism and Freedom of Expression

Secularism and freedom of expression are inseparable. Both concepts evolved out of the struggle for the separation of church and state, and the liberation of science from religion in Europe. In other words, the successes of the Reformation movements in 17th century Europe heralded the beginning of what Owen Chardwick called the “Secularization of the European Mind”—suppressed ideas about science and views about religion were let free. The separation of church and state can therefore be said to mark the beginning
of the exercise of the freedom of expression and the end of the Inquisition—introduced by Pope Gregory IX in the 13th century.

Secularism and freedom of expression are two of the main pillars upon which the principles of Western liberal democracy are rested. Secularists of all shades are therefore the natural custodians of freedom of expression.

Islam is not impervious to certain aspects of the exercise of freedom of expression. In fact, as early as 740 C.E., open debates in Islam were recorded. For example, the debates between the Mutazilites led by Hassan Al Basri’s pupils— Ibn Amr and Ubaayd and their adversaries—the Zahirites of Ibn Taymiyyah attest to this—which was essentially a debate about the application of reason versus some aspects of religious regulations in Islam.

Robert Briffault in his “The Making of Humanity” stressed this fundamental difference between Islamic theocracy and Europe under the Church. “Theocracy in the East has not been intellectually tyrannical or coercive. We do not find there, the obscurantism, the holding down of thought the perpetual warfare against intellectual revolt...” (Ghulam, 1999, p. 4).

This underscores the fundamental difference between Western civilization and Islamic civilization. The encompassing nature of Islam means that the Mosque and the State are intricately linked together. This partly explains the bond between the religion and the ummah (the Islamic society).

However, even in the West, freedom of expression is not being exercised in the absolute. The right of expression whether in speech, visual art, comedy, films, or general literature, etc., is exercised in the West within the context of the law. Laws of sedition and libel or incitement to hatred or even blasphemy exist. On the other hand, authors and publishers also exercise self-censorship even where the laws are ambiguous on questions relating to race or even class. For example, no publisher would publish any work glorifying the Ku Klux Klan or Hitler or even ridicule the Queen in the United Kingdom. It appears that these laws and the exercise of self-restraint do not extend to religions, because some segment of secularists have consistently been disparaging religions, especially Christianity and Islam.

While the roots of Islamophobia lie in the crusades and Orientalism, many interests in the West sustain the current wave of Islamophobia. For example anti-Muslim immigration groups who cannot stand the increasing presence of Islamic symbols in European cities and/or ultra-secularists groups whose main goal is to banish religion from society through the attempts to demystify the sacred.
Part II: The Debate

The Salman Rushdie (1988-1989) saga provoked a debate on a variety of issues relating to the exercise of freedom of expression particularly in the West. Some of the issues touched on include questions on freedom and responsibility, and the limits of freedom, censorship, and whether or not blasphemy laws should be extended to cover all religions especially in the United Kingdom. These issues are still being debated especially after the July 2005 London bombings, the cartoon controversy and under the general debate on integration and multiculturalism in the United Kingdom.

However, the fact that authors like Salman Rushdie are honored with knighthood by the British establishment in the middle of these controversies forecloses any likelihood that the United Kingdom or the West in general would make any concession on freedom of expression to the Islamic world. Thus, ultra-secular groups like the Association of Ex-Muslims in Europe or other individuals and groups whose goal is to wipe out religion from the surface of the earth are likely to increase with predictable consequences. It is therefore very likely that further assaults on Islam and Islamic sanctities would continue.

Implications

The current level of mutual hatred and xenophobia between the West and the Islamic world is slowly but steadily growing beyond dehumanizing and demonizing. Hardliners on both sides of the divide have taken over the show; voices of moderation and dialogue are being silenced. A vicious cycle is thus being created. While the world is fast shrinking into a much smaller global village in almost all spheres of life, these powerful forces seem more than ever determined to exacerbate the situation. The British National Party, for example, is said to be gaining more support from its campaign of hatred towards immigrants and Muslims (Arzu & Massoud, 2002).

On the other hand, young European-born Muslims are said to be falling into the hands of hardliners. In a *Time Magazine* publication titled "Generation Jihad," one of the London bombers of July 7, 2005, denounced what he called "atrocities against Muslims," which, according to commentators, indicates the dilemma and disillusionment those young men have found themselves regarding where to pitch their loyalties.

In the same issue of *Time*, experts interviewed by the magazine contend that what drives European-born middle class Muslim youths into acts of violence ranges from the discriminations they suffer because of their religion or race in
terms of employment and admission into universities, to what they described as atrocities committed against Muslims by some parts of the Western world. As mentioned above, the implications of this vicious cycle of hatred begetting hatred are many. In one sense, globalization includes increase in the numbers of immigrants from all parts of the world to the West. Thus, changing the demography of some of the Western capitals, yet tension between the West and the Islamic world is reaching higher levels. In other words, global harmony, peace, and security are further being threatened under the guise of the exercise of the freedom of expression.

The security implications of this to countries like Nigeria, which are prone to ethno-religious conflicts, are enormous. Beside the long standing mutual distrust among the adherents of the two dominant religions which are internally rooted, recent events have shown that Nigeria is highly vulnerable to tensions on issues that affect the Muslim world and the West. The cartoon controversy which sparked demonstrations in the country, eventually turned into a violent conflict between Christians and Muslims. The Maiduguri conflict in Borno State which attracted reprisal attacks in Onitsha—Anambra State—is said to be “unprecedented [in] bloodletting as angry youths moved to avenge the killings of their kinsmen” (Sani, 2007, p. 26). At another level, the implications of this to the stability of the whole of the West African sub-region cannot be overestimated.

Conclusions

It is obvious that conflict situations between the West and the Muslims world have reached higher levels and that these conflicts can be curtailed. The biggest hindrance comes from those who insist that dialogue will not serve their interests. Edward Said described the situation more clearly:

Never mind that most Islamic countries today are too poverty stricken, tyrannical and hopelessly inept, militarily as well as scientifically...what matters to “experts” like Miller, Samuel Huntington, Martin Kramer, Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes...is to make sure that the “threat” is kept before our very eyes, the better to exorcise Islam for terror, despotism and violence (Said, 1996, p1)

The question, whether Islam poses threats to the West, has since been answered (Huntington, 1993). What is required is the political will and
determination from both sides to engage in a comprehensive dialogue. This way the activities of hardliners and carefree individuals, whose actions they carry out in the comfort of their offices, and which causes the death of hundreds of innocent lives elsewhere, can be curtailed.

Furthermore, the West, particularly the United States’ “jihad” of globalization of Western values, needs to be threaded with caution. Perhaps Fukuyama’s (2006) comment that “there must be an internal demand for democracy for it to be exported” is instructive in this regard. This, we are convinced, will very likely accelerate the process of building bridges of mutual understanding.

References


