

Dialogue is a necessity

Only by honestly addressing the cultural schism with Islam can we reach accommodation

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I'm ashamed to admit it, but before September 11, I didn't pay much attention to Islam. I had a cursory knowledge of the historical struggle between Israel and its Arab neighbours. I knew a bit about the struggle with the west over oil. I followed the comings and goings of Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Syria. But, when it comes to Islamic culture and history and its long engagement with the west, I was virtually ignorant.

It took the deaths of 5,000 Americans in a horrific act of terrorism to get my attention. Like so many others, I have been reading up on Islam - its tenets, internal struggles, contradictions, visions and shortcomings, its similarities and deep differences with Christianity and the west. Some of what I'm learning gives me hope; other things make me frightened for what might lie ahead.

I'm not alone. Seven of the 15 lead books on the New York Times paperback bestseller list are devoted to Islam. The Koran has become a bestseller. The whole world, it seems, has been converted into a classroom as we try to make sense out of the tragic events of September 11 and its aftermath.

What have we learned, not about Islam, but rather about ourselves? First, that we tend not to regard realities that differ in some fundamental respects from our own. We have come to accept, at face value, that our way of life is the universal standard. We cannot imagine anyone not aspiring to it. Therefore, in our minds, such people either don't exist, or their way of thinking is so alien that we have no way of making allowances for their presence. For all practical purposes, these "others" are not there, and they do not count.

Over the past several weeks, I have heard Muslim intellectuals use the word "humiliation" to describe how vast numbers of Muslims feel. Humiliation is a deeply cultural construct that cuts far deeper than economic or political terms like "impoverished" or "disenfranchised". To feel humiliated is to be denied consideration or respect.

Most of us are incredulous that many in the Muslim world, even among the well-off and well-educated, responded to the deaths of thousands of Americans in an almost haughty manner, as if to say, you won't be able to ignore us ever again. Large numbers of Muslims probably feel a certain pride in what Osama bin Laden accomplished. After all, he forced us to take note of 1.2bn Islamic people. But his accomplishment was a negative one, born in violence. Now, the question is, can this horrible act be an opportunity?

What if, instead of holding on to every utterance of the extremists, analysing their every pronouncement and fatwa, we focus on the centre of gravity in the Muslim world and call for a cultural dialogue between Islam and the west? There are many questions we need to ask. For example, how do most Muslims feel about values we hold dear, like civil liberties, democratic participation and gender equality? I'd like to know if most Muslims can accept living in a pluralistic world, with respect for different faiths, creeds and ways of life. Many in the Muslim world would probably like to ask why we are so preoccupied with material values.

Is it possible that Islam and the west might have things they can learn from each other? It's hard to believe that there isn't something we might learn from a culture that has had such a powerful impact on the world for nearly 1,500 years and in which one out of every five human beings finds meaning.

If, however, both sides believe there is little of positive value to be learned from each other, then there is little hope of resolution of the cultural divide that separates us, short of escalating violence and a protracted struggle in which each side tries to impose their will. We have been putting large sums into a military and political response to the new terrorism. Perhaps we need to put as much, or more, attention on finding mechanisms to engage each other where it most counts - in the cultural arena.

It is disheartening that even in America and Europe, where millions of Muslims live, there is often little interaction between their communities and others. This is all the more troubling when we consider the sheer number of Muslims. They make up a majority in 52 countries and a sizeable minority in many others. There are 6m Muslims living in the US, 2m in the UK, 3.2m in Germany and 5m in France. Moreover, Islam is the fastest growing religion. Demographers predict that one out of every four human beings will be Muslim in 24 years. If demographics is power, then the world is tilting toward a Muslim century.

We need to begin a cultural dialogue with Islam now, rather than wait until the point of no return. Let me cite just two ticking cultural time bombs. First, in the US, western Europe and other countries, the Muslim populations are young, often unemployed or impoverished, and the subject of growing discrimination. Millions of Muslim youth have been left behind by globalisation. In their desperate search to find identity, purpose and hope, many are being won over to the fundamentalist call for a jihad to recapture the golden age of Islam and reconquer the world for God - a kind of Islamic view of globalisation.

Second, for most of us who have long accepted the notion of giving private loyalty to our faith and public loyalty to our government, the idea that substantial numbers of Muslims living among us do not share our conviction is unsettling. A New York Times reporter recently interviewed young Muslim students in the US and was surprised to learn that some did not think of themselves as Americans, but rather as Muslims living in America. Their bonds are extra-territorial and based on the revival of the Islamic idea of umma, the "universal Islamic community". Many young Muslims in Europe and America since

September 11 have said they would not fight against their fellow Muslims in Afghanistan if called upon to do so by their own governments. They also view the nation state as a colonial construct imposed on the Middle East and the rest of the world. Add to this the fact that the Muslim diaspora is spreading into virtually every country, and we begin to understand the risk of perpetuating a global ghettoisation of Islam.

We are long overdue for an open cultural exchange between Islam and the west in our own neighbourhoods. We desperately need a frank discussion with each other about who we are and what we believe - even if neither side likes what they hear.

President Bush, Prime Minister Blair and Chancellor Schröder have attempted to put distance between Islam and the al-Qaida network, suggesting that the only real threat to the western way of life is Bin Laden's terrorist campaign. Still, even if Bin Laden's network ceased to exist, we'd still have to confront the fact that two great civilisations, with a long history of conflict, are once again facing off in the global arena.

Politicians, military commanders and journalists talk about the "Great Game", a reference to the geopolitical intrigues being played out between Islam and the west in the Afghan war. What we need is "The Great Conversation" between Islam and the west so we can figure out how to accommodate each other. Until we do, our world will continue to be a dangerous and precarious place.

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