



What does the West know about Islam?

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The West with its overwhelmingly Christian population does not know the truth about Islam. It was true in the past and it is true today. The West approaches Islam with many preconceived notions, remaining firmly under the sway of presentations hostile to Islam. There were some justifiable reasons for the ignorance. Primitive communication methods and travel conditions made intermingling at an amicable level difficult if not impossible. Nor was it easy to obtain books to help people understand the other side. Continuous hostilities between the two sides along with the attitudes of religious leaders exacerbated matters since such people did not enjoy access to correct information or to meeting with scholars or the right people.

Today, however, it should be, in theory at least, easier for Christians and Muslims to get to know (about) each other. Actually, I am forced to say "easier." The image of "militant Islam" that emerged after the 1979 Iranian revolution has been a serious source of fear in the West and has clouded the West's perceptions of Muslims. It was the extremist part of the big picture that was reflected the most in the Western media, thus leading to the creation of deep-rooted prejudices about Islam.

Just as the last manifestations of the Iranian revolution were about to die down came the September 11 attacks. Even before that, though, Muslims were frequently characterized as "Arab terrorists." Immediately following September 11, however, nearly every Muslim has had to live with the stigma of Usama bin Laden. This image was, of course, unfair. Almost a billion-and-a-half Muslims across the world did not approve of Usama's actions, but the media did not seek out these voices. Owing to the search for sensational news, the global media remained deaf to the voice of the Muslim world.

The Western world began to learn more about Islam with the commencement of the war in Iraq. Labels like Sunni, Shiite and Wahhabi were among some of the more technical terms with which Islam was described. But the picture etched in the mind of the world public remained the same: suicide bombers, terrorists, snipers. There is, of course, a chasm between the majority of Muslims and the image that straight-jacketed Islam, but this is not visible from the Western view.

The fact remains, however, neither the Islam nor the Muslims known today by the West are truly Islam or the true Muslims. I commend the scholarly work and objective findings that have been published by intellectuals and researchers in this area. Though they may be few and far between, there are Western scholars who do produce some fair work on the Islamic world. Still, the bulk of the information presented daily through Western media channels is clearly prejudiced.

If I may be permitted, I would like to offer some short, basic facts about Islam: Did you know that Islam counts Jesus as one of Allah's messengers? That is one reason that millions of Muslims carry the name "Isa," by which name Jesus is called by Muslims. Someone who doesn't believe in the sanctity of Jesus but at the same time believes Muhammed to be the Prophet of Allah wouldn't be counted as Muslim. This is because the Qur'an in many of its chapters mentions Jesus, clearly describing him and recognizing him as one of Allah's messengers on earth. As for the Virgin Mary, she is mentioned with reverence in the Qur'an. Again, this is why millions of Muslim girls and women have the name "Meryem," which is how we say "Mary." The Qur'an also declares that Allah sent revelations -- the Bible -- to Jesus and underlines that those who don't believe in the original form of the Bible, even if they believe in the Qur'an, cannot be Muslim. According to Islamic rulings, Christians and Jews are referred to as "ahl-i kitab," or people of the book. What this means is that Islam commands its believers to do business with, make neighbors with and live in peace with the Christians. Similarly, Islam commands that when "people of the book" live in lands under Muslim rule, their lives, possessions and very honor are under Muslim protection and must never be disturbed.

I could give more examples from the basic religious facts and rulings I described above. My intention is not to propagandize Islam. It is to voice this truth: In light of Islam's open declaration of its intention to live in peace with the Christian world, ignorance must be at the root of the animosity between the faithful of the two religions. I have already mentioned reasons why there was so much ignorance in the past: What is astounding, however, is that these same errors continue today. There has to be an end to the ignorance that feeds the basic reason for the clashes between Islam and Christianity. Of course, simply erasing the ignorance is not enough; people need to approach each other with good intentions. They need to try and understand one another. These two great religions have billions of believers, and these believers have to learn how to share life in friendship, not in enmity.

It is quite clear that both sides here have plenty of preconceived opinions about the other. Rather than feed biases about each other, if the masses in these two religions learn more about each other, they will come to respect each other's position. At this point, no other path to world peace is on the horizon. Only mutual understanding will make this world livable in the future. And so, if I can return to the beginning of this column and ask again: Do Westerners know enough about Islam? The answer is an unequivocal no. Likewise, sadly, it is difficult to find Muslims with adequate knowledge and training to explain Islam to the West. Why? To get the answer to this question, we need to turn this familiar question around to Muslims: Do Muslims know enough about Islam? Unfortunately, no. And if you'll allow me, I will continue on this in my next column.

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