

ISLAM: CONFLICT OR RECONCILIATION?

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MARCH 21, 2002

Islam means surrendering of oneself to the one and only God. The root word from which Islam is derived is Salaam or Peace. In essence one discovers peace by surrendering to God. The process in which a person surrenders to God is closely connected with his/her relationship to the world. In order to find inward peace, one must also act outwardly with openness, kindness, fairness, and understanding. Islam calls for such action. Yet it's often the most misunderstood religion in the world for a number of reasons.

The colonization of the Muslim world by the Western powers had left the Muslim countries in long-term psychological, political and economic traumas. In the Middle Eastern and underdeveloped countries the corrupt dictators and monarchs are often installed and supported by the Western power blocks, including the multinational business corporations, to advance their economic interests at the cost of larger interests of the common people.¹

This, in turn, has made many people hostile toward their governments, as well as the West, particularly the U.S.A. Some of them have resorted to extremism to usurp those non-representative corrupt governments. Their extreme actions, compounded by the repressions of their governments, have reflected negatively on Islam.

Wahabism, the ultra-conservative school of thought that is officially recognized and allows no other interpretation and ideas except their own to prevail in Saudi Arabia, is now being exported through the enormous petrodollar money throughout the Muslim world.²

This official Saudi version of the truncated and distorted Islam has promoted intolerance, dissension, and subjugation of women.³

Again, Islam has been blamed for such imperial and cultural misconducts. The media generally plays a major role in keeping these "sensational" misconceptions alive.

Having said that, how can we make Islam work in effective ways that will promote peace

¹Thelma Ekiyor, "Women in Peace Building. An Account of the Niger Delta Women." (Ghana: St. Francis Press Ltd, issue No. 2, September 2001), page 2 and Washington Post, "Marriage of Convenience/The U.S.-Saudi Alliance" (February 12, 2002).

²Washington Post (February 12, 2002), p. A17.

³Frontline: Inside Saudi Time Bomb, A PBS Production. Available in VHS, 1800 Play PBS.

and understanding and block all forms of violence, extremism, greed and bigotry? I have outlined a few suggestions to this effect.

A Recipe for Reflection and Reconciliation

1. The journey begins with one step and one person. The purification of the heart is the first individual step toward promoting peace and unity in the world. The purification that increases inner peace and benevolent feelings and decreases unrest and selfishness are achieved through the regular remembrance of God, prayer, meditation, and charity.

2. A conscious-raising circle is a forum in which people of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds come together to discuss their points of views, respectfully, yet freely. Twelve years ago I started an informal conscious-raising group at my home that was named the Forum for Religious Emancipation and Enlightenment (FREE). In this forum, people would brainstorm, pose questions, ponder, and reflect. In this circle, friendships developed between people who, due to misinformation or ignorance, held the other one's culture or religion in a negative light. The forum allowed the participants to challenge some of the old concepts and helped new ideas emerge.

3. Interfaith organizations are crucial in enhancing mutual understanding. After the 9/11 tragic incidents many innocent Muslims and their houses of worship (mosques) became the targets of attacks and harassment in U.S.A. Montgomery County, Maryland, experienced the least of such incidents, largely due to the higher level of interactions between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The County Executive Douglas Duncan, and the County Policy Chief, Charles Moose, who had been the regular guests and visitors at the local Muslim Community Center were among most effective and supportive of people in protecting their Muslim neighbors.

4. Cross-cultural curriculum development is another area to be considered. The world view of a person begins to develop at an early age. As a child if she/he is exposed to various cultures there is more hope that she/he will reach adulthood with a broader perspective. Personally as a child I was greatly impressed by the story of the Buddha read in my school's social studies class in Bangladesh which, in turn, had influenced my decision later on to pursue a higher level of study on Buddhism and make a broader connection with the local Buddhist community.

5. Cross-cultural case studies are important tools to measure the aspects in societies which promote peace, tolerance, and understanding. The largest Muslim nation, Indonesia, which is neither Arabic speaking nor located in the Middle East, reflects higher levels of tolerance and understanding than many Muslim nations. Is it due to its multi-religious social structure, which allows freedom of religion and interfaith exchanges? Or, how does it affect a person's outlook and interaction in an ultra-secular Muslim nation like Turkey where the slightest religious symbolism in academic and government institutions are banned? Does this government policy make people feel more liberated or repressed? What are the levels of interactions between the religious and secular groups in such a social setting? An extensive comparative study can shed

more light on our queries and mark and measure the important aspects for wholesome coexistence.

6. The formation of a strong civil society is essential in keeping the government, media, and various interest groups on the right track. In countries where the roles of civil societies are limited, usually liberty and accountability are at stake.

In combining the six essential ingredients, as mentioned earlier, we can co-create a sumptuous-nourishing recipe for peaceful coexistence in the world in which we live.