THE UNENTHUSIASTIC IMAGE OF ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN THE MUSLIM COUNTRIES—CAUSES AND SOLUTION

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ABSTRACT:
Islam is one of the major world religions continuing since Hazrat Adam under different names but renamed and revived by Muhammad in Arabia in the early 7th century AD. According to Encyclopedia of social sciences, "Islam is the proper and most widely used term for the religion of those who believe that the Quran is true word of God transmitted to mankind as an ultimate revelation through the medium of his Prophet and messenger Muhammad. By applying the communication devices, it would be possible for Muslim world to disseminate developmental and positive aspects of their respective region.

KEY WORDS: Muslim world, religious

INTRODUCTION:
The past three decades have produced a considerable increase in scientific and journalistic publication about Islam, the Muslim World, and the position of Muslims in Western Europe. This considerable growth has mainly been prompted by national and international developments, such as the Iranian Revolution, the Rushdie Affair, the Gulf War, the war in former Yugoslavia, the revolution in Afghanistan and the growing significance of Islam as a political factor in the Muslim World. Another factor of great importance which should not be overlooked is the significant spurt in the migration of Muslims to countries of the European Union. It has only recently dawned on the governments of these countries that their societies will be permanently confronted with a significant number of Muslims and with their different cultural and religious backgrounds.

Daily events in which both the relationship between the Western and Muslim World and between Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe and North America is a central issue when combined with various publications on this topic show that the relationship between the groups concerned is a tense one. Mutual contacts are based mainly on stereotypes and prejudice, which are clearly observable in the various reports in the media in which Muslims are described as fanatics, irrational, primitive, belligerent, and dangerous. Such generalisations and simplifications indicate that where expertise is lacking, fantasy surges ahead and where knowledge is faulty, emotion plays a central role in the regulation of the course of mutual relationships. Dating back to the eighties up to the present day, the media frequently refer to the alleged danger of Islam. Warning against the threat of the Muslim enemy is not new in the Western world. Since the eighties some scientists, politicians and journalists have given such warnings continuously without presenting any substantial evidence to back up their concern. In this regard reference can be made to statements of the Chairman of the Club of Rome, the former Secretary General of the NATO, and of ministers and leaders of right-wing political parties in Western Europe and North America. These remarkable public facts are well known and indicative of the intensity of the negative attitude of the West towards Islam and Muslims. Essentially this negative attitude is undeserved and is not based on solid facts. As people become more aware of this, the number of publications in which the alleged threat of Islam to the West is analyses and assigned

to the realms of myth is steadily increasing (Esposito, 1992; Hadar, 1993; Shadid en van Koningsveld, 1995; Halliday, 1995; Lawrence, 1998).

Other experts, for instance Halliday (1995), consider the Islamic threat to the West to be an illusion. Not only does a unified Islamic World not exist, even were such a World to exist, it would fall for short of the economic and military power to compete with, let alone risk confrontation with the West. The hostility of the West towards Islam and Muslims therefore encompasses racist, xenophobic, and stereotypical elements, a phenomenon which Halliday calls anti-Muslimism. This terminology is based on the thesis that the hostility voiced against Muslims is directed mainly against Muslims as a group of people and not against Islam as such, and that the anti-propaganda does not consist of strictly religious elements, but is mixed with spurious rhetoric and other murky ideologies (Halliday, 1995)

Islamologists and social scientists have not seen it as their duty to correct the myth of the threat posed by Islam and Muslims, as the majority of these experts predominantly seek their source in classical religious publications in order to understand and to explain modern developments in contemporary Muslim societies. Their ivory-tower approach fails to comprehend that such complex socio-economic and political developments cannot be explained by reference to the Koran, the Sunna, or the views of Ulamas only. Inexorably, this approach creates new stereotypes and fails to cast doubts on the existing ones, leaving the prejudice against Islam and the Muslim World unscathed. Some authors (see Muños, 1999: 5) therefore say that the methodology used by experts to analyse such developments in the Muslim World can be characterised by two misleading tendencies.

First of all there is the persistent inclination to assume that Western norms and values are the sole points of reference in any analysis and to regard these as incompatible with those of Islam. Such an approach focuses mainly on analysing points of conflicts between Islam and Western culture, simultaneously ignoring all existing similarities between the two cultures. Remarkably, the search for points of conflict is not carried out in order to understand the behaviour of Muslims but mainly in order to stress differences and distinctiveness, implicitly emphasising the superiority of Western culture. In this regard Hippler & Lueg (1995) are of the opinion that such an approach is mainly used by those who want to maintain the hostile image of Islam in the West: "[They] do not compare like with like: Christianity with Islam, or the realities of Europe with those of the Middle East. As a rule they are prone to comparing a religion (Islam) with a region (or society) (the west). And if you ask the wrong questions you do not get the right answers". The second misleading tendency concerns approaching all developments in the Muslim World as signals of extreme religiosity. In this regard Muños (1999) states that, for example, the Iranian revolution has been characterised in the Western historical imagination only as a fanatical expression of religious fervour, ignoring all the social, political, and economic factors which gave rise to the revolutionary movement.

THE MODEL OF INCREASED MUSLIM-IMMIGRATION TO THE WEST:

Another model created to explain the existence of the so-called Islamic threat relates to the increased immigration to the West of people with an Islamic background. The presence of relatively large groups of Muslims residing in countries of the European Union is of fairly recent date. The majority of Muslim immigrants have settled in Europe only since the Second World War, either by spontaneous migration during the 1960s and 1970s, or as a result of recruitment by European governments. Recently, immigration has been restricted to family reunions and the search for political asylum. Generally speaking, the pattern of immigration of each of these countries reflects their colonial past. In the United Kingdom for instance, a relatively large number of immigrants come from the British Commonwealth, in the Netherlands they originate from Indonesia, Surinam, and the Netherlands Antilles. In France, primarily North Africans comprise the majority of the Islamic immigrants.

Whatever their origin it is an irrefutable fact that in the post-war periods, especially during the 1960s, a considerable increase took place in the migration to Western Europe of people with an Islamic background. Strikingly, public debates on this phenomenon were initially mainly centred on socio-economic factors.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, however, both the media and public conception have drawn an inextricable link between these debates and the culture and religion of those immigrants. It was only then, the debate about the importance of the norms and values of Muslims and about whether or not their culture is compatible with Western culture was initiated. As an example, the so-called 'headscarf-incident' can be mentioned. It played a significant role in the public debates in the Netherlands, Belgium, as well as in France. Other aspects of Islamic culture, like mixed swimming, female circumcision, polygamy, and the foundation of Islamic schools, also became focal issues in public debates The central topic raised by numerous, including scientific publications, was the question of to what extent the revival of 'political Islam' would influence the development of Islamic groups within the European Union. Neither politicians nor scientists were able to provide an accurate answer, as was clearly demonstrated by the incapability of traditional orientalistis to create a clear picture of Muslim normative views of living as a Muslim, a minority within a non-Islamic proximity. The opinions of medieval Islamic ulama were, and are without correction, cited as the authoritative source of present-day Islamic perspectives. The contemporary and modern ideas which exist on these subjects are either unknown or set aside. As a result of this perceived vacuum, an important task of enlightenment seemed to be reserved for the media, which nevertheless continued to serve the public with out-dated information about Islam, using old sources, in which the influence of the Islamic threat was still very powerful. (Shadid and Van Koningsveld, 1994).

In this respect, Halliday (1995) considers the use of the term 'Muslims' indicates an ethnic identity as a stereotypical projection which is used especially by those who intend to exclude people with an Islamic background, as well as by those who, within an Islamic community itself lay a false claim to authority over the group concerned and who consider their interpretation of the Islam to be the only right one. Another cause of the deterioration of the Western attitude towards Muslims in Europe can be attributed to statistical misrepresentation. This is particularly the case in countries where both secularisation and the number of Muslims have shown a considerable increase in reporting on the number of Muslims in countries of the European Union. Scientists, the media, or official institutions base their estimations on the number of immigrants from the Islamic world in general. In contrast, the estimations of Christians are based on the number of church members, while a distinction is made in the various denominations within Christianity. Because of the fact that in practice, the number of church members is decreasing, while the number of immigrants from the Islamic world increases, the statistical misrepresentation of Muslims and non-Muslims becomes ever more disproportional. Such labeling has serious negative consequences for the inter-ethnic relations in the countries involved. Defining one group by religious characteristics (Muslims) and the other by nonreligious qualities (Dutchmen, autochthonous), creates a false dichotomy: 'they' the believers and confessors as against 'us' the liberals and seculars. Furthermore, such a presentation intensifies the fear of the population about the alleged Islamisation of the country which is even spread by certain 'scientists' (Brugman, 1998). Such assumptions are based on the status of Islam in ancient times and not on adequate knowledge of the current situation in the Muslim world.

Also in this field, much needs to be done in order to rectify the mutually negative images. In the search for factors which negatively influence the attitude of Muslims towards the West, non-religious sentiments in the Islamic world should also be taken into account. Hippler & Lueg (1995) believe that the reservations some Muslims have in relation to the West are not necessarily based on religion. Experience in the past with colonial oppression combined with cultural arrogance and the exploitation of the natural resources of the Middle East by the West, as well as the use of double political and military standards in judging political events around the world, may account to an important degree for the sceptical and hostile attitude towards the West. Rectifying the negative image of Muslims in the European Union may be achieved by means of an 'acceptance-policy' aimed at stimulating the acceptance of these groups by society. This will require more than just providing information about the mutual cultures and the stressing the acquisition of the cognitive skills necessary to associate with them. Acceptance is a process that needs to be internalised by both parties in order to make the essential mental turn: on the part of the Muslims in Europe implying the acceptance of

the respective countries as their second homeland and on the part of the autochthons, the readiness to accept these groups as fellow-citizens. At the psychological level, being accepted in Europe would mean to immigrants, among other things, 'feeling at home'. This long-term goal will only be realised if governments apply a multidimensional policy directed towards Muslims as well as towards society at large. Any acceptance-policy for that matter should focus implicitly on increasing their opportunities to participate in society in general and on intensifying their loyalty towards the society concerned. A comparable policy should be formulated for European societies, aiming at the creation of a social climate in which Muslims can in fact be accepted as fellow-citizens with all thereto-inherent rights and duties. This requires a specific policy designed to convince the autochthonous population that a dark fellow citizen, a Muslim, can also be a loyal European citizen. This realisation has not yet fully sunk into the consciousness of society. In everyday practice it appears that the autochthonous citizens of Europe are focused mainly on the preservation of a mono-cultural society based on the Christian tradition. They are obviously not willing to treat 'different' cultural expressions of, for instance, Muslims in the same way as those of autochthonous groups. The last mentioned groups contain people who reject, on religious grounds, preventive vaccinations, the use of contraception, and equal treatment of homosexuals. Deviant though it may be, such behaviour does not lead to vehement discussions in the societies concerned.

HOW TO IMPROVE THE IMAGE OF ISLAM AND MUSLIM COUNTRIES:

In light of review of the literatures and after conducting in depth analysis of portrayal of Muslim countries, the following suggestions have been developed. These guidelines would prove helpful in building better image of Islam and Muslim countries as well as develop better harmony between Islam and the West. These recommendation/ suggestions are as under:

1. It is suggested that Muslim thinkers must better explain Islam by writing books and articles, giving lectures and arranging meetings, with people of other religion (Memon, 1996).

2. Moreover, Muslim countries should initiate certain steps in order to address the political and socio economic root causes of militancy and terrorism. Therefore Muslim world and Europe should work jointly to enhance efforts in addressing the root cause of international political unrest. In this connection, the peaceful resolution of the Palestine, Kashmir, Kosovo and Chechnya, is need of the day because these issues are the most important factors resulting in Muslim anger and alienation in the present world.

3. Similarly it was reported that statistics indicates that more than 90% of books about Islam which published in Western countries are written by non Muslims. After 9/11, 75% of media coverage in West and America was about Islam and almost 60 percent of the media content was negative (Khaled, 2005).Furthermore, the findings of most recent, a study of UK media commissioned indicates that only 4 percent were "positive" out of 352 articles examined in their overall depiction of Islam or Muslims.

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