



## *Islam in the Contemporary West*

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Good Afternoon!

It is an honor to speak at this distinguished forum of administrators, teachers and students of Stuart, for which I am grateful. Allow me also to take this opportunity to extend Merry Christmas and Season's Greetings to you all. This is that special time of the year when people of all religious persuasions should and do converge to acknowledge their shared destiny in peace and human happiness.

### **Disclaimers**

Let me begin with a few disclaimers. In this lecture on **Islam in the Contemporary West**, I will focus on Islam and how it is understood in or related to the contemporary West. At times, I will make references to Christianity and Judaism in order to present Islam in its current context. I ask for forgiveness from the followers of other religions to which I make no reference, for the sake of keeping this lecture focused. I also do this for the simple reason that Islam is often alleged to be engaged in a “clash of civilizations” with these two religions.

I will also distinguish between the historic and contemporary West, focusing upon the latter in order to avoid a deeper discussion of the complex relations between Islam and the West throughout history, such as the Crusades, various other wars between Islamic and Christian empires, and more recent Islamic liberation movements in countries that had been colonized by Western powers. I do, however, believe that it would be a mistake to ignore the impact of these relations upon contemporary Islamic-Western relations.

As administrators, educators and students of Stuart, a School of the Sacred Heart, you well know that education is about seeking and learning the truth. We must ensure that our educational institutions remain faithful to this sacred principle, even if doing so would conflict with our personal or national interests. And as the goals of your school state, education is also about an active faith in God, respect for intellectual values, promotion of social awareness, building of community, and personal growth. Such an education does not allow for stereotyping and demonization.

In framing this lecture, I was partly guided by the questions you had raised, conveyed to me by the School. To my delight, most of them did not focus on Islam as a religion; rather they dealt



with the many political issues that surround Islam and its relations with the West. Why is the Muslim world experiencing extremism? What is the place of women in Islam? Is Islam compatible with democracy? Can the Palestinians and Israelis ever make peace? How can we break the stereotypes suffered by Islam and the Muslims? And finally, did I really run for the President of Iran?

### **Islam, Muslims, and the Islamic World**

Often the terms Islam, Muslims, and the Islamic world are conflated and used interchangeably. The truth is they are quite different from one another, as is, say, Christianity, Christians, and the Christian world. Like other religions, Islam is a faith that has evolved over time into a diverse and complex body of knowledge. Islam, just like Christianity and Judaism, has three sides to it: Islam as it is defined in its holy book, the Qur'an, Islam as religious scholars and non-scholars have understood it throughout the course of history, and Islam as it is practiced. We often judge Islam by the way it is practiced, but do not do the same for Christianity and Judaism.

The similarities between the three faiths do not end here; as in Christianity and Judaism, there are also various schools of thought, orientations, and sects in Islam. For example, there is the Sunni Islam and the Shi'a Islam, each holding differing views of what the religion teaches or demands in practice. There is a gulf between the fundamentalist Islam of al-Qaeda or Taliban and the reformist Islam of, say, Mohammad Khatami, the former president of Iran. Indeed, animosity between the two versions is more pronounced than between Islam and other religions such as Judaism.

Given this diversity, it is obvious that we cannot simply speak of "Muslims" as a monolithic community, just as we cannot speak of "Christians" as a monolithic community. I am a proud Muslim, but so is Mr. Bin Laden! Are we not really different? I certainly like to think so! The Muslim world is equally diverse with the largely desert Arab world adhering to a more traditional Islam than the coastal Asian nations. Besides, in the "Muslim world" not only "Muslims" but peoples of other religious persuasions also live. For example, 7 percent of Palestinians, 11 percent of Indonesians, 15 percent of Egyptians, and 35 percent of the Lebanese are Christians.

It is this ignorance of Islam, Muslims and the Islamic world that is at the root many misunderstandings about the three, namely that all Muslims are Arab or all Arabs are Muslim, and that all terrorists are Muslim or all Muslims are terrorist. The fact is there is not one Islam, one kind of Muslim, one homogeneous Islamic world. The same is true of the contemporary West: It is not a homogenous category and cannot be stereotyped as one world of one religion, one kind of people, or one type of government. The West, like the Islamic world, is not monolithic.



This is not to say that there are no common values and creed as well as history and heritage that bonds Islam, Muslims and the Islamic world together. There certainly are! For example, we can indeed speak of an Islamic civilization. However, what distinguishes the various constituent elements of this civilization is no less significant than what is shared among them. In fact, the defining characteristic of the present day Muslim world is its diversity of outlook, purpose and interests. Indeed, one might safely suggest that there are often more difficulties within Muslims of different sects than between the same Muslims and Christians. Witness the Iraqi conflict in which Shi'a and Sunni Muslims murder one another while the Iraqi Christians (4 percent of the population) are staying on the sideline.

It is often said that Islam is misunderstood in the contemporary West; the fact is that it is also misrepresented. While the misunderstanding of any religion is a common phenomenon, most often resulting from ignorance or the lack of an education, the misrepresentation of Islam is often done by highly-educated scholars of significant standing, such as Professor Samuel Huntington of Harvard University and Professor Bernard Lewis of Princeton University. The combination of the popular ignorance about Islam with this scholarly misrepresentation of it results in Islam frequently being demonized throughout the contemporary West.

### **The True Teachings of Islam**

In terms of its followers, Islam is the second largest religion in the world, with over 1.3 billion followers spread over a vast world geography. Islam is the fastest growing religion as well, both in the world and in the United States. There are perhaps as many as 8 million Muslims in the US, making Islam the second largest religious community in the country. Some 800,000 Muslims reside in our State of New Jersey, and these numbers are fast growing. More than 400 mosques and Islamic centers operate in the Tri-State area alone. These Muslims are highly educated and very successful professionally. While Muslims in the US have been active in business for a long time and highly successful in their careers, they have only recently become active politically.

Muslims believe in one God, and have a holy book, which devotes more time to the prophets of the Christians and the Jews, such as Jesus and Moses, than to their own prophet Mohammad. Muslims accept Christianity and Judaism as divinely inspired religions, and Islam emerged from the same holy land from which these other two religions emerged. Muslims teach justice and believe in a day of reckoning as do Christians. Contrary to popular opinion, Islam does not advocate violence, as Pope Benedict XVI has acknowledged in recent weeks, does not divide the world into a Muslim “abode of Islam” or peace and a non-Muslim “abode of war,” as claimed by Professor Lewis, and does not demand a clash with Western civilization as claimed by Professor Huntington. Not only terrorism but also suicide is un-Islamic and subject to the strongest punishment by God in the afterlife, as noted in the Qur'an.

Fascism and Islam are not compatible, despite what George W. Bush and others have said about “Islamofascism,” nor is the religion similar to communism, as claimed by Charles Krauthammer



of the *Washington Post*. Let me assure you that Adolph Hitler, Josef Stalin, Meier Kahana, and Slobodan Milosevic were not Muslims! Colonialism and Fascism did not originate in the Muslim world, nor were the two World Wars. Muslims proudly remain blameless of any involvement in the Holocaust. And Christians massacring Muslims in Srebrenica in the 1990s was the largest inter-religious carnage in modern Europe. Yet, Muslims have their own bad guys and practices. They include Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, Mulla Omar of the Taliban, leaders of the suicide bombers in Iraq and Israel, and the perpetrators of the September 11 tragedy.

In sharp contrast, the world remains proud of such figures as Thomas Jefferson, Albert Einstein, and Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian human rights activist who recently won the Nobel Peace Prize, among others. The present world civilization will be inconceivable without the technological contributions that the Americans have made since the turn of the last century. Nor could we have prosperity without the British contributions to economic science, or have a deeper understanding of the world without German philosophy. Nevertheless, I would also like to note that in recent years, Muslims have won three Nobel Peace Prizes and one Nobel Prize in Literature. The fact of the matter is that all religions and nations have figures and practices of which they should be ashamed, just as they have figures and practices of which they can be very proud.

### **Turmoil in the Islamic World and Relations with the West**

There is no denying that Islam, Muslims, and Islamic nations are experiencing significant turbulence. It is undeniable that this unrest is unsettling. Nevertheless, it would be more productive to view the turmoil as reactions to internal changes and external pressures. Islam is a young religion compared to Christianity and Judaism. While the last two emerged and developed in the age of philosophy, Islam belongs to the age of politics. It is no wonder that political Islam has always been a dominant component of the religion. Even so, many of the key political problems that besiege Islam today are of contemporary origin.

The Christian Dark Ages ended with the Industrial Revolution, Reformation and Enlightenment. Islam has yet to experience these crucial changes. Part of this arrested development is internal to Islam, originating from its entanglement with domestic absolutist politics, underdeveloped economics, and tribal institutions. In large part, however, the lack of progress is rooted in the unequal encounter between Islam and the Western world which had undergone these changes. The violence that the Crusaders had imposed on the Muslims was not yet erased from their memories when the colonialists begin to appear in the Muslim world. Even after Muslims liberated themselves from colonialism, the West continued to dominate their societies politically and economically. Only the mechanisms changed, from colonialism to imperialism and now globalization.

God has blessed Muslims with huge oil wealth; yet that very wealth has become a curse for Muslims as it is concentrated in the hands of absolutist governments and a small number of political elite, and it has also exacerbated Western interventions in the Muslim societies. The



establishment of the Israeli state in the Muslim Middle East in the wake of the Western Holocaust became a second source of the unease between the Muslim world and the West. The turning point for the mobilization of political Islam arrived when the West helped destroy nationalist movements in the region, most notably in Iran, where the CIA assisted the British intelligence service to oust the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran.

It is now generally acknowledged that if that coup had not taken place, the 1979 Islamic Revolution would have not occurred in Iran and in the absence of that revolution, the Americans would have not been taken hostage in Tehran and relations between the two countries would have remained friendly. Besides, in the absence of that revolution, Saddam Hussein would have not imposed an eight-year war on Iran beginning in 1988 and invaded Kuwait after it reached a cease-fire agreement with Iran. With the Islamic Revolution, radical Muslims became mobilized and emboldened; with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the United States became entangled in two wars with Iraq with the result that the situation is now considered "grave" by the Baker-Hamilton bi-partisan Iraq Study Group.

Concerned with these developments, the United States also worked with the Governments of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to arm Mujahedins in Afghanistan to fight the former Soviet Union. That policy resulted in the creation of the infamous al-Qaeda. It also gave a free hand to friendly Pakistani Government to educate and train anti-Soviet extremist Muslims. The Taliban emerged from those religious schools, which continue to operate and produce extremists as the United States fight the "war on terrorism." Meanwhile, Israelis helped form Hamas as a countervailing force to the Al-Fattah Palestinian nationalists. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 completed this list of developments as it led to the establishment of Hezbollah in the occupied south.

The current wave of Islamic militancy is best explained as both reactive and proactive. Unfortunately, this reaction is stifling the possibility of long-awaited reforms in the Muslim world while creating hostility with many Western countries. Democracy, human rights, and women's liberation are much needed areas of internal change that have been arrested. However, the situation is not as grave as it sounds in the West, and certainly not in all Muslim lands. For example, while in Saudi Arabia women have yet to earn the right to drive a car, in Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Iran women have become President, prime minister, and vice president.

In the West, Muslim women are ignored when they advance in politics and professional fields but become a spectacle when they cover their hair. Nor are these women ever asked why they wear the hijab. While for some women, covering the hair is a religious duty, just as it is for Christian nuns and ultra-Orthodox Jews, for others, particularly the younger generations, the hijab is a symbol of resistance to western culture. Ironically, in their view, the recent invasion of western cultural values throughout the world threatens to take away their autonomy and their identity, and reduce them to sexual commodities.



Democracy and human rights are other arrested values in the Muslim world. The oil curse was enough to give Muslim dictators the power to oppress their people. The pressure from the West, which has created military establishments in most Muslim countries, is an added obstacle. The situation has become particularly grave under the current Bush Administration, which believes in the forceful establishment of democracy in the Muslim world. Iraq is an example of the fruits of that doctrine. Islam is not incompatible with human rights and democracy, just as Christianity and Judaism are not. Under their current state of siege, however, Muslims have not been able to promote these values effectively within their own countries.

Let me end with a statement by President George W. Bush and a proposal to ameliorate his concern and ours as was reflected in some of your questions about a way out of the current “grave” situation. After the September 11 tragedy, the President said in a speech to the nation that he considers the world divided into two kinds of countries: those who are with us and those who are against us. Even if this was to be true, we have the power to change it into a world of all friends and no enemies. It is only unfortunate that the President misunderstood the real source of that American power when he began to address the problem. For him, that power was reduced to military force.

To be sure, America is a great military power and no one should doubt its resolves in using it when it is presented with imminent existential threat. However, what has made America the greatest nation that it is has not been its “hard power” but its values and creeds - that is its “soft power.” They include the principles of freedom, equality, justice, and humanity as well as the belief in a deeper understanding of other cultures, rejecting stereotypes, avoiding demonization of others, and building lasting international friendships and peace on the basis of mutual respect and dialogue. Let us hope that the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group will usher in a new policy of dialogue and multilateralism for resolving international conflicts, including the tension between Islam and the contemporary West.

Thank you!

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