

Editorial

A common accusation made by Muslims is that the West disrespects Islam and employs a double standard when dealing with them. It is so easy to find instances of hypocrisy that one may reasonably argue that it is the West's default response to Muslims (e.g., saying it supports democracy while financing authoritarian regimes, or saying Islam oppresses women while overlooking the prevalence of sexual harassment against women in the western workforce.)

In his "Clash of Civilizations" article, Samuel Huntington argued that such double standards are an inevitable result of the "kin-country syndrome": "A world of clashing civilizations ... is inevitably a world of double standards: people apply one standard to their kin-countries and a different standard to others."¹ So, Muslims should not complain about such western double standards as sanctioning Iraq for failing to comply with United Nations resolutions (he was writing in the 1990s) while ignoring the same failure when it comes to Israel.² His idea of a kin-based double standard has parallels in other cultures, of course, as reflected in the Arab proverb "Myself against my brother; my brother and myself against my cousin; and my cousin, my brother, and myself against the foreigner."

Sacrificing justice for all in the name of protecting oneself and one's "kin" is both blameworthy and a source of tension in today's international system. It is also connected to a simplistic western understanding of Muslims and the internal and external challenges they face as a community. Both of these lead to negative judgments of Muslims and Muslim cultures. To explain. In his article, Huntington went on, famously, to propose that as the United States moved into sole superpower status and as the West's "victory" in the cold war demonstrated that the western liberal capitalist model was the best political system, the coming age would be marked by wars sparked by civilizational differences instead of ideology. "Islam" was singled out as a civilization most likely to cause wars, due to certain aspects of its essential nature ("Islam has bloody borders [p. 35].)" He posited a dyadic relationship between the West and Islam: whereas western values were laudable, they were missing in Islam, for

Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separa-

tion of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures.” (p. 40)

In subsequent years, as crisis points between Muslims and the West continue to erupt, Huntington’s thesis seems to have been demonstrated: 9/11, the Danish cartoons, the bombings in Bali and Europe, the face veil issue in Britain and the hijab in France, and resistance to the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, to name but a few. All of these seem to prove that Muslims lack a commitment to modernity’s noble values (e.g., the rule of law, freedom of religion and expression, the rights of women, democracy, and so on).

Huntington’s hypothesis has been gone over with a fine-toothed comb by many scholars more perceptive than me, some of whom have pointed out flaws in his concept (what is a civilization?) and in its predictive power (what percentage of wars have been due to civilization and other factors, such as land grab, oil, race, ethnicity, etc?).³ And yet, the West/Islam divide he set up remains intuitively appealing and is used to explain many aspects of the West/Islam relationship (from both sides of the line). So the idea that there is some essence to western civilization that is noble, and one to Islamic civilization that is ignoble, has established deep roots in public discourse in order to explain any kind of social or political phenomenon related to Muslims. Of course, such a western idea about Muslims goes back several centuries. But now it is being re-inscribed in the twenty-first century under the new (renewed) global context of power relations between the stronger West and weaker “Muslimdom.”

But as social scientists who hope to understand and explain properly the world in which we live, any human behavior theory must pass certain rational and empirical tests. Huntington’s theory vis-à-vis West-Muslim tensions works only at a superficial level. For example, it does not explain Muslim responses to western critiques of them and Islam, at least not from an insider’s perspective. Scholars concerned about the implications of studying “the other” have meticulously confirmed that “the other” must recognize herself in research produced by an outsider about her and her culture. Huntington’s thesis would lead us to believe that Muslims would acquiesce to western double standards because they either do not want to or else are incapable of achieving noble western values anyway. But the reaction of hypocrisy tells us that something else is going on. It is reasonable to argue that in western critical reactions to Muslims, the overriding explanation is not to be found in differing civilizational values, but in hypocrisy: the West applies one standard to one case and another standard to another case.

Hypocrisy is a psychological state, a value, or, more precisely, the lack of an operational value of fairness and justice. It is not a laudable value, and, Huntington notwithstanding, few western thinkers or politicians would endorse it (at least not publicly: actions that are known to be hypocritical, such as public figures supporting a dictator in the name of “the national interest,” despite their rhetorical support for democracy, are excused by blaming the victims and their lack of democratic sensibilities or whatever). Hypocrisy exists in every culture, and every human being has the potential to engage in it. And yet when we think about the best way to explain western negative responses to Muslims, hypocrisy turns up time and time again as a powerful descriptor.

Muslims react very negatively to hypocrisy partly because the current structures of global power make them its prime victims (western support for democracy in word, but support for authoritarian regimes in deed), and partly because their religious and cultural heritage is strongly opposed to it. In fact, one chapter of the Qur’an is named *Surat al-Munafiqun* (The Hypocrites) after a group of outwardly Muslim inhabitants of Madinah. Abdullah ibn Ubayy was to have become the ruler of Yathrib (the future Madinah), until a majority of its people converted and invited the Prophet (pbuh) to live among them to help restore peace between two warring tribes. Deprived of his anticipated rule, he converted (at least outwardly) to save face. Known as the “chief of the hypocrites,” he spent the rest of his life trying to stir up hatred against the Prophet and his Companions. Of course, he was not alone in this effort. The Prophet, attempting to show clemency, constantly sought to redirect his Companions’ anger away from Ubayy and the hypocrites.

The Qur’an speaks sternly about their fate, directing some of its verses toward Ubayy and his companions and, in general, to any Muslim who indulges in hypocrisy. *Surat al-Tawba* (Repentance) states: “God has promised the hypocrites, men and women, and the rejecters of faith, the fire of Hell. Therein shall they dwell, and sufficient is it for them. For them is the curse of God and an enduring punishment” (9:68), and *Surat al-Munafiqun* reveals: “When you look at them, their exteriors please you; and when they speak, you listen to their words. They are as (worthless as hollow) pieces of timber propped up (unable to stand on their own). They think that every cry is against them. They are the enemies, so beware of them. The curse of God be on them! How they are deluded (away from the Truth)!” (63:4).

Several *ahadith* testify to the abomination of being a hypocrite. Both al-Bukhari and Muslim record a hadith narrated by Abu Hurayrah: “Prophet

Muhammad (pbuh) said: ‘You will find that the worst person is double-faced; he meets one group of people with one side of his face, while another with the other side.’⁴ Ammar ibn Yasir narrated: “[The Prophet said]: “Whoever is double-faced in this life will have two tongues of fire in the Hereafter.” (Related by al-Bukhari in *Al-Adab Al-Mufrad*, and by Abu Dawood, al-Darimi, and others).⁵

Muslims are thus exhorted to avoid hypocrisy and to be on constant alert for any sign of it within themselves. Such a religious rejection makes hypocrisy a detestable behavior to Muslims and helps explain the intensity of emotions surrounding their accusations of western hypocrisy.

The strength of these accusations also tells us that Muslims are interested in such supposedly uniquely western values as the rule of law and respect for human rights; want to live in societies that operationalize such values (hence emigration to the West and the existence of Muslim reform movements); believe that such values are part and parcel of their own cultural and religious heritage; and, moreover, that they want the West to recognize their embrace of and desire for such values. Herein lies another key to the Muslims’ criticism of western hypocrisy.

But this charge does not explain all of the West’s reactions to the Muslims’ cultural and religious values, which are supposedly at odds with noble modernity. Could it also be simply a case of ignorance? Possibly, especially among those who know only of Islam via the media. (Incredibly, a friend told me that last year he had a co-worker who, when told I am a Muslim, responded “What’s that?” and he was not joking.) But the claim of ignorance is hard to sustain, especially at a certain level of world-literateness in the face of all the information currently available via the Internet, television, print media, person-to-person interaction, and the like.

The West’s negative reactions to Muslims goes deeper than that. In 1979, Edward Said presented his critique of Orientalism, of how the power relationship itself had and continues to structure “knowledge” of the Middle East and Muslims. He has been much criticized (as well as lauded), but what is striking nearly thirty years later is how stable his delineation of the West’s interpretation of Muslims remains. It has become like an inheritance in the West, passed on from one generation to the next. Thus, anti-Islamic sentiments are deeply embedded in the western psyche.

A related factor is the consistent inability of western commentators (that trickles down to ordinary people) to explain and understand social and political phenomenon in Muslim communities via analogies to their own society. For instance, on the topic of women, it is a kind of “truth” in western culture

that “Islam oppresses women.” Leila Ahmed first remarked on this in 1982.⁶ Embedded in such a critique is the implication that to be liberated, a Muslim woman must leave Islam. The West, as a place of liberation for women, stands as the unspoken backdrop. Are there no problems for women in the West? Has feminism won? Are feminists outdated? Not according to them. Patriarchy, gender inequality, discrimination, harassment, and violence against women are all prevalent in the West’s social fabric.

As this editorial was being written, a report prepared by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health on violence and sexual harassment in Ontario high schools revealed several shocking statistics. More than 1,800 Grade 9 students were surveyed, with a follow-up two years later, in twenty-three rural and urban high schools in southwestern Ontario. Among the surprises were that

almost half of female high school students are subjected to sexual comments or gestures, and one-third are touched, grabbed or pinched in a sexual way ... Almost one-third of the girls in Grade 11 felt pressured into taking part in unwanted sexual activity, and 15 percent “had oral sex just to avoid having sex.” Thirty-six percent of males in Grade 9 were subjected to sexual comments or jokes, which dropped to 27 percent by Grade 11.⁷

A Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) afternoon radio show guest claimed that part of the problem was a “lack of feminism” among the girls.⁸ Nowhere in the coverage did one get the sense that “western” culture, some kind of monolithic culture that needed rejecting, was to blame. What was offered were analyses targeting particularly disturbing aspects of contemporary western culture. No one felt such aspects to be “essential ingredients.” Instead, they were problem attitudes and behaviors that needed to be, and with education could be, changed. And yet if one looks at the coverage of disturbing aspects affecting Muslim women (i.e., honor killings), one finds that religion and culture are singled out. The murder of a Muslim teenage girl in Mississauga was due to her “refusal to wear hijab,”⁹ rather than an unfortunate outcome of a dysfunctional family that resorted to violence.

As Zaid Shakir commented in his response to claims that Islam calls for honor killings: “In the United States there are approximately 1,200 women killed every year by their husbands or intimate partners. There are other ‘Christian’ nations where murders of this type are even higher.”¹⁰ When looking at their own social ills, western society can differentiate between its culture and the values in which its people believe and to which they aspire. But when looking at outsiders, Muslims, or others, western society cannot

make such subtle distinctions. Thus, every Muslim social ill is transmuted into a cultural value. Muslim secularists eager to attack “Islamism” do the same thing. What I am saying has been said before and in better analytic terms by female scholars of the Middle East for nearly thirty years. But somehow it makes no impact on popular- or even high-cultural analysis. That this is another form of hypocrisy bears repeating.

Perhaps the height of this hypocrisy is exporting “democracy and freedom” as the best form of governance through the barrel of a gun, while western social and political theorists bemoan the state of democracy in their own countries. With voter apathy on the increase and the rise of big-moneyed interests setting the policy agenda, some theorists talk not of liberal democracy but of oligarchy, not of democracy but of “democracy’s deficit.” Would such a system be in dire straits at home, but so worth exporting that it is worth the lives of thousands of innocent people in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere?

Huntington and others are wrong to suggest that there is an inherent antagonism between the West and Islam. Islamic values are not a threat to western civilization. A case is easily made that the “West” and “Islam” are not closed systems that grew up in isolation from each other. There is plenty of evidence of intercultural influences. Early Muslims, while committed to their belief in the Qur’an and Sunnah, were thirsty for the knowledge of all civilizations known to them. And so they learned everything they could get their hands on, filtered it through their belief systems, adapted it, and built upon it. Their creation was taken up by Aquinas and others thinkers who were not truly “westerners” in the way we understand this term today, and passed on into the heritage of the “West.” Thus, at its very foundation the “West” is composed of Islamic and other civilizations filtered through its commitment to Christian thought. This is the same with Islamic civilization, which is composed of Arabian, Byzantine, Persian, Indian, Greek, and other civilizations’ creations, filtered, of course, through its commitment to Islam. The “Judaean” part of the “Judaean-Christian” western heritage is a recent formulation that occurred only after Christian leaders addressed the issue of Christian persecution of Jews as the “killers of Jesus” in order to smooth the way for our contemporary critics of Islam to speak wishfully of the “Judaean-Christian-western” values supposedly threatened by Islam.¹¹

Current relations between the West and “Muslimdom” are like two tectonic plates that frequently rub up against each other and cause volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. But this is not inevitable. To make the transition to a more peaceful co-existence, the West must abandon its double standards

and its inability to treat the social ills of Muslim communities as something other than culturally determined pathologies. Dialogue and mutual respect require partners who feel equally dignified in their persons and commitments. Currently, this is not accorded to Muslims, who react with anger and accusations of hypocrisy. Such emotions feed an unhealthy anti-westernism in Muslim communities, which only contributes to a cycle of violence.

This issue of AJISS opens with Umer O. Thasneem's finely rendered "Two Souls in Search of an Oasis," an analysis comparing the conversion stories of two important figures: Muhammad Asad (a Polish Jew born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and Kamala Surayya (an Indian Hindu). Thasneem shows that, contrary to the contemporary West's popular view, Islam as a religion and a way of life has been (and remains) a deeply attractive alternative for spiritual people.

Muhamad S. Olimat's "The Fourth Wave of Democratization" surveys the "state-of-democracy" in an attempt to show that the failure of the so-called "fourth wave" in the Arab world is attributable not to the "Arab" mind, which is supposedly incapable of creating democracy, but to the resistance of the region's autocrats and their western backers to losing their power. Olimat argues that not only must the West talk to the leading democrats in the Middle East, but also that the Islamists must work to demonstrate that western concerns about them coming to power are misplaced.

Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi's study of the reformist movement in nineteenth-century Tunisia highlights the important role of scholar-statesman Khayr al-Din and the obstacles the reformers faced. His article is a timely reminder that good governance has indigenous roots in Muslim intellectual thought and need not be imposed by outsiders. Indeed, his study demonstrates that outside interference largely scuttled the indigenous reform movement both in Tunisia and, by extension, elsewhere. Perhaps the Muslim world would be in a brighter situation today had the indigenous movements been allowed to take their own course without the brutal colonial interventions and intrigues.

Seyed Mahdi Sajjadi's "Religious Education and the Delegitimation of Knowledge" focuses on how the rise of an "information technology" society impacts religious education. Making an important distinction between "information" and "knowledge," he suggests that the huge increase in available information has brought about a decline in true knowledge. Religious education, with its emphasis on gaining knowledge to acquire virtue and worship the Creator, can suffer through this delegitimation of knowledge. Indeed, scholars of political Islam have noted the Internet's role in creating

a crisis of interpretative authority for Islam and the concomitant rise of extremist Muslim ideology. To counter this trend, a group of Muslim scholars committed to traditional Islamic methodologies of the legal schools recently issued a “Pledge of Mutual Respect and Cooperation Between Sunni Muslim Scholars, Organizations, and Students,” in which, among other things, they

[u]rge Muslims in the West, especially our youth, to leave off unproductive and divisive discussions of involved theological issues that are the proper domain of trained specialists, and we especially discourage participation in those internet chat rooms, campus discussion groups, and other forums that only serve to create ill-will among many Muslims, while fostering a divisive, sectarian spirit.¹²

In our “Forum” section, Altaf Fatima addresses “The Role of Popular Muslim Movements in the Indian Freedom Struggle,” reminding her audience that Muslims played an important precursor role to the final success of Ghandi’s non-violent movement for Indian independence.

Endnotes

1. Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 36.
2. Ibid.
3. Jonathon Fox, “Ethnic minorities and the clash of civilizations: A quantitative analysis of Huntington's thesis,” *British Journal of Political Science* 32, no. 3 (2002): 415-35.
4. www.angelfire.com/ca/hasakr/2face.html.
5. www.aljazeera.com/News/2004/07/040701-Islam%20Abhors%20All%20Types%20of%20Hypocrisy,%20Adil%20Salahi.htm.
6. Leila Ahmed, “Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem,” *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 3 (fall 1982): 521-34.
7. Kristin Rushowy, “Sexist comments and unwanted touching a major concern throughout southwest Ontario,” *The Toronto Star*, 7 February 2008. www.the-star.com/News/GTA/article/301336.
8. Ibid., “Here and Now” 7 February 2008.
9. www.cbc.ca/news/viewpoint/vp_fatah/20071214.html.
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11. www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/marchweb-only/56.0b.html?start=1.
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