LookSmart

The Muslim world and the West: the roots of conflict

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TO SAY THAT AN EFFECTIVE CURE of a disease requires a sound diagnosis is to state the obvious. Yet, in the face of the 9/11 plague, and of the scourge of terrorism in general, the Bush administration has utterly failed to shed any light on some of the submerged factors that might have provoked such heinous attacks. Instead, the simplistic and politically expedient explanations such as "good vs. evil," or "the clash of civilizations," or the "Islamic incompatibility with the modern world" have shed more heat than light on the issue.

Aside from their poisonous implications for international relations, such explanations simply fail the test of history. The history of the relationship between the modern Western world and the Muslim world shows that, contrary to popular perceptions in the West, from the time of their initial contacts with the capitalist West more than two centuries ago until almost the final third of the twentieth century, the Muslim people were quite receptive of the economic and political models of the modern world. Many people in the Muslim world, including the majority of their political leaders, were eager to transform and redesign the socio-economic and political structures of their societies after the model of the capitalist West. The majority of political leaders, as well as a significant number of Islamic experts and intellectuals, viewed the rise of the modern West and its spread into their lands as inevitable historical developments that challenged them to chart their own programs of reform and development.

In light of this background, the question arises: What changed all of that earlier receptive and respectful attitude toward the West to the current attitude of disrespect and hatred?

This study will show, I hope, that the answer to this question lies more with the policies of the Western powers in the region than the alleged rigidity of Islam, or "the clash of civilizations." It will show that it was only after more than a century and a half of imperialistic pursuits and a series of humiliating policies in the region that the popular masses of the Muslim world turned to religion and the conservative religious leaders as sources of defiance, mobilization, and self-respect. In other words, for many Muslims the recent turn to religion often represents not so much a rejection of Western values and achievements but away to resist and/or defy the humiliating imperialistic policies of Western powers.

EARLY RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGES OF THE MODERN WORLD

Not only did the early modernizers of the Muslim world embrace Western technology, but they also welcomed its civil and state institutions, its representational system of government, and its tradition of legal and constitutional rights. For example, the Iranian intellectuals Mulkum Khan (1833-1908) and Agha Khan Kermani (1853-96) urged Iranians to acquire a Western education and replace the Shariah (the religious legal code) with a modern secular legal code. Secular political leaders of this persuasion joined forces with the more liberal religious leaders in the Constitution Revolution of 1906, and forced the Qajar dynasty to set up a modern constitution, to limit the powers of the monarchy and give Iranians parliamentary representation (Armstrong 2000: 149).

Even some of the Ottoman sultans pursued Western models of industrialization and modernization on their own. For example, Sultan Mahmud II "inaugurated the Tanzimat (Regulation) in 1826, which abolished the Janissaries [the fanatical elite corps of troops organized in the 14th century], modernized the army and introduced some of the new technology." In 1839 Sultan Abdulhamid "issued the Gulhane decree, which made his rule dependent upon a contractual relationship with his subjects, and looked forward to major reform of the empire's institutions" (Ibid.: 150).

More dramatic, however, were the modernizing and/or secularizing programs of Egypt' s renowned modernizers Muhammad Ali (1769-1849) and his grandson Ismail Pasha (1803-95). They were so taken by the impressive achievements of the West that they embarked on breakneck modernizing programs that were tantamount to trying to hothouse the Western world's

achievements of centuries into decades: "To secularize the country, Muhammad Ali simply confiscated much religiously endowed property and systematically marginalized the Ulema [religious leaders], divesting them of any shred of power" (Ibid.: 150-51). In the face of dire conditions of underdevelopment and humiliating but unstoppable foreign domination, those national leaders viewed modernization not only as the way out of underdevelopment but also out of the yoke of foreign domination.

Not only the secular intellectuals, the political elite, and government leaders but also many Islamic leaders and scholars, known as "Islamic modernizers," viewed modernization as the way of the future. But whereas the reform programs and policies of the political/national leaders often included secularization, at least implicitly, Islamic modernizers were eclectic: while seeking to adopt the sources of the strength of the West, including constitutionalism and government by representation, they wanted to preserve their cultural and national identities as well as Islamic principles and values as the moral foundation of the society. These Islamic modernizers included Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-97), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), Qasim Amin (1863-1908), and Shaikh Muhammad Hussain Naini in Egypt and Iran: and Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98) and Muhammad Iqbal (1875-1938) in India.

To be sure, there was resistance to change. But, by and large, nationalist modernizers in many Muslim countries did manage to pursue vigorous agendas of social, economic, and political reform. John Esposito, one of the leading experts of Islamic studies in the United States, describes the early attitude of the political and economic policy makers of the Muslim world toward the modern world of the West in the following way:

Both the indigenous elites, who guided government development programs in newly emerging Muslim states, and their foreign patrons and advisers were Western-oriented and Western-educated. All proceeded from a premise that equated modernization with Westernization. The clear goal and presupposition of development was that every day and in every way things should become more modern (i.e., Western and secular), from cities, buildings, bureaucracies, companies, and schools to politics and culture. While some warned of the need to be selective, the desired direction and pace of change were unmistakable. Even those Muslims who spoke of selective change did so within a context which called for the separation of religion from public life. Western analysts and Muslim experts alike tended to regard a Western-based process of modernization as necessary and inevitable and believed equally that religion was a major hindrance to political and social change in the Muslim world (1992: 9).

Karen Armstrong, author of a number of books on religious fundamentalism, likewise points out:

> About a hundred years ago, almost every leading Muslim intellectual was in love with the West, which at that time meant Europe. America was still an unknown quantity. Politicians and journalists in India, Egypt, and Iran wanted their countries to be just like Britain or France; philosophers, poets, and even some of the Mama (religious scholars) tried to find ways of reforming Islam according to the democratic model of the West. They called for a nation state, for representational government, for the disestablishment of religion, and for constitutional rights. Some even claimed that the Europeans were better Muslims than their own fellow countrymen since the Koran teaches that the resources of a society must be shared as fairly as possible, and in the European nations there was beginning to be a more equitable sharing of wealth (2002, 45).

Armstrong then asks: "So what happened in the intervening years to transform all of that admiration and respect into the hatred that incited the acts of terror that we witnessed on September 11?"

While profound questions of this type could go some way to help a national debate over some of the more submerged factors that contribute to heinous crimes such as the 9/11 attacks, the Administration of President Bush, in conjunction with major media outlets, have so far effectively kept such questions off the national debate.

It is necessary to acknowledge, once again, that the Muslim world's earlier openness to the modern world was far from even or uniform: along with advocates of change and adaptation there existed forces of resistance and rejection. Focusing primarily on such instances of rejection, proponents of the theory of "the clash of civilizations" can certainly cite, as they frequently do, many such incidents of resistance in support of their arguments that horrific acts like those committed on 9/11 are due to inherent incompatibility of the Muslim world with Western values (Huntington 1997: Lewis 2001; Krauthammer 1994; Pipes 1995). But such selective references to historical developments in order to support a pre-determined view do not carry us very far in the way of setting historical records straight. A number of issues need to be pointed out in this context.

To begin, change almost always generates resistance. Resistance to change is, therefore, not limited to Muslims or the Muslim world. In fact, the Christian Church's nearly 400-year resistance to capitalist transformation in Europe was even more traumatic than that of the Muslim world. The resulting travail of transition created more social turbulence than has been observed in the context of the Muslim world. Whereas the Church of the Middle Ages made anathema the very idea of gain, the pursuit of gain and the accumulation of property are considered noble pursuits in Islam. Opponents of transition to capitalism in Europe not only tried (and almost hanged) Robert Keane for having made a six-percent profit on his investment and "prohibited merchants from carrying unsightly bundles" of their merchandise, but also "fought for the privilege of carrying on in its lathers' footsteps" (Heilbroner 1972: 35). As Karen Armstrong points out, during the nearly 400 years of transition, the Western people often "experienced ... bloody revolutions, reigns of terror, genocide, violent wars of religion, the despoliation of the countryside, vast social upheavals, exploitation in the factories, spiritual malaise and profound anomie in the new megacities" (Armstrong 2000: 145).

Second, Muslim societies, like less-developed societies elsewhere, are expected, or compelled by the imperatives of the world market, to traverse the nearly four hundred-year journey of the West in a much shorter period of time. Furthermore, the travails of transition in the case of these belatedly developing countries (vis-a-vis the case of early developers of the West) are often complicated by foreign interventions and imperial pressures from outside. External pressure has included not only direct colonial and/or imperial military force, but also pressure exerted from the more subtle market forces and agents such as the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization.

Despite its turbulence, the painful process of transition to capitalism in the West was largely an internal process; no foreign force or interference could be blamed for the travails of transition. And the pains of transitions were thus gradually and grudgingly accepted as historical inevitabilities. Not so in the case of belatedly developing countries. Here, the pains of change and transition are sometimes perceived not as historical necessities but as products of foreign designs or imperialist schemes. Accordingly, the agony of change is often blamed (especially by the conservative proponents of the status quo) on external forces or powers: colonialism, imperialism, and neo-liberalism.

Actual foreign intervention, realizing and reinforcing such perceptions, has thus had a retarding impact on the process of reform in the Muslim world. For intervention from outside often plays into the hands of the conservative, obscurantist elements who are quite adept at portraying their innate opposition to change as a struggle against foreign domination, thereby reinforcing resistance to reform, especially religious reform. Today, for example, U.S. intervention in the internal affairs of countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, and Turkey, far from facilitating the process of reform or helping the forces of change in these countries, is actually hurting such forces as it plays into the hands of their conservative opponents and strengthens the forces of resistance.

Third, contrary to the rising political influence of "radical Islamists" in recent years, radical Islamic circles of the earlier periods did not sway much power over the direction of national economies and policies. Their opposition to Western values and influences was often in the form of passive "rejection or elusion" (Guiyun 2002). They simply refused to cooperate or deal with the colonial powers and their institutions (such as modern European schools) spreading in their midst: "They did not attempt to assume direct political control but used their position to preserve tradition as best they could under the rapidly changing conditions of the time." And while they "remained an important factor in influencing public opinion..., they basically

used their position to encourage obedience to those in power" (Voll 1994: 94).

To the extent that conservative Islamic figures or groups actively challenged policies of change, such obscurantist challenges were almost always defeated, coerced, or co-opted by the modernizing, reforming, or revolutionary secular nationalist leaders. Thus, in all the major social movements of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century (that is, in the anti-colonial/anti-imperial national liberation movements as well as in the subsequent radical reform movements of a "non-capitalist" or "socialist-oriented" character of the 1950s and 1960s) national leadership lay with secular nationalists. This is not to deny that, at times, religious nationalism played an important role in the anti-colonial/anti-imperial struggles. But that because Islamic leaders lacked national development or nation building plans, political leadership on a national level often fell into the hands of secular nationalists who offered such plans.

Those programs were fashioned either after the U.S. model of economic development, as in the case of the Shahs of Iran and the King of Jordan, or after the Soviet model of "non-capitalist development," as in the cases of Nasser's Egypt, for example. While it is now relatively easier to see, in hindsight, the shortcomings and the failures of those development programs, such programs at the time did hold promises of lifting the respective societies out of dependence, poverty, and underdevelopment. Thus it was not simply a lack of an "Islamic alternative" that gave the leading role of national development to secular nationalism. Perhaps more importantly, were the hopes and aspirations that were nurtured by those national development projects.

As long as the hopes and aspirations that were thus enlivened remained animated, the appeals of vague promises of an "Islamic alternative" were not strong enough to challenge the rule of the secular nationalist leaders and their development programs--and that meant, approximately, the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. But as those hopes turned sour, such promises began to sound appealing. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, all the propitious factors and circumstances that had until then nurtured those dreams of economic progress, democratic rights, and political sovereignty seemed unreal and disappointing.

The secular national governments that had emerged in a number of Muslim countries from the process of national liberation struggles turned out to be headed largely by the allies and collaborators of the colonial/imperial powers they had formally replaced--that is, the landed aristocracy and the big commercial interests, known as "comprador bourgeoisie." As such, they were more willing to continue the inherited pattern of socio-economic structures than to carry out land and other reform programs that would change such structures in favor of the masses who had fought for independence.

Likewise, it soon became clear that revolutionary nationalist leaders who replaced the comprador bourgeoisie in countries such as Egypt, Algeria, and the Sudan, and who had initially embarked on extensive reform programs in the name of socialism or non-capitalist development had done so primarily out of self-interest or political and economic expediency. Once firmly in power, they began to enrich themselves by virtue of their positions at the commanding heights of national economy. And once they had thus accumulated sufficient capital in the shadow of state capitalism, they began to modify or reverse their original radical course, and revert back to the many of the social and economic policies of the regimes they had replaced (Hossein-Zadeh 1989).

It was, therefore, only after the plans and programs of secular nationalist leaders (whether of a pro-U.S. capitalist type or of a pro-Soviet "non-capitalist" model) failed to bear the fruits promised that the disappointed masses of the Muslim world found the radical message of Islam, giving voice to their pent up grievances, attractive. As Hrair Dekmejian puts it: "the recent quest for a return to the Islamic ethos appears to be a natural response to the successive pathological experiences which have buffeted Islamic societies in contemporary times" (1980: 3). Or, as John Voll points out, "The failure of existing institutions and regimes to cope with the challenges of the late twentieth century experiences is accepted by most as an important dimension of the [Islamic] resurgence" (1994: 379).

SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTOURS OF ISLAM

A number of socio-historical comparisons between the industrialized West and the Muslim world, as well as between Islam and other major religions, might help dispel some of the demonizing myths that have been attributed to Islam in the West.

Islam Is Not Monolithic

The view that Islam is a rigid, monolithic, and intrinsically violent religion fails to explain the multitude of interpretations and practices of Islam, both across time and space. It fails to take into account the fact that, for example, both the essence and interpretations of Islam, like those of other major religions, are not independent of the actual social needs and circumstances; and that, as such, its message is as much reactive to real social, political and economic needs as it is divine and proactive. The view of Islam as an intrinsically violent, anti-progressive religion is not only dangerous but also incapable of explaining the flexibility and maneuverability of Islam, like all religious traditions, to be both rigid and pragmatic, revolutionary and quietist, combatant and pacifist--depending on social circumstance.

A cursory look at the ruling powers and state policies in the contemporary Muslim world defies perceptions of a monolithic Islamic threat. While most of the ruling authorities in the Muslim world invoke "Islamic principles" to legitimize and strengthen their power, interpretations and implementations of those principles vary significantly from one Muslim country to the next. Such differences can readily be observed in all the major aspects of both polity and policy: the forms of government, domestic policies and programs, as well as international relations and foreign policy. Kings, military rulers, presidents, and clergy all have used Islam to implement their often markedly diverse social and economic programs, and solidify their power.

Diverse, and sometimes diametrically-opposed, Islamic interpretations of social, economic, and political issues exist, often side-by-side, both within and between Muslim countries and communities. Not only have the incumbent authorities in recent years tried to utilize Islamic symbolism to advance their objectives and enhance their power, but perhaps more importantly, the opposition forces and movements have also invoked Islam to attract popular support for their agendas. Such contentious interpretations of Islam can clearly be observed in today's national debates raging in most Muslim countries, including Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Egypt, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Indonesia, Turkey, Algeria, and Jordan.

Divergent views of the role of Islam in governance and policy is also reflected in the diverse foreign policies and international relations pursued by various Muslim countries. Foreign policy imperatives of Muslim countries, like those of other countries, are determined largely by special interests, specific circumstances, national interests, or geopolitical considerations--not by a pan-Islamic or united nations of Islamic countries. Accordingly, international relations among Muslim countries are no less prone to frictions and conflicts than relations among non-Muslim countries, or among Muslim and non-Muslim countries. Diversity of foreign policy objectives is also reflected in the markedly different relations of Muslim states and Western powers, especially the United States. For example, while ruling powers in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and Pakistan have been among the closest allies of the United States, those in Iran and Libya have been among its severest critics (Rodinson 1981; Esposito 1992 & 1980; Hudson 1980).

These observations--which view the recent revival of political Islam as a response to specific socio-economic issues, policies, and interests--strongly refute the claim that the revival stems from "a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them" (Lewis 1990: 60). As John Esposito points out, the claim that attributes the resurgence to the "inherently confrontational nature of Islam" and/or a historical continuity of "the clash of civilizations" tends to "downplay or overlook specific political and socioeconomic causes for Muslim behavior, to see Muslim actions as an irrational reaction rather than a response to specific policies and actions ..." In this way, continues Esposito, "The primacy of competing political interests, policies, and issues is dismissed or eclipsed by the vision of an age-old rivalry between 'them' and 'us'" (1992: 179).

The Rise of Fundamentalism is Not Limited to Islam

The establishment media and political pundits in the West, especially in the United States, tend to paint the resurgent Islam of recent years with the proverbial broad brush of Islamic fundamentalism, maintaining that the resurgence is simply due to the inherently rigid, static, retrogressive, and anti-modern foundation of Islam. This represents a distorted, obfuscating interpretation. Despite the fact that the term Islamic fundamentalism is readily used to characterize all types of Islamic movements and political activism, "it tell us everything and yet, at the same time, nothing," points out John Esposito (1992: 7-8). Perhaps the best way to appreciate the facile use of fundamentalism and its inadequacy is to consider the following:

> This term has been applied to the governments of Libya, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran. Yet what does that really tell us about these states other than the fact that their rulers have appealed to Islam to legitimate their rule or policies? Muammar Qaddafi has claimed the right to interpret Islam, questioned the authenticity of traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, silenced the religious establishment as well as the Muslim Brotherhood, and advocated a populist state of masses. The rulers of Saudi Arabia, by contrast, have aligned themselves with the ulama (clergy), preached a more literalist and rigorous brand of Islam, and used religion to legitimate a conservative monarchy.... (Ibid.).

By focusing almost exclusively on the violent behavior of the frustrated and embattled Muslims, the corporate media and the establishment political pundits in the Unites States tend to create the impression that the rise of religious fundamentalism is a purely Islamic phenomenon. Such depictions are false. The rise of religious fundamentalism is universal; and this is not fortuitous. It is because fundamentalism arises largely in response to modernity and secularism, which tend to weaken and threaten religious principles and traditions. Fundamentalism has recently been on the rise not only in Islam but also in Judaism, in Christianity, in Hinduism, in Buddhism, in Sikhism, and even in Confucianism (Appleby 1997; Armstrong 2000; Choueiri, 1990: Marty/Appleby 1995). As John Voll points out:

> By the early 1990s, violent militancy was clearly manifest among Hindu fundamentalists, Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Jewish fundamentalists in Israel, and others elsewhere. As a result, analyses that interpret the militancy of Islamic fundamentalism as being somehow directly caused by distinctive Islamic doctrines and traditions are increasingly out of touch with the realities of the global religious resurgence of the late twentieth century. The globalization of the resurgence reflects the new realities of what can be seen as post-secular era (1994: 376).

Furthermore, as Karen Armstrong points out, "Of the three monolithic religions, Islam was in fact the last to develop a fundamentalist strain, when modern culture began to take root in the Muslim world in the late 1960s and 1970s. By this date, fundamentalism was quite established among Christians and Jews, who had had a longer exposure to modern experience" (Armstrong 2000: 165).

A number of factors tend to make Islamic fundamentalism more visible or dramatic than Christian or Jewish fundamentalism. One such factor pertains to the mode of expression or form of manifestation. While Islamic fundamentalism is usually expressed in traditional, direct, personal or, let us say, "pre-capitalist" forms of expression, Christian or Jewish fundamentalism is often masked by institutionalized, modern lobbying, and less-visible methods of market subtleties. For example, tile subtle, sophisticated, and institutionalized mode of operation tends to camouflage the fact that the influence of powerful fundamentalist forces over the policies of the administrations of both President Bush and Prime Minister Sharon is not less than parallel fundamentalist influences over state policies of a number of Muslim countries.

A second factor that tends to magnify Islamic fundamentalism while minimizing or disguising Jewish and Christian fundamentalism is related to the all-powerful corporate media and the far-reaching but subtle propaganda apparatuses of political and ideological institutions and think tanks of the West. These include not only radio, television and newspapers but also journals, books, movies, art, and so on. While, for example, the establishment media, eagerly portrays every angry reaction to foreign aggression by every child anywhere in the Muslim world as a manifestation of Islamic fundamentalism, it rarely points out the fact that powerful fundamentalist Christian and Jewish forces support the more destructive military operations or geopolitical polices that trigger such violent reactions in the first place.

A third factor that makes the rise of fundamentalism in the Muslim world more dramatic is the oppressive foreign intervention. Proponents of the theory of "the clash of civilizations" attribute negative reactions in the Muslim world to the suffocating policies of the imperial powers almost exclusively to Muslims' fear of modernization. Yet, such essentially political reactions are prompted mainly by the predatory imperial policies and the unwelcome, onerous, and constant symbols of foreign presence in their lands, their markets, and their daily lives. That presence is imposed in a variety of ways: sometimes via direct military occupation, sometimes through military bases and advisors, sometimes through financial gurus of transnational corporations, sometimes through economic embargoes, and sometimes through aggressive commercialism and shabby cultural products such as violent video games or pornographic movies.

More importantly, people in many Muslim countries feel the imperial pressure through the vicarious authority of the dictatorial regimes that rule their countries by virtue of the support of foreign powers. Since such unpopular, client regimes do not tolerate dissent or countenance alternative views, opposition views are often expressed in "illegal," violent ways. Western imperial policies in the Muslim world are, therefore, directly responsible for Muslims' resort to religion and the rise of fundamentalism because those policies prop up loyal but dictatorial rulers who suppress economic and democratic rights of their people in order to safeguard their nefarious interests, along with those of their foreign patrons.

Atrocities are Committed in the Name of Most Religions--Not Just Islam

The concept that Islam is a notably confrontational and belligerent religion stems from either intellectual dishonesty or historical ignorance or both. It fails to consider the fact that many of the angry and humiliated people in the Muslim world resort to religion as a source of self-assertion and a force of inspiration in the face of foreign aggression. It focuses on the angry and sometimes violent responses of the Muslim people to foreign aggression as evidence of terroristic Muslim behavior but tails to acknowledge the fact that such responses are often reactions to certain imperialistic actions, or as Chalmers Johnson puts it, they are "blowbacks" from earlier foreign aggressions or imperial policies (2002: 8-9). It also fails to acknowledge the fact that Muslim people are not making any claims on other people's territory, or resources, or markets. All they want is to be respected, to be left alone, and to be allowed to decide for themselves. Is this too much to ask?

More importantly, it fails to consider the fact that the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity far surpass those committed in the name of Islam. The brutal wars of the Crusades, fought in the name of Christianity, continued sporadically over hundreds of years. Written in blood and terror, they were often prompted by a desire to usurp the wealth and treasures of other nations through looting and spoils of war in order to ease the domestic economic and political difficulties of the papacy and major princes of Europe.

But the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity did not end with the end of the Middle Ages and the Crusades. Transition to capitalism and the dawn of the modern era brought forth its own share of aggression and horrific wars that were also often fought in the name of Christianity and civilization. These included the Holy Inquisition, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, the Thirty Years' War, the English Civil War, the St Bartholomew Massacre, Cromwell's slaughter in Ireland, the enslavement and widespread extermination of native peoples in Africa and the Americas, the Eighty Years' War in Holland, the expulsion of the Huguenots from France, the pogroms, the burning of witches, and many other horrific events right down to The Holocaust itself, which was largely the work of people who considered themselves, as did the slave drivers of America's South, to be Christians (Chuckman 2002).

Aside from the wars motivated by or waged in the name of religion, far more blood and conflicts can be detected in the European and American history than that of the Muslim world. Here is a sample, as collected by John Chuckman: The Hundred Years' War, the War of the Spanish Succession, the Seven Years' War, the slave trade, the Vendee, the Napoleonic Wars, the Trail of Tears, the Opium War, African slavery in the American South, the American Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War, the massacre in the Belgium Congo, the Crimean War, lynchings, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, the Spanish Civil War, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War--and now President Bush's wars of preemption and regime change. As Chuckman puts it, "How anyone with this heritage can describe Islam as notably bloodthirsty plainly tells us that immense ignorance of history is at work here" (Ibid.).

Today many observers detect similarities between the Bush administration's war policies in the Muslim world and those that

drove the Crusades; or, more importantly, between the insidious theories of "the clash of civilizations" and those that underpinned the Crusades. While the historical context, the tactics, and the means of warfare are vastly different, the drive to war, both then and now, seems to be fueled primarily by economic interests. Then, economic resources included precious metals, articles of art, and other treasures that were coveted by the popes and princes of Europe. Now, they include war-induced or war-related profits for big corporations, especially military industries, and related contractor.

Not surprisingly, many people in the Muslim world--as well as in the rest of the world, including the United States--are deeply concerned about the gravity of the implications of the theory of "the clash of civilizations," and the concomitant policy of preemptive wars. Sadly, the Bush Administration's policy in the Muslim world and its rhetoric of "war on terrorism" (often couched in missionary, biblical terms such as "axis of evil, good vs. evil, day of reckoning, evil doers," and the like) tend to reinforce such fears.

Contrary to popular perceptions in the West, far more tolerance and generosity of spirit can be detected in the history of Islam and/or Muslims than that shown by Christians--bloody characters like Tamerlane notwithstanding. To begin with, Muslims, starting with the Prophet Mohamed himself, do not reject Christianity or Judaism. As Georgie Anne Geyer points out, "The Prophet Mohamed was so tolerant for his age (the seventh century) that he saw the Muslim Allah as existing existentially as the same god of the Jews and the Christians, upon whose religions he syncretistically based Islam" (2003). Accordingly, Muslims view the historical place and the mission of the Prophet Mohamed in line and in accordance with the traditions of the major Judeo-Christian prophets (Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus) who succeeded him.

The expansion of the Islamic Empire to Europe (eighth century) was hardly brutal, or predatory, or restrictive and oppressive. On the contrary, it ushered in a period of tremendous growth in trade, in arts and sciences, and in culture. The Muslim kings of Spain, known as Moorish kings, tended to follow the same tolerant attitude towards religion that the classical Romans had done. The Romans allowed any religion to flourish, often officially adopting the gods of a conquered people, so long as the religion represented no political threat to Rome's authority. "A remarkably tolerant society flourished under the Moors in Spain for hundreds of years. Jews, Christians, and Muslims were tolerated, and the talented served the state in many high capacities regardless of religion. Learning advanced, trade flourished" (Chuckman 2002).

Recent Return of Religion is Universal

Not only the rise of religious fundamentalism but also the turn to religion in general is a universal development of recent years that goes beyond Islam or the Muslim world. As noted earlier, the recent appeal of religion in the Muslim world has been precipitated largely by a series of disappointments and frustrations over a long period of time, including the inability of the prevailing political and social structures to deliver economic security and political freedom, as well as the oppressive and humiliating interventions from outside. While it is important that policy failures are "properly" identified in the discussions of the generation and accumulation of such frustrations, it is equally important to point out the systemic flaws, the shortcomings of the capitalist system, that affect both policy and the socioeconomic environment. Capitalism, especially in the context of the belatedly developing economies, has often been incapable of delivering economic justice and democratic rule. Frustrations with the woes and vagaries of a market economy--especially with the imperatives of globalization of markets--coupled with popular desire for independence from foreign intervention, have provided fertile grounds for Islamic resurgence in the last few decades. The rise of political Islam represents, therefore, as much a response to the systemic vices of market mechanism as it does to specific policies--the two are, of course, often inseparable. Without this crucial link, the link between social circumstances and social movements, Islamic resurgence (or any other social protest, for that matter) can hardly be explained satisfactorily.

Viewed in this light, it is not difficult to see that the resurgence represents essentially a new phase, or another form of struggle, in the long social struggles against capitalist injustices and/or imperialist aggressions. Anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist struggles have, of course, not been limited to the Muslim world. Nor have such struggles in the Muslim world always taken a religious form. All along the 19th century and for the most part of the twentieth century those struggles were led primarily by secular forces. They included secular national liberation movements; radical left, workers and peasants challenges; a whole host of guerilla warfare and "communist" insurgencies; especially in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s: as well as socialist, social democratic, and radical nationalist challenges. Global capitalist forces have proven, so far, to be more tenacious than those

challenges. The success of world capitalism to defeat, co-opt, exhaust, or neutralize most of those earlier challenges has given birth to new configurations of social forces and new challenges, including the recent return to religion as a mobilizing force.

Formerly "socialist" countries of the "Eastern bloc" are now pursuing capitalist development. Accordingly, the turn to religion in these countries is no less dramatic than in the Muslim world. As the end of the era of guaranteed employment and economic security--minimal as they were--has led to insecurity and vulnerability for the majority of the people in the former "Soviet bloc" countries, the appeal and the turn to religion has grown accordingly. Even in the core capitalist countries, especially in the Unites States, there has been a considerable religious resurgence in recent years. Here too the turn to religion is not unrelated to social and economic policies, practices, and circumstances: a shift away from social democracy and welfare state programs to unbridled market forces of neo-liberalism.

Likewise, many of the less-developed countries that pursued "non-capitalist" or "socialist-oriented" paths of development in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s and, accordingly, eschewed foreign capital and Western patterns of development, are now compelled by market imperatives to follow the neo-liberal guidelines of developments and compete with each other to attract international capital. As the neo-liberal offensive has dissipated and/or weakened the traditional sources of challenge (left, labor, and secular radical nationalist forces and organizations) to market pressures, many of the people who resist that offensive are increasingly turning to religion as a source of self-assertion and a force of mobilization. The "return of religion" is, therefore, not limited to the Muslim world; it signifies a global phenomenon. As John Voll puts it, "While the diverse experiences of Muslims in [recent years] cannot simply be equated with religious developments in other traditions, it is also a mistake to view the Islamic developments as isolated phenomena." Voll further points out:

> Although it is interpreted in many different ways, most people now see the Islamic resurgence ... as part of a global context. This resurgence has distinctive characteristics but it takes place on a world context in which there is also the rise of activist assertions of faith in Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and other major world traditions of religion. The resurgence in each of these cases is better understood when seen in the context of the 'worldwide eruption of religious and quasi-religious concerns and themes.' The Islamic resurgence in this context can be seen as a dynamic response to the modern historic transformations. It is not a rare and pathological response but rather an effectively articulated response in tune with some of the major global developments of the end of the twentieth century (1994: 376).

Another characteristic of the recent turn to religion--in addition to being a worldwide trend--is that it is no longer limited to militant groups on the fringes of society; it has become a trend that is embraced by almost all social layers and classes. Whereas the poor and working classes are increasingly resorting to religion as a response to joblessness and other economic pressures of market forces, the ruling classes are also increasingly (and more vigorously) adopting religious symbols, terminology, and pretexts to legitimize their rule and justify their policies. Even the educated middle class and urban professionals, who ever since the days of Enlightenment believed that religious people tended to be "uneducated, rural, poor, and conservative" have in recent years turned to religion (Harding 1991; Warner 1979; Voll 1994; Robertson and Chirico 1985).

Adoption of religion by the mainstream of society, or "normalization of the religious resurgence," as John Voll calls it, has far reaching consequences for the Muslim world. Although violent protestations by extremist elements will certainly continue, the widespread use of religion as a mobilizing force of social protest will have a moderating and, ultimately, reforming impact on Islam. While out of official power structure and in opposition, Islamic (or any other) political groups sound and behave quite radical. Once in power, or part of the legal and/or institutionalized channels of political activism, they tend to become pragmatic and play by the rules of non-violent politics and governance. Experiences of the Islamic parties in Jordan, Turkey, Iran, Bangladesh, and Algeria serve as examples of such a shift in political policy: from violent protests when they were banned or repressed, to nonviolent political activity as they were allowed to participate legally in the political process.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE ONCE-POPULAR U.S. IN THE MUSLIM WORLD?

Prior to World War II, England and other European powers dominated world politics and markets, not the United States. In its drive to penetrate into those markets in competition with European powers, the United States, often citing its own war of independence from the British Empire, frequently expressed sympathy with the national liberation struggles of the peoples of the colonial and other less-developed regions. Unsurprisingly, this made the United States--not just the country, its people, and its values but also its foreign policy and its statesmen--quite popular in the less-developed world, especially the Muslim world, as it portrayed the prospect of an unconditional ally in a rising world power.

Thus, for example, when the late Egyptian leader Jamal Abdel Nasser faced the European opposition to his state-guided economic development program, he turned to the Unites State for help. Nasser's appeal for the U.S. support had been prompted by the United States' veiled expressions of understanding of Egypt's aspirations to chart an independent national policy. Nasser perceived those sympathetic gestures as signs of genuine friendship and cooperation. But when the United States revealed its conditions for the promised cooperation, the Egyptian leader was deeply disappointed.

One major condition required Egypt to enter into the then U.S.-sponsored military alliance in the region, the Baghdad Pact. This was one of the early military alliances that the Unites States established in the region, not only to counter the Soviet influence but also to supplant its enfeebled allies, Britain and France. As a savvy statesman, Nasser understood the "necessity" of such alliances and was, in fact, willing to join the proposed military pact. But the United States expected more. In addition, the U.S. wanted to "shape" Egypt's economic policies. As Mahmood Hussein put it, "the United States claimed the right to control the Egyptian state's economic policies" (Hussein 1973: 136).

Disillusioned--indeed, with his back against the wall--Nasser turned to the Soviet Union to temper the pressure thus exercised against Egypt. Nasser's turn to the Soviet Union was, therefore, precipitated more by expediency--or, more precisely, by default--than by ideological affinity.

Like Egypt's Nasser, Iran's liberal-nationalist Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq also initially harbored illusions of unconditional friendship with the United States. This was because, in the dispute between Iran and England over the control of Iranian oil, the United States had originally conveyed signs of neutrality, even sympathy, with Iran's grievances against England. Prior to the 1953 nationalization, Iran's oil was essentially controlled by Britain. As promised during his election campaign, Mossadeq took steps to nationalize the country's oil industry soon after being popularly elected to premiership in 1951. As England resisted giving up its control of Iran's oil industry, a severe crisis ensued between the two countries. "Mossadeq had thought that the United States might warn London not to interfere, and for a while Truman and Acheson maintained the pretense of neutrality by advising both sides to remain tranquil" (Ali 2002: 133). It soon became clear, however, that while trying to weaken the British Empire, the United States was pursuing its own imperialistic agenda. And when Mossadeq resisted compliance with that agenda, he was fatally punished for "insubordination": His democratically elected government was soon overthrown by the notorious 1953 coup, which was orchestrated by the CIA and British intelligence. The coup also brought the Shah--who had fled to Rome--back to power, aboard a U.S. military plane with the CIA chief at his side.

It is now common knowledge that, since the 1953 violent overthrow of Mossadeq's government in Iran, the United States has helped or orchestrated similar coups against duly elected governments in a number of other countries. In each case, the United States replaced such legitimate governments with "friendly" dictatorial regimes of its own choice. A sample of such handpicked regimes includes those of General Pinochet in Chile, the Somoza family in Nicaragua, Duvalier in Haiti, and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. The list of the U.S. interventions and adventures abroad is quite long. In his latest best-seller, Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got to Be So Hated, Gore Vidal lists some 200 such interventions since WW II (Vidal 2002: 22-41). Most of today's regimes in the Muslim world (such as those ruling in Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia. Jordan, Kuwait, and a number of smaller kingdoms in the Persian Gulf area) are able to maintain their dictatorial rule not because their people want them to stay in power but because they are useful to some powerful interests in the United States.

It is not surprising, then, that many people in these countries are increasingly asking: Why can't we elect our own governments? Why can't we have independent political parties? Why can't we breathe, so to speak? Why are our governments

so corrupt'? Why are our people, especially Palestinians, treated like this? Why are we ruled by regimes we don't like and don't want, but cannot change? And why can't we change them? Well, the majority of these countries' citizens would say, because certain powerful interests in the United States need them and want them in power!

Nor is it surprising that many people in the Muslim world, especially the frustrated youth, are flocking into the ranks of militant anti-U.S, forces, and employing religion as a weapon of mobilization and defiance. It is also no accident that desperate violent reactions are usually directed at the symbols of U.S. power--not at those of the Japanese, for example. Correlation between U.S. foreign policy and such reactions was unambiguously acknowledged by the members of the United States' Defense Science Board, who wrote in a 1997 report to the undersecretary of defense for acquisition and science, "Historical data shows a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States" (Eland 1998).

Calling such tragic and often destructive reactions to U.S. international involvements "blowbacks from imperialistic U.S. foreign policies," Chalmers Johnson in his illuminating book, Blowback, lists many instances of U.S. interventions in the domestic affairs of other countries, as well as some of the violent responses to such interventions:

> What the daily press reports as the malign acts of 'terrorists' or 'drug lords' or 'rogue states' or 'illegal arms merchants' often turn out to be blowbacks from earlier American operations.... For example, in Nicaragua in the 1980s, the U.S. government organized a massive campaign against the socialist-oriented Sandiuista government. American agents then looked the other way when the Contras, the military insurgents they had trained, made deals to sell cocaine in American cities in order to buy arms and supplies. If drug blowback is hard to trace to its source, bomb attacks, whether on U.S. embassies in Africa, the World Trade Center in New York, or an apartment complex in Saudi Arabia that housed U.S. servicemen, are another matter (2002: 8-9).

The point here is, of course, not to condone or justify, in any way, the destructive or terrorizing reactions to U.S. foreign interventions--legitimate grievances do not justify illegitimate responses. Nor is it meant to disrespect the innocent victims of such atrocious reactions, or to disparage the pain and agony of the loss of the loved ones. The point is, rather, to place such reactions in a context, and to suggest an explanation. As Gore Vidal puts it, "It is a law of physics ... that in nature there is no action without reaction. The same appears to be true in human nature--that is, history" (2002, ix). The "actions" Vidal refers to here are U.S. military or covert operations abroad, which are sometimes called state or wholesale terrorism. "Reactions," on the other hand, refer to desperate individual, or group, terrorism, which are also called retail terrorism.

SUMMARY

Close scrutiny of the Muslim world's early responses to the challenges of the modern West reveals that, despite significant resistance, the overall policy was moving in the direction of reform and adaptation. That policy of adaptation and openness continued from the time of the Muslim world's initial contacts with the modern world in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries until approximately the last third of the twentieth century. During that period, the majority of the political elite and/or national leaders viewed the rise of the modern West, and its spread into their territories, as an inevitable historical development that challenged them to chart their own programs of reform and development. Not only did the political elite, the intellectuals, and government leaders view modernization as the way of the future, but so did many Islamic leaders and scholars, known as "Islamic modernizers."

It is true that obscurantist conservative forces, both religious and otherwise, have always defied reform and resisted change. It is also true that, at times, religious nationalism played an important role in the anti-colonial/ anti-imperial struggles. But because Islamic leaders often lacked clear programs or plans for the reconstruction and development of their societies, political

leadership on a national level often fell into the hands of secular nationalists who offered such nation-building plans. After WW II, those plans were fashioned either after the U.S. model of market mechanism, as in the cases of the Shahs of Iran and the Kings of Jordan, or after the Soviet model of "non-capitalist development" and/or Arab "socialism," as in the cases of Nasser's Egypt and Qaddafi's Libya. Both models nurtured dreams of economic progress and political/national sovereignty. Accordingly, secular nationalist leaders who promoted such models, and promised economic well being and social progress, enjoyed broader popular support than the conservative religious leaders who lacked plans of economic development and national reconstruction.

As long as the hopes and aspirations that were thus generated remained alive, promises of an "Islamic alternative" remained ineffectual in their challenge of the plans of the secular nationalist leaders. But as those hopes gradually and painfully turned into despair and hopelessness, such promises began to sound appealing. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, most of the national governments' hopeful and auspicious plans that had hitherto nurtured dreams of economic progress, democratic rights, and political sovereignty turned out to be hollow and disappointing. Frustrated, many Muslims turned to religion, and sought solace in the promise of an "Islamic alternative."

Equally disappointing were the policies of the United States in the Muslim world. Before supplanting the European imperial powers in the region, the U.S. promised policies of neutrality and even-handedness in the Muslim world. Once it firmly replaced its European rivals, however, the United States set out to pursue policies that have not been less imperialistic than the policies of its European predecessors. U.S. imperial policies in the region have, therefore, strongly contributed to the nurturing of the Islamic revival of the recent decades.

These historical observations refute the claim that Islam and/or the Muslim world are inherently incompatible with modernization, and that, therefore, the rise of an Islamic militancy in the last few decades, and the violent reactions such as the 9/11 attacks, are essentially manifestations of "the clash of civilizations." The claim that attributes the Islamic resurgence to the "inherently confrontational nature of Islam" tends to downplay, or overlook, specific socioeconomic factors and geopolitical policies that underlie the rage and reactions of the majority of the Muslim people.

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