

Title: “The Muslim World and the West: what can be done to reduce tensions?”

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Media Watch	Classification: O	Quality: 1	Country: Egypt, general
Key words: Arab-West and Muslim-Christian relations, Islamophobia			

[Text of a lecture for students and professors of different faculties at the University of Copenhagen, November 3, 2004. Hulsman was introduced as the Editor-in-chief of *Arab-West Report*, at the end of a lecture tour on Arab-West and Muslim-Christian relations in Germany and the Czech republic. The lecture in Copenhagen was attended by H.E. Ambassador Muna ‘Umar who reported about this to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, resulting in the Ministry showing great interest in our work. See also her letter of recommendation of April 15, AWR, week 50, art. 2]

We hear a lot about a ‘clash of civilizations’ in Western discourses, a clash between the Arab and Western cultures. A Dutch author, pastor in a mainline church, even wrote that “a religious war between Christianity and Muslim fundamentalism cannot be avoided,” and “the Christian West refuses to see the danger.” Religions need to be self-critical, he stated, that is, confronting changing culture and the spirit of the time. If a religion is not capable of doing this, “then culture should give such a religion no space and it should not fear war.” The pastor obviously refers to what he sees as Muslim fundamentalism (1). The pastor’s comments are not an isolated comment of someone who is out of touch with society’s mainstream thinking. It shouldn’t be too difficult to search for comments that are very similar in tone.

Are we living in a time of clashing civilizations? Is this an accurate description of what we see today?

European societies are full with Islamophobia, expressions of fear of Islam. This is recurrent in Western media but we also heard this in meetings with people during the lectures we presented in the past five weeks in Germany and the Czech Republic.

Selectivity in news reporting is a big problem. Negative news about Islam and the Arab World is dominant in the West. Very little attention is given to positive news. The attention often focuses on what happened and not why it happened, making it possible for readers in the West to develop their own theories of why it happened, usually believing all ills in society to be associated with Islamic radicalism. Radical statements of Muslims, rarely expressing general opinion, are highlighted, insufficient attention is given to mainstream Muslim feelings, violence is often associated with Islam despite explicit denunciations of such violence by major Muslim leaders, claims of discrimination and even persecution of Christians are often heard and reported.

This type of news creates both fear and anger among Europeans. Non-European Muslims, who do not recognize themselves in these stories, feel attacked.

This panic is aggravated by the fact that Islam is growing in Europe while churches are losing members. It creates the perception that traditional values of Europe may be changed and threatened over time.

Is fear justified? It seems so. But is that right?

In 2002 Dr. Hamdī Zaqzouq, Egypt’s Minister of Endowments, gave in Germany a lecture entitled “Der Islam und Europa – ohne Dialog kein Zukunft.”(2) The Minister compared today’s world to a global ship sailing across the universe, which has to avoid shipwreck at all costs. Shipwrecking can be avoided if the crew cooperates to set the ship’s direction but the crew is not united. One part seems not to care about what others do and thus there is a serious risk of shipwreck due to uncooperativeness.

We have to cooperate, the Minister stated. We have to find ways to address the polarization we now see taking place. We need to understand each other's cultures. Too often we only see the negative and not the positive elements in them.

Seeing primarily negative elements in other cultures has not always been customary. Before the development of nationalism in 19th century Europe, we have seen people of many different cultures and languages living together in multi-national and multi-cultural states until nationalism got many people in grip and ethnic-national features were accentuated, creating terrible wars and efforts to create states dominated by one major cultural group, preferably with only one language.

Emigration is an opposite trend. It has brought together people of many nationalities who mixed in the new world in what became known as a great melting pot. Europe has seen millions of new immigrants arriving in the past half a century and changed from once homogeneous societies into societies with great cultural varieties but also with cultural discrepancies since, unlike emigrants to the new world, today mainly well educated, the immigrants coming to Europe usually belonged to lower social classes, linking cultural background (Turkish, Arabic) to religion (Islam) and social class, which is not healthy.

It is obvious that intercultural differences can be both accentuated or downplayed. In the 19th century this was done along ethnic lines. Today the tendency is to do so along religious lines, primarily between a secularized West and Muslims who want to take their religion seriously. Accentuating intercultural differences is a choice, not an unavoidable necessity, not a natural law!

Between all cultures one finds similarities and differences. It is like a painting where different lines can be accentuated. When this is done, different pictures can be seen of one and the same reality we live in.

The problem we see today is that the differences between the Muslim world and the West have been developed and accentuated over a period of hundreds of years: discrepancies that follow differences between Western Christian culture, today highly secularized, and an Arab culture where adherence to religion, for Muslims but also Arab Christians, is highly valued.

At times in the past the West has used Arab Christians to interfere in the Arab and Muslim world, often using noble sounding arguments but in reality reflecting political interests, creating tensions and conflict, resulting in Christians leaving their countries of origin, either encouraged, forced or a mixture of the two.

Christians born in Muslim countries at times only identified themselves with their coreligionists in their countries of origin, which aggravated ill feelings of Muslims.

This was very obvious when Western nations, especially England, France and Russia, used Christians in the 19th century Ottoman Empire to gain influence to serve their own interests. Western powers forced the Ottoman Empire to accept reform that would benefit Christians, winning Christian loyalty for their policies but also turning Christians into a third colon, nationals of an Empire who could no longer be seen as loyal to their own state. It naturally resulted in frictions, tensions, and conflicts, ultimately making it possible for the Armenian genocide to take place in 1915. The atrocities during that genocide have often been described: one should not only ask what happened but also why it happened. But that question is rarely asked and seldom thoroughly studied.

The 20th century was the century of de-colonization but other methods of Western influence developed. Western attention to human rights and especially the 'American Freedom from Religious Persecution Act of 1998' is often seen as such a tool in the Arab World. Attention to human rights is good if it is obviously non-partisan, not used to favor specific groups over

others. But much attention to human rights, and especially this act, gives people in the Arab world the strong impression that the rights of Christians, Baha'is and other non-Muslim population groups are attracting greater interest in the West than non-partisan human rights that do not distinguish between people of different religions, nationalities or nations. Such a partisan interest in human rights only helps to fuel Muslim anger, accentuates new divergences and thus contributes to a clash of civilizations along religious lines. Harping on partisan interests is self-defeating. It doesn't help non-Muslim communities living in Muslim societies, the latter feeling that injustice has been done to them.

Along these highlighted discrepancies images have been created that deepen and strengthen the divergences, images that portray the other as less cultured, violating norms that were created by one side on the cultural divide or even images of the other as enemy. No process happens only from one side, such images have been created by people lacking tolerance for other cultures and beliefs on both sides of the dichotomy or people advocating/defending the rights of one particular cultural tradition or faith while neglecting those of people belonging to different traditions and faiths, both in the West and the Muslim world.

Dr. Zaqzouq rightly points in his European lecture to interest groups on both sides, the West and the Islamic world. They accentuate differences, deepen them, create fear and, if that happens long enough, it creates fanaticism, intolerance for the other.

Only radicals benefit from radicalism. Radicalism and extremism from one side of the divide create and strengthen radicalism and extremism on the other side of the cultural spectrum.

The media play a big role in this. Statements of radicals are given publicity, they are sensational, draw attention. Some of these radicals had previously been unknown. The press, obviously, functions as a loudspeaker. Soft, hardly known voices, suddenly get prominence.

The Egyptian paper *al-Dustour* published in 1997 a text in which radicals asked for the death of major Christian businessmen. No names were given but initials and the descriptions made it very clear which people were targeted. *Al-Dustour* was widely and sharply criticized. It defended itself by stating they had just published a text they had received. But that text was unheard of outside the newsroom and was, thanks to the editors of *al-Dustour*, now made known to a large public. *Al-Dustour* paid a high price and was taken off the market.

Media are often dealing with different kinds of activists and journalists need to be aware of the pitfalls in reporting.

Problem 1: Selections are made from Arab media and are presented to Western media. It is thus suggested that this selection represents the general thought of the Arab world. But quotes/statements cannot be taken out of context. Doing so is highly unfair for any country. It has made the Arab world seething with anger about how they see themselves often portrayed in Western media.

Western media do not only do this with the Arab World. Before coming to Egypt in 1994, I was the director of the Christian Emigration Center in The Netherlands and later the Netherlands Emigration Foundation. In those years articles appeared in Dutch and British media about Maoris being severely discriminated against in New Zealand. The Embassies of New Zealand and Britain responded in anger. They saw it as a distortion and so did Dutch immigrants in New Zealand. They did not recognize their own experiences in New Zealand in the articles that were then appearing in some European media.

Problem 2: Material from political activists/interest groups is often used without checking their sources and/or claims. That concerns for example US Copts activists who have frequently made highly exaggerated statements on particular issues. Or Western visitors, including journalists,

came to Egypt, interviewed people who have presented them exaggerated statements and passed them on.

The US Copts Association spread in December 2001 a press release stating that Egyptian authorities had destroyed a church in Al-^oUbour city, a satellite city of Cairo. They placed photos on the Internet. Reality was different. They did not mention the church had obtained this land for church building and thus authorities were not opposed to a church on this location. The local priest had, however, erected a makeshift building before having all paperwork finished in order to be able to organize meetings and collect finances from the local Christian community for a proper church building. Local authorities did not agree to a temporary building before papers were ready and destroyed a wall. One cannot possibly describe that as “authorities destroying a church.”(3)

Not only media but also major organizations such as the Anglican Synod of Australia fell in the misinformation trap of Coptic activists. They lobbied to make the synod accept a resolution that Coptic Christians in Egypt were persecuted. The resolution was, remarkably enough, accepted without the church consulting the bishop in Egypt or Anglican experts close to the Archbishop of Canterbury.(4) Lord George Carey later commented: “The further one is away from a specific region the less likely it is that one is well informed.”(5)

Problem 3: Egypt is a country with a lot of rumors. Many people do not differentiate or are not able to distinguish between a rumor and a fact.

Rumors spread that Christians in the chain of Awlād Ragab and two other chains were forced to convert to Islam. Bishop Mousa explicitly denied the fact but rumors kept circulating.

Problem 4: There are several cultural factors that cloud a good understanding of an issue. Honor and shame in the stories alleging that Christian girls are kidnapped is an example. An honor and shame culture does not accept blame or mistakes on one’s own side but blames the other instead. Christian girls do convert to Islam and conversions to another religion are not accepted in a highly religious society like Egypt. Muslims don’t accept it and neither do Christians. If it nevertheless happens, in order to avoid blame the convert’s family and community often present themselves as the victims of the other. This honor and shame culture is rarely understood by Western writers on Muslim-Christian relations.

Problem 5: Media can not only distort but also aggravate and increase tensions.

The events around al-Kushh in 1998 are an example. Two Christians were murdered, the police rounded up hundreds of villagers, mostly Christians, for interrogation and used methods including beatings, electricity shocks and insults. The local bishop was naturally upset and wanted the police to stop using these methods. He complained about this style in his city Balyāna and in the provincial capital Suhāj. Nothing happened. He then went public, informed Coptic activists in and outside Egypt who added some juicy details to the story resulting in a horrible article in the *Sunday Telegraph*. The Egyptian press responded with great anger, escalating tensions, causing or at least influencing legal complaints against the bishop and the arrest of Hāfīz Abu Si^oda, secretary-general of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights. Tensions kept brewing and ultimately created an atmosphere that led to the killing of 21 Christians on January 2, 2000.

It is horrible but that escalation could have been avoided if the bishop had continued seeking solutions in Egypt. When the bishop informed Coptic activists he also informed me. I then pursued a different road and went with a priest from al-Kushh to the Ministry of Interior in Cairo, asking officers to look into these methods of investigation and to interfere. The Minister of Interior shortly after sent a high-ranking officer to the area and I received phone calls of both the bishop and the governor. The bishop told me the interrogations had stopped. The governor called me and told me the bishop had apologized for going public. Well, the outcome seemed

typically Egyptian, a compromise whereby both parties had obtained something: the end of interrogations and an apology. The story seemed over but meanwhile Coptic activists in the UK were able to convince the *Sunday Telegraph* to place a story with grisly details that were very far from the truth. They claimed Christian girls were raped and Christians were crucified. That did not happen. Naturally Egyptian media responded in anger. That anger was justified but could have been avoided and further escalation prevented.

The problems I have just mentioned must be addressed. Leaving them unattended just makes it possible for escalations due to misinformation to continue. We are establishing for that purpose the Center for Arab-West Understanding. This initiative is predominantly Egyptian. The founders are very diverse, Muslim and Christian of all denominations, including human rights activists, religious leaders, and scholars. This diversity is a must because the center should be non-partisan, not focused on the news or interests of only one particular community.

The work started on a small scale in 1997 with translations from Egyptian media and was supported by a very limited group of people: Dr. °Abd al-Mu°tī Bayoumī of the Azhar University; Orthodox Bishop Thomas; Father Dr. Christiaan van Nispen, a scholar involved in Muslim-Christian dialogue; and Dr. °Amr As°ad Khalīl, an Egyptian media expert. The 1998 al-Kushh issue mentioned earlier showed the need to produce our own reports. The group of experts around the news service slowly grew. Its name changed from *Religious News Service from the Arab-World* to *Arab-West Report* in 2003, reflecting an interest not to report solely on religious issues. In 2003 the decision was made to apply for NGO status in Egypt. Prominent Egyptians were asked to join as founders and the formal application was launched in August 2004. The new NGO will be called 'Center for Arab-West Understanding' and will become the publisher of the current electronic journal *Arab-West Report*. The Center will also develop an Electronic Documentation Center to make an easy search possible in the thousands of articles that have **already** been translated in the past years. The Center will further make its work available to students in order to help them understand the complicated world of Arab-West and Muslim-Christian relations.

The Center wants to advocate great ideals:

- reducing prejudices and stereotypes;
- promoting of respect for pluralism;
- combating religious and political extremism and promoting tolerance across the lines of religion and culture; and
- distinguishing cultural/social factors from religion and working towards cross cultural understanding and addressing cultural and social factors that could cause tensions in society.

We believe the Center will be able to have a great impact on fostering mutual understanding between the Arab World and the West. This is the only initiative that gives Western readers an insight in discussions taking place in Arab media. The selection method of articles for translation or summaries is related to subject, not whether we like a particular author or not. And with this method we will be able to show Western readers that cherry picking statements/articles from Arab media is wrong, causes serious distortions and thus leads to polarization that could so easily be avoided if only the information was available.

We want to produce special investigative reports on issues that have been distorted in the Western media, provide readers with more background and show that issues are generally not black or white but that there are many shades of gray, more complicated than usually presented in Western articles and reports. One of the projects is to work on a report on religious freedom in Egypt that will show the need to place freedom issues in their proper cultural context. The current draft text is strongly critical of existing religious freedom reports and wants to open a discussion about how such intercultural issues could be best reported.

Our aim is also to work on a media watch – criticizing prejudices and stereotypes as expressed in Arab and Western media.

In the future we could also develop translations from Western media into Arabic for an Arabic speaking public that is so far often so poorly informed about the West. They too should discover issues are rarely black or white but more complicated than often portrayed.

I want to return to Dr. Hamdī Zaqzouq. We believe, like he does, that speaking about a clash of civilizations is not helpful. Doing so is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we speak long enough about certain lines of differences we come to believe that they cannot be bridged. Activists and poor media reporting play a big role in deepening the divide. This is not needed. We want to show in Cairo that this can and must be different. We must build bridges.

We are very close to obtaining NGO status in Egypt and we are now looking for partners in Europe to work with. That is why I am now on a tour to Germany, the Czech Republic, Denmark and The Netherlands. We want to keep in touch with you.

Thank you very much.

Notes:

1) *Trouw*, May 15, 2004

2) Mahmoud Hamdī Zaqzouq, “Der Islam und Europa – ohne Dialog keine Zukunft,” Robert Bosch Stiftung, Stuttgart, 2002.

3) The US Copts Association falsely claimed on December 19, 2001, that a church had been destroyed in al-‘Ubour City and blew the story completely out of proportions, 4) *RNSAW*, 2001, art. 5-7.

5) *AWR*, 2001, week 37, art. 4 and 5.

6) *AWR*, 2004, week 37, art. 39