

## **Building bridges of communication between the Islamic World and the West**

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There are issues that have not taken their appropriate place in contemporary Islamic thought, even though they are a part of the religious values advocated by Islam. Islam recognizes the existence and importance of these issues:

From amongst these issues we can find the following:

The Holy Qur'an teaches Muslims how to deal with religious diversity and cultural differences, and it gives them the keys to discover that this world does not comprise of only one religion, nation or civilization, but it is comprised of many faiths, nations and civilizations. If Allah (God) wanted humankind to become one religion then he would have ordained for this to transpire. However Allah's wisdom required that there be multiple and different faiths, so that each human individual discover their mistakes through others and compete with them in doing righteous deeds.

This is illustrated by Allah's words in the Holy Qur'an, the meaning thereof:

*"And We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming that which preceded it of the Scripture and as a criterion over it. So judge between them by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their inclinations away from what has come to you of the truth. To each of you We prescribed a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good. To Allah is your return all together and He will [then] inform you concerning that over which you used to differ."*

Chapter 5 (Al-Ma'idah) Verse 48

What is mentioned in the Qur'an in criticism of other religions is to correct the errors of some of the Jews and Christians in their understanding of the Torah and the Bible or changes that were made to their texts. This is so that there remains no contradiction between what Islam recognizes and what is contained in the religious books of other religions. Contradiction is proof to the difference in source and as long as the source of the Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an is one, which is Allah, it is obligatory to correct these errors.

Here, we observe that the Qur'an is not simply criticizing some Jews and Christians, but it also criticizes some Muslims for their actions and perceptions. This creates within Muslims a natural spirit of understanding and tolerance, because faults can be found in all factions and what is required is their correction, so that differences are not used as a pretext to ignite conflict and warfare.

The Holy Qur'an links the suitability of all religions, in having faith in Allah, the Last Day, and in righteousness, Allah says in this regard:

*“Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabeans [before Prophet Muhammad] those [among them] who believed in Allāh and the Last Day and did righteousness will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve.”*

Baqarah) Verse 62

Chapter 2 (Al-

The Qur’an does not believe in abrogating all that came before it, but rather it substantiates that it has come to confirm "What came before the book," thus confirming the beliefs, values and legislation that are suitable to the innate human instinct. This means that the Qur’an wants to establish a culture that Islam is the completion of the previous religions, promoting and correcting their inaccuracies and building a balanced world of values, far from extremism or dissoluteness. In the Qur’an it states:

*“He has sent down upon you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming what was before it. And He revealed the Torah and the Gospel. Before, as guidance for the people. And He revealed the Qur'an. Indeed, those who disbelieve in the verses of Allāh will have a severe punishment, and Allāh is exalted in Might, the Owner of Retribution.”*

Verses 2-4

Chapter 3 (Al-‘Imran)

The Qur’an declares about itself and the dispatch of Mohammed as a mercy to the world, Allah Almighty says:

*“And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds.”*

‘Anbiya) Verse 107

Chapter 21 (Al-

This is something that Muslims have been aware of historically, consequently building their civilization through interaction with other civilizations, influencing other civilizations and being influenced by them. Islamic civilization accepted human civilization from various races, nationalities and religions, so Jews and Christians lived within the fraternity, safe and prolific; some of them even occupied senior positions within the Islamic Council. History bears testament to the reality that had it not been for the presence of Muslims, who sponsored the people of other religions and embraced them, then the numerical and geographical features of many modern day followers of Judaism and Christianity would not be the same in this day and age.

The Qur’an declares the principle of universal human brotherhood, and pays tribute to its diversity and individuality; Allah Almighty says:

*“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.”*

Chapter 49 (Al-Hujaraat) Verse 13

From the goals of variety and diversity is the attainment of familiarity with other civilizations through humanitarian channels of communication, understanding, coexistence, and exchange of experiences, as well as the development of compassion within the human community.

Islamic civilization has reported this tradition throughout its dogma, literature, heritage, speeches, teachings and wisdom.

Imam Ali (PBUH) comprehended this Qur’anic fact and spoke on universal brotherhood by saying:

*“People are brothers to you in faith, a brother that your mother bore or your brother in creation.”*

The Qur’an recognizes the principle of religious freedom and Muslim scholars have derived this rule from Almighty Allah’s saying:

*“There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong.”*

Baqarah) Verse 256

Chapter 2 (Al-

The problem of apostasy remains the problem of the individual person who allows himself to exercise this act. Islamic Law is stressed upon when the apostasy progresses from an individual case to a general declaration and propagation to abandon all values and principles. This would be contrary to the social charter within the nation and if allowed would cause chaos and disorder to prevail, leaving no stability; stability being the cornerstone of development and progress.

The apparent extremism in Islamic societies is due to overlapping concepts and has many causes.

Extremism is marked by the denunciation of others and the rejection of dialogue with them. Extremists believe in a strict implementation of religion, and reject juristic reasoning (*Ijtihad*). They exaggerate in their veneration of Islamic heritage, and desire to purge the world of “the other”. Another characteristic they possess is their rejection of renewal and development.

Extremism has many causes of which some can be attributed to a misunderstanding of the Islamic texts that discuss jihad, both in the misunderstanding the meaning and the application of Jihad under their particular conditions. These include historical reasons linked to the military conflict with the West in earlier periods of history, which produced colonialistic conditions and aggression against the local values of the occupied people.

What is required of Muslim scholars is to contribute to the eradication of the root causes associated with the poor understanding of religious texts. It is also required that western governments do all they can to eliminate all elements that are reminiscent of colonialistic conditions, and help the Islamic world to enjoy security and stability, which are the two most important factors that limit the spread of extremist ideology. Not to mention the problem of the long and bitter Middle East conflict, characterized by the Palestine issue.

It has been observed that Muslims residing in the West experience difficulty in achieving the desired integration socially and culturally, and this situation has its causes.

First and foremost, the majority of Muslims live in a real dilemma regarding their loyalty. This is due to them possessing incorrect ideas about loyalty, the nation, and the Caliphate. This develops in them a sense of loyalty to the Muslim nation and the Islamic Caliphate alone, however these ideas need to be corrected, as there is no contradiction between the spiritual loyalty of a Muslim to his nation of origin and his loyalty to the western government of the country he resides in. He is to respect its legal and constitutional establishments, as well as seek to promote the values of Islam which call for virtue, cooperation, tolerance, respect, service of the community and the preservation of the environment.

There are other reasons, such as ignorance of Islamic culture and Western culture alike, and a poor working knowledge of the language of the country. The drawing upon opinions from unqualified “scholars” who are not familiar with life in the West, the absence of equal opportunities between Muslim youth and others, causing them to feel as second class citizens; this is sometimes caused by what is termed institutional racism. It also does not help to constantly ruminate on the bloody history between the East and West, and ponder on the deteriorating situation of Muslims in Muslim countries. Many feel that there is a certain amount of inertia from the West in helping Muslim countries overcome the difficulties they face. Moreover they feel that the West employs double standards when dealing with these countries. Many also encounter difficulties adjusting to way of life in the West, finding that many practices that exist are contrary to the morals and values they espouse. Last but not least, the negative image portrayed by the media about Muslims; a stereotypical image that is in need of amending.

It is not fair to only focus on negative examples of Muslims within the media in order to give the impression that the image of Muslims is bleak in the West. If we look, we can find many shining examples and leading institutions of Islamic achievement in the West, who adopt a method of moderation, dialogue and coexistence, considering it a way of upright citizenship.

It is desired that official and media organizations highlight the role of these Islamic institutions and that every division endeavor to give them the reins of leadership and initiative. The simple reason being they are capable of setting up within the Islamic circles of the West, concepts of good citizenship, productive integration, constructive interaction, and contribution to the betterment of society and the environment.

The rationale of trading accusations and blaming each other is counter productive and works to swell the crisis in the relationship of Muslims in the West. The best approach is that each party should courageously and impartially bear the responsibility to self critique and find out the

causes of the crisis, and then to cooperate with the other party to complete the process of building a civilized and humane relationship that goes beyond the historical barriers and old political conflict. They should then cooperate to develop a program of priorities in the cultural, diplomatic and media fields that would change aspirations into reality. This coupled with a Charter of honor between Muslims and the West that contains the core values of common humanitarian care, acceptance of and respect for others, respect for religious and cultural particularities, the preservation of the environment, and the elimination of situations of tension and conflict.

It should be noted here that contemporary Muslim generations living in the West and their counterparts from Western backgrounds will not be like the older generations. This is because the younger generation has had an opportunity to form a unique cultural awareness. They have grown up and lived within a context of daily communication with others. It must be stressed that this opportunity must be invested in, in order to fulfill the goals of good integration for future generations to come.

In order to overcome the various crises in the relationship between the West and Muslims and towards improving understanding, dialogue and integration, we offer the following suggestions:

- 1) Contribute to correcting misperceptions about Islam.
- 2) Publicize the policy of equal opportunities between Muslims residing in the West and their counterparts from other denominations.
- 3) Present the true teachings of Islam from reputable sources, and qualified scholars.
- 4) Empowerment of moderate Islamic personalities and institutions in the West.

This can be achieved through several projects as follows:

Exchange visits by western communities to Islamic centers in eastern countries in order to identify efforts in correcting perceptions and the changing of stereotypes that the West has of Muslims, as well as vice versa.

Activate the role of cultural attaché's within embassies to continue dialogue and the exchange of views.