

Islam: A Hostile Force or a Civilization in Crisis?

October 23, 2002

Rabbi David Rosen and Dr. Eran Lerman

Amidst the terrible agony of the terror attack in Bali – one of the places often thought of as closest to paradise and now turned into vision of hell on earth – it is easy to be tempted, once again, by angry thoughts. The pattern is there - from the horror of 9/11 to the suicide/homicide bombings in Israel, and on to the flaming frontiers of Albania, Bosnia, Chechnya or Kashmir; it is indeed in the name of Islam that innocent people have fallen victim to hideous terrorism and unthinkable cruelty. It is therefore well within reason to raise questions as to the very nature of Islam, and almost plausible to see everything in terms of an inevitable clash between "our" world and "theirs." Indeed, this was the very essence of Professor Samuel Huntington's famous argument about "the Clash of Civilizations."

Plausible, forceful, elegant - as many grand and simplifying ideas often are – but ultimately, wrong. Yes, Islam is different; yes, there are elements in Islamic history and identity which make the lives of Bin Ladin and his likes easier when they come to "sell" their interpretation of religion to young and excitable men (such they are) from the far reaches of South-East Asia to the immigrant neighborhoods in Paris and London. But there is much more to Islam than all that – as there is more to all great and complex civilizations, including ours (whether as "ours" you count the "Judaic" heritage or the so-called "Judeo-Christian" one). To understand the carnage, we have to bear in mind that what we see is not so much "Islam" mobilized to fight "the West," but a civilization in severe internal crisis. It is in places like Algeria – Muslim killing Muslim – that the bloodshed has been most intense. To understand the roots of this violence, we need to broaden our perspective and recognize the commonalities as well as the differences between civilizations going through the agonizing challenges of adjusting to modernity.

In the course of its history, Islam has been a tremendously vital and creative religion and civilization, with a great ability to adjust to new realities. It struck up remarkably complex and productive relations with the Jewish communities in its midst. Few examples of interreligious cooperation and cross-fertilization, if any, have equaled the period of Muslim rule in Andalusia between the ninth and twelfth centuries. Moreover, as early as the High Middle Ages, i.e. the turn of the previous millennium (which in Muslim history was the high point of achievement, not "the Dark Ages"!), Muslims had to come to terms with the fact that the unified political realm of Islam had disintegrated into several

kingdoms, some strong, some weak. A new Muslim superpower emerged later – Ottoman Turkey – but long before its decline and fall, Muslims had to rethink basic premises: Islam could no longer be (and certainly is not today) just about political and military power. In other words, the problems that give rise to the present turmoil are not new; below, in a greatly simplified form, is an outline of the different ways in which Muslims responded to these challenges.

For the great majority of Muslims from the Middle Ages onwards - parallel to some key choices made within Judaism - the response took the form of a turn away from politics, as well as away from the rational philosophical quest of earlier generations, and a withdrawal into the mystical tradition. Through the various practices of the Sufi “orders” – Tariqa, in Arabic – individuals and groups found solace in the pursuit of a more intimate experience of the Godhead in their lives, and in charity and personal piety. The realm of material affairs receded, as did the actual status of the Muslim states in international affairs; other things mattered more. Sufism, which for a long time was an overwhelming dominant influence among Muslims, is still a very broad presence in the Arab and even more so in the non-Arab Muslim world, but its voice is often drowned out in the din of politicized Islamic positions.

The modernizers – particularly those in the 19th century, who came to see the West as a model to be emulated - rose against the Sufi tradition (much like the Jewish "Haskalah," or Enlightenment, rose against what they saw as "regressions" of the Hassidic traditions) because in their eyes it threatened to degenerate into the worship of holy men and holy places, and to stifle the spirit of creativity and dynamism necessary for success in the new world (the so called "protestant" work ethic), as well as undermine the legal intellectual tradition and authority. For more extreme elements such as the “purist” Wahabis in what is now Saudi Arabia, there was a theological reason for opposing Sufi practices that were portrayed as bordering on "Shirk," polytheism. And yet neither the Saudi family (which struck an early alliance with the predominant British power) nor the pro-Western modernists sought, at the time, to return to "Jihad" as a practical purpose. Liberation? Maybe. Conquest? Not a real objective in the real world.

What caused the present twist, or perversion, among Muslims to emerge and prosper was not an internal development but a terribly tempting external trigger – the new forms of European totalitarianism (both Fascist and Bolshevik) – in conjunction with the void created when the secularist regime of Ataturk in Turkey finally abolished, in 1926, what was left of the institute of the Caliphate. For several ideologues in the Muslim world, already angry to still be under the political control of the two declining "Liberal" powers, Britain and France, the world

situation suggested a new solution to the old dilemma: violent revolutionary modernization, with Islam re-defined to resemble what they saw in Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Soviet domains – a relentless drive for power. The old creed was cut to fit the fantasy. The seeds of the present crisis were sown.

A detailed analysis of the reasons for the rise, ebb and new tide of these movements in the Muslim world – and their vicious hold on the minds of many in the immigrant communities in the West – is beyond the scope of this short article. It is enough to say that alienation and identity crisis are more central to these dynamics than actual economic needs (the 9/11 killers were affluent, one and all – and so is Bin Ladin...). What must be said – and translated into practice – is that they do not represent "Islam," or even the majority of Muslims. The former President of Indonesia, Abdurahman Wahid, had eloquent words to say on this subject when he addressed the AJC Annual Meeting in May 2002, as did Prince Hassan of Jordan when he addressed an AJC gathering in New York last June.

What does all of this mean, in practical terms? What is to be done?

- The so-called "fundamentalists" - a mistaken general name for the totalitarians who perverted Islam - should be fought on all levels, from military means to intellectual de-legitimization. Since what they promise is not religious redemption but revolutionary victory, it can well be argued that in this war (and a war it is) nothing succeeds like success, and more to the point, nothing fails like failure. This goes also for the fellow-travelers who took control of many Muslim associations in the West. Working to rid Islam of this curse is not "Islamophobia" – quite the contrary: it is an effort to help a noble religion redeem its name.
- At the same time, we must work, and work hard – even to the point of quietly promoting them where it matters – to give an opportunity to other Muslim voices, which today are often marginalized or even intimidated. It is not our business to pick and chose among them, or have preferences between Liberals and Reformists, Sufis and other Traditionalists. However, it is very much in the long term interests of Jews everywhere, and of the West in general, to avoid lumping moderate Muslims together with those who are, in fact, the mortal enemies of all that they stand for.

Finally, one encouraging thought. While the malaise rages among the second-generation Muslims of Europe, seized in the grip of an identity crisis and facing poor integration and intolerance, the situation in

Latin America (albeit with some dangerous local exceptions, such the pro-Hizbullah Shi'ites in the Argentinean-Brazilian-Paraguayan border triangle) is much more encouraging, even in terms of Jewish-Arab relations. Time and tolerance are cures for some of the ills which gave rise to much of the present trouble. Moreover, even in Europe there are bodies such as the Three Faiths Forum in the U.K. and the Foundation for the Three Cultures of the Mediterranean in Sevilla, Spain, which are succeeding in promoting effective Jewish, Muslim, and Christian dialogue. Similarly there are an increasing number of Muslim leaders and communities in the United States who genuinely seek respectful dialogue and cooperation with other faith communities. It is in the interests of America and American Jewry to ensure that their profile is enhanced, for ultimately it is through strengthening the moderates that the impact of the extremists will be diminished and thwarted.