

Two Faces of the West: Can Western Muslims Advance a Balanced View of the West?

By Muqtedar Khan

Muslim intellectuals and thinkers have had to contend with the power of the West and the power of Western ideas while interpreting and understanding the condition of the Muslim community. Many, like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (India), Muhammad Abduh (Egypt), and Muhamamd Khatami (Iran), openly admired the West for its achievements and have even remarked that the West was “Islam without Muslims.” For them the West was indeed worthy of emulation in many areas, such as democracy, human rights, respect for the rule of law, and dedication to science.

Other Muslim thinkers, like Ayatollah Khomeini (Iran), Maulana Maududi (India), and Syed Qutb (Egypt), have found the West responsible for the moral and material decline of the Muslim world. They blamed Western imperialism and the era of colonial domination for the present backwardness and lack of self-government in the Ummah (Islamic nation/people). They imagine it as the embodiment of Satan and have postulated Islamization as the complete rejection of all that they see as Western. Some of their less enlightened followers have even rejected democracy and freedom of speech, simply because they saw them as Western in origin rather than universal in application. These thinkers are widely represented as Islamic fundamentalists in the West and often contrasted with Islamic liberals.

Needless to say, both discourses have some element of truth in them, but both suffer from a lack of balance. While the former suffers from a lack of self-esteem and exaggerates the virtues of the West, the latter confuses polemics and diatribe against the West for Islam. Both elements are to some extent valid, and even necessary, but only as supplements to a dominant discourse that is both balanced and constructive.

The West is essentially like a Centaur—half-human and half-beast. The human face of the beast allows the West to appreciate the virtues of democracy, equality, and freedoms of speech and religion. It provides the moral basis for protecting and treating its own citizens with utmost respect and dignity while also striving hard to advance their interests, understood in terms of political and material development.

The bestial dimension of the West has led it to commit huge crimes against humanity. The holocaust, colonialism, imperialism, slavery, and racism, and the world wars, are just a few of the atrocities that the West has committed in the past. In the recent past, the U.S. caused over a million casualties in Vietnam, and France matched that number in Algeria. In both cases these Western nations, in the name of freedom, were barriers to the independence and integrity of third world nations. In 1956 the U.S. replaced the elected and democratic regime of Mossadiq Hussein with a monarchy through a coup that the CIA even to this day describes as one of its finest achievements. While Western nations brag that democracies do not wage war upon each other, they do not reflect upon how often advanced democracies have waged war on poor, underdeveloped nations in the name of national interest.

These elements of the West are puzzling. How can a society that has so much respect for human life at home be so determined to persist with sanctions that are slowly killing thousands of innocent Iraqi children? How can a society that stands for equality and democracy allow so little freedom to other societies to disagree with it?

Today's era of globalization forces all civilizations to live in intimacy. Moreover, millions of

Muslims now live in the West and many others live in a close embrace of Western ways of life. Understanding the puzzle that is the modern West is essential because its enormous power, both material as well as cultural, has attained hegemonic proportions. Muslims will have to understand the modern West in a more balanced way, and go beyond blind imitation of the West or outright rejection of its values. It is essential that they develop a positive and constructive understanding of the “other.” Only then can they have a cooperative, rather than hostile relationship with the West.

Only those who have had a sustained experience of the West and have witnessed both its human and its bestial dimensions can develop a meaningful understanding of it. Others will continue to rely on caricatures, one way

or the other. Muslims who live in the West can play this critical role.

A Balanced View

What does it mean for Muslims to have a balanced view of the West? It means that they do not throw the baby out with the bath water. Because Muslims are upset that the U.S. has chosen to ally with Israel and not with the Arabs, or because U.S.-sponsored sanctions hurt Iraqi children, they must not reject democracy, human rights, respect for freedom, and the rule of law. A balanced view of the West should recognize the tension between realism and moralism, idealism and materialism, that continue to underpin its foreign policy. Satanization of the West merely leads to dehumanization of Muslim responses—allowing for the use of

egregious acts of terror against the West.

A balanced view of the West is essentially a considered and enlightened opinion of Western institutions and practices that does not allow negative emotions to cloud one’s rational faculties.

Only when such an attempt to understand the West is made by Muslim intellectuals—as well as the general public—will the Muslim world be able to deal with it more effectively and also establish a more cooperative and less hostile relationship between the two great civilizations.

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