

The Qur'an and Islamophobia

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In recent times, the media has represented the “absent Muslim other” and has sought to create a stereotypical representation of Islam and Muslims that have been impossible to ignore. In addition, pejorative remarks and the “Muslim Ban” by Donald Trump and the terrorist activities by groups such as al-Qa’ida, ISIS, and Boko Haram have engendered stereotypes and suspicions against all Muslims.

Moreover, hatred towards Muslims has become legitimized and an acceptable by-product of national media and American culture. This has left many migrants and second generation Muslims with a sense of alienation and marginalization. Furthermore, the vitriolic attacks on Islam and the Qur’an by some Christian fundamentalist groups have exacerbated the current conflict in America. Franklin Graham labeled Islam as a “very evil and wicked religion” whereas Jerry Vines, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, said the Prophet Muhammad was a “demon-obsessed pedophile.”¹ Such comments further amplified the prejudices against Islam and Muslims.

The prejudices, stereotyping of and attacks against Muslims and Islam ignore the multiplicity of voices and nuances prevalent within Islam. They also ignore that fact that Muslims are multivocal and hold different views. In the media and the eyes of many Americans, all distinctions between Muslims have been obliterated. Distinctions between Shi‘is and Sunnis,

¹ Amir Hussain, “Muslims, Pluralism, and Interfaith Dialogue,” in Omid Safi ed., *Progressive Muslims*, 261.

moderate or conservative, Christian or Muslim Arabs have been effaced. Instead, all Muslims and Arabs have been grouped together as the enemy other.

This observation can be discerned from the uproar that arose after the ground-zero mosque project. The fact that the desire to build a mosque close to ground-zero created such a major controversy suggests that there is a larger debate about the place of minorities (and in particular Muslims) in U.S. public life. The controversy also exposes many underlying assumptions about religion in the public space and politics, particularly in the case of American Muslims, who are given the option of being either politically suspect or socially and religiously invisible, thereby acquiescing in the face of much prejudice and discrimination.

The Qur'an and Islamophobia

In discussing Islamophobia, it is important to examine the Qur'anic view on the abuse, vilification, and dehumanization of fellow human beings, especially when such prejudices are based on distorted stereotypical images and prejudices. With the advanced means of communication and increased emigration, different religious and ethnic groups have had to share common space. More than ever, the need to understand, respect, and live with the "other" has become imperative. More importantly, citizens of all nations must come to terms with human diversity that characterizes their terrestrial existence. Dealing with human diversity requires a proper articulation of the means of peaceful coexistence.

It is important to comprehend how the Qur'an deals with the question of demonizing and dehumanizing others. The Qur'an views human diversity as a basis for understanding and peaceful coexistence. Thus, verse 49:13 states, "O people, We have created you from one male and female (Adam and Eve), We have created you in different communities and tribes so that you may know each

other.” Stated differently, human diversity should enhance the recognition of rather than confrontation with the other. The Qur’an also categorically maintains that human beings should not demonize or judge each other. The ultimate fate human beings should be left to God, the true judge of human conduct. Not even the Prophet has the right to judge the ultimate fate of human beings. As it states, “Upon you [O Prophet] is the deliverance [of the message], upon us is the reckoning [of the deeds] (13:40).” In another verse, the Qur’an states, “Had God willed, they would not have been idolaters. We have not appointed you as a watcher over them, neither are you their guardian (6:107).” By elevating judgment to the divine realm, the Qur’an accommodates the space for coexistence on the human plane.

Fundamental to the Qur’anic conception of peaceful co-existence is the view that human beings are united under one God (2:213). They are to strive towards virtuous deeds (5:48), for the most noble person in the eyes of God is the one who is most pious (49:13). These and other verses command Muslims to build bridges of understanding and cooperation with fellow human beings so as to create a just social order.

Peaceful co-existence also necessitates that people abstain from abusing those who do not share their beliefs. Deriding and mocking others can often engender violence and hatred. Therefore, the Qur’an urges the respect for the beliefs of others. The Qur’an further states, “Had God willed, they would not have been not idolaters; and We have not appointed you a watcher over them, neither are you their guardian. Abuse not those to whom they pray, apart from God, otherwise, they will abuse God in revenge without knowledge. So We have decked out fair to every community their deeds; then to their Lord they shall return, and He will tell them what they have been doing” (6:107-108).

Qur’anic tolerance extends protection not only to Muslims and the people of the book but even to strangers who openly declare idolatry. As it says, “If one of the idolaters seeks protection, then grant

him protection so that he may hear the word of God, and after that, send him to a place of safety” (9:6). The verse instructs Muslims not only to protect but also to ensure that no harm comes to the idolaters when they leave Muslim territory, and to send them to a place of safety. The discussion above indicates that the Qur’an envisions a diverse community that is united under common moral values. Human beings are to coexist in peace and harmony. Diversity and differences in faith are to be judged by God only since, “Isn’t He (God) the best of judges”(95:8)?

The People of the Book in the Qur’an

To further comprehend the Qur’anic view on demonization of other, it is essential to examine how it deals with the people of the book. In the sectarian milieu of seventh-century Arabia, Muslims encountered other monotheists like the Christians and Jews. These encounters generated inter-religious polemics, which are reflected in the Qur’anic verses, especially those that were revealed in Medina. In its discourses with the people of the book, the Qur’an invites them to the notion of a shared religious community based on the belief in one God. Thus, the Prophet is instructed to tell them, “Say! O people of the book! Come to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but God, and that we associate not aught with Him, and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God. And if they turn their backs, say, ‘bear witness that we are Muslims’” (3:64).

The *ahl al-dhimma* in the Qur’an and early history of Islam were the protected minorities, both Jewish and Christian, who had chosen not to convert to Islam. They were allowed to follow their own laws, modes of worship provided this would not impinge on the Muslim community. The term *dhimma* refers to a pact drawn up with the people of the book which the believer agrees to respect, the violation of which makes him liable to blame (*dhamm*).

In return for security and protection, the people of the book were required to pay a poll tax (*jizya*), which is mentioned in verse 9:29. The poor and dependents were exempt from paying this special tax. The *jizya* was also levied in compensation for exemption from military service in Muslim forces. If a *dhimmi* joined the service then *jizya* was not levied.² Later on, the *jizya* became symbolic of Muslim ascendancy and subjugation of non-Muslims.

The Qur'anic discourse with the people of the book indicates that, despite the polemics and differences with the *dhimmis*, it allowed the Muslim community to seek means of peaceful coexistence with them. The recipients of earlier revelations were acknowledged by the early Islamic state to be autonomous religious communities, to be governed in their communal affairs according to their own laws. As long as they did not threaten the Muslim community and they paid the *jizya*, the Islamic state was to assure their security and autonomy.

The vast expanse of the Muslim world inevitably meant that it came to encompass a variety of civilizational and cultural forms. By the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Muslim-majority world showed a remarkable variety of institutional forms from North Africa to South Asia, up to and including the hinterland of the Chinese empire, and soon thereafter emerged as a dominant force in Southeast Asia. Historically, Islam has exhibited much tolerance to members of other faith communities such as in Spain, India, the holy lands, Turkey, Africa, and Indonesia.

Due to the status and protection the Qur'an accorded to the people of the book, violence and genocide against them became virtually impossible. Jews in Islamdom did not face a tradition of anti-semitism even though the *dhimmis* in general were regarded as second-class citizens. They had full religious liberty and were allowed to manage their own affairs. They were also able to participate in

² See Louay M. Safi, "War and Peace in Islam," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 5 (1988): 39.

mainstream culture and commerce. This is one reason why Sephardic Jews were treated much better by the Muslims than Ashkenazim were treated by Christians. As Marc Gopin states, “there is a qualitative, not just quantitative difference between the two.”³

There is a clearly articulated preference in Islam for nonviolence and forgiveness over retribution. The Qur’an is also concerned about proportionality even in retribution. By stipulating appropriate levels of punitive response when attempting to restore violated rights or correct injustices, it regulates acts of retribution, for these should not exceed the extent of the original injury.⁴

On the part of the victim, forgiveness is preferred over retribution as he foregoes the moral right of demanding injury by inflicting more injury. As verse 42:40 states in this context, “... whoever forgives and thereby brings about a reestablishment of harmony, his reward is with God; and God loves not the wrongdoers.” By his acceptance of compensation in the face of repentance and the acknowledgement of the harm that the offender has inflicted, the victim demonstrates willingness to rehabilitate the offender in society. The victim is, in turn, rewarded by God.

Challenges for Muslims in Contemporary Times

The Qur’an offers a distinctly moral perspective on tolerance and respect in a multi-ethnic, multi-communal world.⁵ The challenge for us in contemporary times is to recover the tolerance and means for peaceful coexistence through the Qur’an rather than the juridical and exegetical understanding which were formulated to assert the subjugation of the “other” in a particular historical context. As

³ Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 107.

⁴ On the role of forgiveness as a tool in peace making and relationship building see Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace*, 110-11, 129-130.

⁵ Eickelman, “Islam and Ethical Pluralism,” in *Islamic Political Ethics*, ed. Sohail Hashmi, 115.

they engage in a re-examination of traditional exegesis, the point of departure for Muslims has to be the Qur'an itself rather than the multi-faceted and multi-layered scholarly discourse that has accumulated since the eighth century.

The moral tenor of Qur'an shows that it wants to engage humanity in a moral discourse where all human beings can connect with the Qur'an and with each other based on universal values. As Sohail Hashmi argues, there are few ethical works that outline the Qur'anic vision of coexistence or warfare. Muslims need to disentangle Islamic ethics from medieval Islamic law and to re-examine the Qur'anic pronouncement on war and peace in light of its ethical axioms.⁶ Thus, the challenge for Muslims is to draw on this Qur'anic vision so as to develop just interreligious and intercultural relationships in a world of cultural and religious diversity.

The pluralistic tenor of the Qur'an indicates that, differences in skin color, ethnicity, and culture are *never* reasons to feel inferior or superior --seeing as, the only thing truly separating one individual from another are levels of God-consciousness. Thus, a black convert to Islam, Fatima, declares "no one can make you feel inferior without your permission." Fatima has enwrapped herself in Islam in a manner that also divides her from a hostile non-Muslim public.

Growing-up as a Black person in a white supremacist nation equipped Fatima with the armor to confront discrimination while remaining unruffled: "I'm *used* to being the odd person out. I'm always the 'other'" Fatima says off-handedly. Due to the fact that this woman has always occupied the margins of society mainstream Islamophobia is not felt to have the power to

⁶ Sohail Hashmi, "Islamic Ethics in International Society," in *Islamic Political Ethics*, ed. Sohail Hashmi, 148.

degrade her seeing as she has already mastered a firm sense of self from her social-cultural position.⁷

The Role of the Media in Promoting Islamophobia

It is within this backdrop that we need to understand Islamophobia. The term means prejudice against, hatred towards, or fear of Muslims or of ethnic groups perceived to be Muslim. It is also defined as intense dislike or fear of Islam, especially as a political force. It is premised around concepts of threat and fear. One way of promoting Islamophobia is to make Muslims as "the other." They are seen as outsiders, a threat to American values and norms.

Consequently this mentality justifies the negative stereotyping of Muslims, the demonization of the Islamic faith and its practices, and structures the discriminatory treatment of individual Muslims--all of which "relies on a sense of otherness". The adverse actions of *any* Muslim in the global landscape "implicates" *all* Muslims in the West to a public waiting in-the-ready for the *enemy in their midst* to fulfill/confirm its "innate" capacities for evil. *Fear* of the non-Christian/non-white "other" is at the root of this prejudice which creates a hospitable terrain for essentialism whereby "difference" is used to qualify any number of stereotypes.⁸

The treatment of Islam in the North American media has attracted much attention in recent years, the most comprehensive work being Said's 1998 book, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. This work provides a serious analysis of how media coverage on the Middle East informs the American public's perceptions about Islam and Muslims, who serve as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not

⁷ Jan Mendes, "Exploring Blackness, from Muslim, Female, Canadian Realities." Master's Thesis, McMaster University, 2011), 138.

⁸ Mendes, 29.

happen to like about the world's new political, social, and economic patterns. Much of Said's study focuses on Iran, it being the subject that established the modern cultural imaginary about Islam that is now accepted as fact. As the author argued, "the Iran story" served to provide a "sustained diet of information about a people, a culture, a religion - really no more than a poorly defined and badly misunderstood abstraction - always, in the case of Iran, represented as dangerous, militant and un American.

It is important to understand how the media treats religion in general and Islam in particular. In America, the media and the press only take notice of religion in the context of political conflicts. Under normal circumstances, God is not discussed in everyday life. The removal of God from the vast amount of media that Americans consume has an effect of gradually diminishing the relevance of the Divine to ordinary life. Talk-show hosts, television producers, news makers, editors, and journalists do not talk about religion or God since this is seen as a form of proselytization. In fact, religion is an awkward, delicate, and sensitive topic in everyday American conversation.

For the mass media, individuals who argue a political or ethical position based on religious convictions are problematic; those who hold the tenets of their faith to be superior to social and political convention are seen as suspect. Persons who frankly express that their faith influences their thinking and socio-political views run the risk of ridicule and contempt.

There are other reasons which account for why the media does not discuss religion. These include: (a) statements about religions are assumed to be in favor of a particular religious position; (b) learning about other beliefs might undermine one's own faith; (c) the legal separation of church and state is interpreted to mean that religion is a private matter unfit for public discourse; (d) statements about religion cannot contribute to the common good because

they are sectarian; and (e) religions can only encounter each another within a competitive framework. In addition, the secular system prevalent in America means that religion is relegated to the private sphere and has no role to play in the public square. All these factors mean that, generally speaking, religion is not discussed in the media unless it is connected to American foreign interests or policy making.

The media plays a constant and important role in people's lives. Newspapers, television, magazines, comics, videos, and computer games reinforce any image that fits the culture at a given time. Why does Islamophobia exist and why is the media so hostile to Islam and Muslims? What can we do to reduce this hostility? It is important to note that the 1970s and 1980s witnessed increased animosity towards Arabs and Muslims in the United States. In all probability, domestic groups like the conservative wing of the Republican Party, Christian fundamentalist groups, and the pro-Israel lobby were responsible for encouraging the anti-Islamic rhetoric.

It is correct to state that an important reason for the negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the media is the fear of Islam and the Muslims by the West. This fear is unfortunately reinforced by Western scholars and so-called experts on Arabs and Islam in the West. Examples of such fears and stereotypes are not difficult to find. Immediately after the arrest of Mohammad Salmeh, the World Trade Center bombing suspect, a University of Miami expert on the Middle East and terrorism remarked during a CNN newscast that the real issue in the Middle East is not the Arab-Israeli conflict, but the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. This and many similar discourses, on American radio and television, by the so-called experts and analysts show a deliberate attempt to present Islam as the enemy of the West, especially America. Most media rely on such uninformed or prejudiced sources.

The role of the media in creating hatred against Islam and Muslims can also be seen from the following account. When the Oklahoma bombing occurred in 1995, the media played a significant role in spreading the rumor that Muslims were responsible, provoking Americans to think that after the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, Muslims had struck in the American heartland. Within minutes of the bombing in Oklahoma, a local TV station started broadcasting that the Nation of Islam was responsible for this attack. A couple of hours later they reported that the FBI was looking for three men of Middle Eastern origin (*Impact*: May 1995). CNN was the first network to broadcast an interview with former Congressman David McCurdy on April 19, 1995. McCurdy noted that, "there could be a very real connection to some of the Islamic fundamentalist groups that have actually been operating out of Oklahoma City."

On the same day Steven Emerson, producer of the PBS documentary, "Jihad in America," declared on the CBS Evening News: "Oklahoma City, I can tell you, is probably considered as one of the largest centers of Islamic radical activity outside the Middle East." A former Congressman and a so-called expert on terrorism were the most widely quoted sources of allegation that the bombing was done by Muslims. John McWeathy reported on ABC World News, April 19: "Sources say that FBI has been watching dozens of suspicious Islamic groups in cities in the Southwest and several in Oklahoma City." Jim Cumins, on NBC Nightly News, April 19, compared the bombing to that in Beirut. Statements such as these, made by supposed "experts on Islam and the Muslim world" clearly arouse suspicions against Muslims and increase Islamophobia.

Without personal direct knowledge of Islam and Muslims, many people in America have no effective way to counter the skewed perspective. It is this continuing cycle of broad,

stereotypical representation and hindered local intergroup contact that allows an association between Muslims and terrorism to become taken for granted in North American public life.

Strategies of the Media in Promoting Islamophobia

The effect of stereotypes is to assign a group in a specified role. As such, stereotypes tend to promote characteristics of a group that are different from normal society. So for example, in the American media, African Americans are often depicted as impoverished and criminals whereas Mexicans are seen as bandits and illegal. FBI agents, lawyers, doctors, and reporters, on the other hand, are white males. Stereotyping a group also means that "the other" that lies within "the other" is hidden since the whole group is clustered in a particular compartment. Thus Shi'is who are a minority within the Muslim community, are not generally mentioned since they are subsumed and voices silenced by the Muslim other.

A good example of how Muslims are portrayed in the American media is the film "The Siege". Two Muslims appear in the movie, one of them who works for the FBI, the other is a terrorist. Interestingly, in the movie, the good Muslim is the one who does not do anything associated with Islam whereas the terrorist invokes Islam all the time and prays before he kills. The obvious message from this is that Muslims who do not observe Islam or are invisible are the good Muslims. On the other hand, *wudhu* and *salat* are symbolic acts of terrorists. As such, they are contrary to American norms. In many ways, the media defines what Muslims are not and also what they should be. The subtle message coming from the media is that Muslims need to reform so they can become like "us Americans". They should endorse and reflect our values and social choices.

It is also important to realize that the media is not monolithic. It uses different tools to promote a certain image. A cartoon, for example, is a very powerful and important tool in the media arsenal. It communicates briefly yet powerfully. It is easier to see than to read. Hence, cartoons utilize symbols, i.e., objects or images that represent something else. The cross, for example, represents the suffering or crucifixion of Christ. Symbols are brief yet they create an association with well-known objects or concepts. This leads to stereotyping a group that is connected with the symbol.

To get messages across powerfully cartoons use caricatures. Here artists focus on features of an individual and exaggerate that feature so as to attain publicity. They often use a recognized symbol such as a prolonged nose or a bomb. The caricatures are then exaggerated and utilized to depict an entire group. Gradually, the caricature becomes a stereotype. For example, the Danish cartoon depicts not only the Prophet (SAW) but uses the symbol of a bomb as a turban, indicating that those who wear turbans are associated with violence.

Similarly, cartoonists and other forms of the media subjugate Muslim women by denying them any representation in Islam except under oppression. It is as if women play no role in Islam apart from being oppressed. The media image is gendered since a fanatical Muslim man is often countered by a submissive and oppressed Muslim woman. The American media also lumps Muslims together. It never projects Muslims as ordinary smart Americans who hold important positions in the American corporate industry. Muslims are never seen as CEOs, astronauts or nuclear scientists. Rather, the media shows them as strangers, either from Arabia, Iran or Pakistan who drive taxis and plot against the government.

It is time that Muslims draw their own cartoons and caricatures to show the diversity inherent within Muslims. They need to counter western stereotypes and show that rather than the

sameness based on stereotypes, Muslims are to be depicted with same nuances that Christians and other groups are.

Islamophobia is promoted in different ways, through books, media, slogans “Muslims are Coming”, Shari’a is a Threat to Canadian Values. An important consideration when we talk about the print media is how and what books for schools and colleges write about Islam. The Middle East Studies Association (MESA) and the Middle East Outreach Council (MEOC) researched history and geography textbooks, finding "an over portrayal of deserts, camels and nomads" in the chapter on the Middle East. Even some well intended teachers use the Bedouin image as somehow typifying "Arab culture." In fact, only about 2% of Arabs are traditional Bedouin, and today there are certainly more Arab engineers and computer specialists than desert dwellers. The MESA/MEOC study concluded "the presentation of Islam is so problematic that it is perhaps time for educators at the college and university level to send a red alert to their colleagues at the pre-collegiate level. Crude errors and distortions abound.

From a contemporary interfaith perspective, Yahweh (the Jewish God), God the Father and Allah (the generic name of God in Arabic) can be regarded as one God. But textbooks sometimes discuss Allah as if the word referred to an alien god remote from Jewish and Christian tradition.

Shi'ism and the American Media

Since Shi'is are in a minority within the Muslim minority in America, they have less access to power, and privilege in the public sphere. Since they have been recently established, Shi'is had fewer resources, institutions, and, most importantly, access to power and influence in the public sphere. Thus, it is the Sunnis who define and represent Islam in America.

Sunni domination and representation of American Islam is visible in many domains.

When the State Department or the media want to talk to Muslims, in most cases, it is to the Sunni institutions and mosques that they turn. Likewise, Sunni centers tend to have more access to the media than Shi'is do. When the press reports that American Muslims offer special night prayers in Ramadhan (called *tarawih*), the average non-Muslim reader or viewer naturally assumes that Shi'is offer these prayers too. Infact, Shi'is do not offer the *tarawih* since they maintain it was a *bid'a* introduced by 'Umar, the second caliph. When a newscast reports that a Muslim can divorce his wife by reciting the triple divorce, it is referring to a distinctly Sunni practice, one which Shi'is reject.

This has been the Shi'i dilemma of minorityness in America. Not only have the Sunnis represented Muslims, Sunni practices have been assumed to be normative, embracing all Muslims, whether Shi'is accept them or not. It is the Sunnis who speak on behalf of the Muslim community. Not only have the Shi'is been subsumed, they have been presumed to speak the language of the majority Sunnis. Shi'i voices have been drowned by Sunni ones. During the course of the twentieth century, Shi'is have learned that being a minority means, in the American context, being the invisible other within the other.

Increasingly, the American media has become aware that Islam is not a monolithic entity and that there are many dividing lines within the Muslim community. They know that Muslims hold a variety of opinions on multitudinous issues, and they want to hear a wide range of Muslim voices. Consequently, many journalists want to hear both Sunni and Shi'i voices.

Especially after the American invasion of Iraq, Americans have gone beyond asking questions such as "why do they hate us, and why are Muslim women oppressed?" The themes covered in the media now are as diverse as they are fascinating. Topics that are typically covered include issues like authority and scripture, challenges in the American milieu, holy days, and

Islamic fundamentalism. American media also want to know more about the relationship between Black and immigrant Muslims, Muslim perspectives on issues like abortion, gay marriages, aging, and euthanasia. In fact, it is possible to detect an evolution in the media from basic issues (terrorism, women's rights) to more sensitive and controversial topics.

For the Shi'is, it is very important that they have their own outlet where they can represent themselves. An important form of outreach is satellite Television. Currently, several Shi'i satellite channels reach the American audience. Most of these are either in Persian or Arabic. The exceptions are: Salaam TV, Ahlul-bayt TV and Press TV. Salaam TV broadcasts from Los Angeles in both Persian and English. So far, its programming has consisted of a series of English lectures, supplications, and programs in Persian that appeal to devout Shi'is. The programs are neither captivating nor intellectually engaging and have not touched upon the substantive issues that impact the American Shi'i community, especially the needs of the younger generation. More importantly, since most of its English programs are in the form of interviews and lectures delivered in Islamic centers by Shi'i imams, Salaam TV has not been able to reach out to a Western audience. Salaam also suffers from a dearth of financial resources that are required to sustain a wide range of programming. Due to these factors, Salaam TV has not been able to exploit the tremendous potential at its disposal and has, so far, been not been able to reach out to the non-Muslim community.

Ahlul-Bayt TV is broadcast from England and is free on satellite TV. It is an important platform to reach a non-Muslim audience. However, although its contents are entirely in English, its programming is geared toward a Shi'i audience. It consists of a series of interviews, lectures and discussion on various religious and social issues. It features a section on women, converts (or reverts) and various lectures by various scholars and public speakers. Significantly, the

program is speaking to the converted and may actually be turning people off Shi'ism. Especially in the months of Muharram and Safar, the channel features Shi'is beating their chests and weeping. While enacting such rituals are important for the Shi'i community to perform in the mosques, presenting these to a non-Muslim audience can have the effect of turning them **away** from Shi'ism. The message should be positive and simple. Shi'ism is rooted in the concept of standing up to injustice and oppression. It is also based on a special kind of charismatic leaders who have inherited authority from the Prophet (SAW) himself. However, such concepts have to be presented in a way that would attract non-Muslims to the Shi'i ethos. In addition, journalists and editors watching scenes such as people wailing and cutting themselves can use such images to promote a negative and violent image of Shi'i Islam. Let us be clear, Shi'is have more opportunity to speak in the West than in most Muslim countries. More Universities want Shi'i studies to be taught unfortunately there are very few Shi'i professors available. It is upto the community to seize this opportunity.

There are a number of Shi'a channels that broadcast on satellite television. Some of them are broadcast from the Middle East. I refer here to channels such as IRNA, al-Forat, Press TV, al-Alam, al-Anwar etc. Only one of these is in English, i.e., Press TV. This channel serves an important function since it removes many wrong notions that other channels carry about the Muslim world. In addition, Press TV carry Muslim perspectives on Islamic issues. More importantly, Press TV is able to show pictures and footage of things and events that channels like Fox News, CNN, and BBC news does not want to show to the Western world. We hardly ever see the plight of Muslim women and children that is caused by Israeli occupation and by the squeezing of the Palestinian economy. Even when Israeli bombs land in Palestine, we hardly

ever see the effects that these bombs have on the local communities. Hence Press TV is able to redress the wrong images that are broadcast by western televisions.

It is important to remember that the media is a primary form for winning the hearts and minds of the people. Shi'as in the West already have a platform to build on. Programs like Ahl al-bayt TV and Salaam need help and assistance so that they can ameliorate their programming. They can present a more positive image of Shi'ism so that when the Imam (AS) re-appears, people will be ready and looking forward to helping him and to joining his forces. For that to happen, we need to change the image of Shi'ism in the minds of non-Muslims and to show them the benefits of the coming of the Imam of the time.

The Film Industry in North America

Prejudices and wrong images about Islam are promoted in different ways. The media has different outlets to disseminate its information and we need use the same outlets to project a true and better image of Islam. In recent times, the film industry has become an important source of filtering stereotypes about Islam and Muslims in North America. It is therefore important to consider the images in the film industry and how to correct them.

Some Iranian satellite channels are broadcast to North America too. Although these channels broadcast exclusively in Persian, some of their programming have English subtitles and are viewed by the Muslim and non-Muslim audience. Many films made in Iran or about Muslims, including some television series, are broadcast on Iranian television and on the satellite channels. These portray Iranians as normal peace loving people who, like everyone have their own daily challenges and issues. They are very interesting and negate many of the stereotypical images that are constructed by "Hollywood" movies. More importantly they carry English

subtitles, thus reaching a much wider North American audience. There are other Arabic television channels which also broadcast television series and films. These include channels such as al-Ma'arif, Forat etc. Some of these carry English subtitles.

In assessing the value of films and television serials, it is important to note that in the West, prejudice and discrimination against Islam and Muslims is often rooted in negative stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims very often based on the films that are aired on television or in theaters. Individual Muslims are associated with or blamed for the acts of small groups of extremists who share their ethnicity or religion. News reports of acts of political violence are one source of these sentiments. Another is the popular commercial culture which is filled with negative images of Arabs. Muslim men (especially Arabs) are portrayed as violent terrorists oil "sheiks" or marauding tribesmen who kidnap blonde Western women. Decade after decade, film after film, these images have been repeated for public consumption.

Since Islam is presented as a monolith, its followers are presented with little sophistication or differentiation. Even in the film industry, there is a lot of interest in Shi'ism especially after the Islamic revolution in Iran.

The importance of the film industry in promoting Islamophobia is seen by the fact that Lebanese-American media analyst Jack Shaheen has documented over 900 Hollywood films portraying Arabs in a negative and offensive manner. In recent years these have included some high profile films: *Rules of Engagement*, *True lies Executive Decision*, *Back to the Future*. *The Mummy*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* etc. Other films include Jackie Chan's *Operation Condor*, *Martial Law*, and the cartoon films *Kazam* and *The Return of Jafar*. Many Hollywood films dealing with Persia/Iran, whether in an ancient or contemporary context, effectively vilify the entire civilization, with a cruel despot, husband, or other aggressive "Easterner", a common trope

in what many film historians refer to as "Hollywood Easterns".

In addition, films made in North America deny Muslim women any representation in Islam except under oppression. It is as if women play no role in Islam. It is correct to state that the image of Muslim women in western films is gendered; i.e., a fanatical Muslim man rules over or is harsh on an oppressed Muslim woman.

Such films do not show Muslims as ordinary Americans. Rather, they are depicted as strangers; as Arabs, Pakistanis, or Iranians. Such films try to define what Muslims are not; they also define what Muslims should be - i.e., to be depicted as good, Muslims should endorse and reflect North American values & social choices. In films that are made in North America, Muslims are never shown as smart people or those who hold high positions in reputable companies. It is here that the value of films made by Muslim companies lie. Let us not forget that the film industry is hugely popular in North America. Not only does it attract many viewers, it can shape and mold the opinions of its viewers.

It is important to remember that if we do not speak or talk about our beliefs and religion, other channels like Fox news and CNN will. What they have to say about us will not be very pleasant. Hence the need to infiltrate and shape the media so that a more fair picture of Islam is represented.

Conclusion

Peace requires changes in our world-views. The quest for peace challenges us to reevaluate how we have viewed the other. It also necessitates a shift in paradigm, asking us to embrace those we have previously excluded or demonized. The challenge is to seek opportunities for interpretations that can

make a community see the enemy in a new way. This is an important measure to establish peaceful relationship.⁹

There is a concurrent requirement to move away from defining ourselves over and above an enemy “other.” The starting point is to re-examine traditions that draw boundaries of exclusion and marginalization. Peaceful coexistence is only possible when we no longer see a group as the other but as a concrete human community with ancient values and norms. Ultimately, peaceful relations between human beings is grounded on a community’s construction of an order based on egalitarianism, justice, and a concern for the moral and social well-being of all its citizens.

We need to understand the role of Muslims in weaving the religious as well as social tapestry of America and to see several gaps – between religion and culture, the gap between religion and politics, religious loyalty and ethnic identity and the lacuna between normative religious texts and the reality of American life. With time, these gaps will be filled. It is here that the challenge for the next generation of Muslims lies.

⁹ See the example cited by Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace*, 44.