

The Jakarta Post

Understanding Islam: What is Islamic and what not?

Nikolaos van Dam , Jakarta | Fri, 05/01/2009 | Opinion

It is not only important to explain what Islam really is, but it is also important to make a distinction between what, in fact, involves Islam, and what people have incorrectly associated with and attributed to it.

What is the relation between Islam and the actions of people that practice the Muslim faith? In my opinion there are many things which have very little to do with Islam as a religion, but are nevertheless ascribed to it because the persons who are linked to it happen to be Muslims.

It should also be taken into account that certain radical actions have been carried out by Muslim individuals or groups in the name of Islam, but that those actions are not supported by the majority of Muslims, and are generally disapproved of by them, although sometimes the position of their disapproval is not explicit enough to create the impression that these radical Muslims that carry out these actions do not in any way represent any Muslim majority.

All this has contributed a lot to existing misunderstandings. A lot of these misunderstandings have to do with false perceptions, but not with academic reality. Although one might also argue that perceptions become academic realities if people believe their perceptions to be true.

The responsibility of scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, is therefore to subject these perceptions to a reality test, particularly if this can help in providing a global forum which would help create a better mutual understanding, as well as a stronger cross-cultural friendship.

Islam is a hot topic in the West, and not only there, but also in the Islamic world itself. Many people talk about it, but much fewer people are knowledgeable about it. If you want to organize a seminar on "democracy in South East Asia", for instance, it may not be that easy to raise funds for it. But if you add the word "Islam", and make it about the role of democracy and Islam in Southeast Asia, the chances become much better.

Nevertheless it may be wrong to stress the idea of any connection between Islam and all kinds of developments in the world. The danger exists that Islam becomes a kind of fixation, thereby adding to a misunderstanding between Muslims and non-Muslims or between so-called Muslim countries and non-Muslim countries.

After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, many people in the West thought they could have a much better understanding of what were the deeper backgrounds of what had happened in New York

by reading the Koran. But could it help its readers much further in understanding what had happened?

I do not think so. It may be of course very instructive to read the Koran, particularly for those who have not done yet, but to understand everything happening in the world is a different matter.

When Islam spread outside the Arabian Peninsula and came into contact with other cultures, Islam adapted itself to these regions in the sense that various local habits and traditions were not only being accepted as not contradicting those of Islam, but were later on also sometimes interpreted by the local populations as being in line with Islam, if not Islamic itself. Many people who as new Muslims continued part of their former traditions, gradually came to argue that these traditions were in fact part of Islam.

More generally, one might say that in large parts of Indonesia Islam has adapted itself to the local cultures and traditions, or has embedded itself into them, instead of fully adapting to the culture and traditions of the Arabian Peninsula the other way around. A similar phenomenon could be said to have taken place in other regions of what today is considered to be the Islamic world. In many places people interpret local habits or traditions as part of Islam, whereas in fact they are not really. Also cultural manifestations based on different religious-cultural backgrounds generally coexist peacefully together in Indonesia.

Other Islamic countries have their own examples concerning the local cultural heritage and Islam existing side by side. It could be noted, for instance, that whereas in strongly traditional Islamic Saudi Arabia women are prohibited from driving a car, the same is allowed in the Islamic Republic of Iran. These differences have nothing to do with Islam itself, but rather with different cultures existing in these countries.

Similarly, the harsh treatment of women by the Taliban in Afghanistan is much more a reflection of regional tribal customs and attitudes than that is part of Islam. The acid throwing into the faces of women happens in wider parts of Asia, including in India and Cambodia, and can be seen as purely criminal. It goes so far as to fully mix up Islamic religion and other phenomena, which have nothing to do with Islam. Other examples are female circumcision, which is most widely spread in Africa, and the so-called honor killings.

But this does not prevent larger part of the non-Muslim world from perceiving these attitudes as being connected with Islam, which therefore generally has a non-favorable effect on the attitude towards Islam in the West.

Both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars have a common responsibility not only to explain many relevant issues about Islam. They should also make clear what is not related to Islam, but rather to other factors, such as politics, culture and local traditions. In doing so, academics can not only help contribute to bridge misunderstandings and correct wrong perceptions.

They also can create a better social and political climate which encourages mutual respect and tolerance. The same academics should help prevent a situation in which all kinds of unjustified

connections between Islam and various developments and ideologies in the world are being suggested.

When exchanging views within the framework of an inter-cultural, or inter-faith dialogue, we do not necessarily have to discuss religious issues as such. After all, it is common for most believers to consider their own beliefs to be the best and most correct. What is more important is to discuss underlying values and beliefs, which the various parties may have in common.

Dr. Nikolaos van Dam is Ambassador of the Netherlands in Jakarta. This article is part of a lecture he delivered at the Institute of Koranic Studies in Jakarta on April 29, 2009 titled: The Global Political Trend and the Role of Islam: The Academic Responsibility of Muslim Scholars. The full text is to be found on www.nikolaosvandam.com.