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Islam from the perspective of Western views (Part 1 of 2)

Nikolaos van Dam , Jakarta | Friday, 10/30/2009 | Opinion

Most Western people have never set foot in the Arab or Islamic world but have only obtained their impressions of Islam and Muslims through the mass media, or through their contacts with highly diverse groups of Muslim immigrants living in their respective countries. For instance Moroccans in the Netherlands, Algerians in France, Pakistanis and Indians in the United Kingdom, and Turks in Germany.

Or they obtained their ideas about Islam through extreme events, such as the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, or those elsewhere. Often such experiences or impressions have been more negative than positive.

And it is often not Islam as such which is being perceived, but rather the acts of individual Muslims who provide a distorted image of Islam because they pretend to act "in the name of Islam" but do not in any way represent any substantial Muslim majority.

The perception amongst the general population in Europe, or the West in general, is these days often shaped by what happens close at home, just next door, rather than by developments in far away Muslim countries.

In Europe, the view towards Muslims and Islam was in the past heavily influenced by the stereotype thinking which emanated from the conflicts between Christian and Muslim rulers in the Middle Ages. But today's situation in the West has developed further and is different.

Although some of the traditionally preconceived ideas and biases still persist, new elements have come into play. New conflicts have arisen which, although they have little to do with religion or Islam as such, nevertheless strongly reflect upon relations between the West and the Islamic world and Muslims in general.

Of course, the colonial rule of Western countries over the Middle East and elsewhere has left its traces amongst formerly colonized peoples. As far as the post-colonial period is concerned, the Arab-Israeli conflict has been an important factor affecting relations.

At its beginning it was a kind of nationalist conflict about the disputed territory of Palestine. In the course of time, however, it obtained an additional dimension, notably that of a conflict between Jews and Muslims instead of between only Arabs and Israeli Jews.

The Israeli occupation and annexation of Jerusalem have added a religious dimension to the conflict as well. Continuous strong Western support for Israel, and the Western application of - what is often seen by Arabs and Muslims as - double standards in its policies towards the Middle East, also have resulted in hostility within the Arab and Islamic world towards the West.

This, originally nationalist hostility, later on gained the additional dimension of wider Muslim hostility towards the West, resulting in various terrorist operations and other violent outbursts

by organizations like al-Qaeda, Taliban and others. Western interventions in Islamic countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as Western presence in the Muslim heartland of the Arabian Peninsula have come to play a role in these animosities and conflicts as well.

Another new element today is the strong presence of many Muslim immigrants in Europe with their very different cultural backgrounds. Their presence has had a strong influence on the opinion amongst some European people towards Islam and Muslims in general.

Many of these immigrants are from the poorer if not poorest rural sectors of their countries and therefore have generally a much lower educational level than that of the country they have immigrated into. Often they are also not in an economically competitive position. (Although it should be noted that there are many successful entrepreneurs amongst their offspring).

In the Netherlands the rate of unemployment is much higher among the Moroccans, than among any other immigrant group, just as is their rate of criminality.

For that reason they have triggered a negative attitude within certain sectors of the Dutch population towards them, and indirectly also towards Islam.

Over the past years, Islam itself has increasingly become a subject of debate in Europe: the attacks by Muslim terrorists on targets in the United States, London and Spain, the pressure on young girls to wear the headscarf, the recruitment of young men for the international jihad, the discovery in particular mosques of books denouncing homosexuals, and the equality of men and women, the implicit condoning of domestic violence and honor-related crimes with reference to the religion of Islam.

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Islam from a Western perspective (Part 2 of 2)

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In 2004, the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered. The extremist Muslim perpetrator left a written message stating that he had committed the murder because Van Gogh had openly criticized Islam. This brought about a change in the Netherlands: politicians and other participants in the public debate were threatened and there were even sporadic incidents in which mosques, churches and schools were attacked.

These events have raised the question as to which extent Islam, in its present forms, is compatible with the democratic core-values and practices in the Netherlands. Combined with concerns about integration, such as the continued low levels of mastery of the Dutch language, low rates of inter-ethnic marriage (more than 70 percent of the Turkish and Moroccan youth marry a partner from their country of origin), high numbers of school drop-outs and relatively poor school results among the Muslim population, these issues have led to heated societal and parliamentary discussions.

Although the Dutch government and civil society organizations are making serious efforts to implement integration policy, one point remains problematic: the split which threatens to develop between Muslims and non-Muslims. This threat is fuelled by some Muslim fundamentalists who take advantage of dissatisfaction among second and third generation immigrants with the slow progress of integration.

These Muslim fundamentalists do not want to be part of the society in its present form, but place themselves outside of it and even reject the Dutch standards concerning democracy and rule of law. Fortunately, however, this group is just marginal and most Dutch Moroccans (or Moroccan Dutch) and people from other ethnic groups in fact do accept Dutch shared values. But, as is well known, individuals and marginal groups can cause a lot of harm.

Finally, there are political parties in Europe which play upon the theme of Islam and violence. Actually their position may have little to do with Islam as such, but much more with existing feelings of discontent towards immigrants from Muslim countries and the disliked or deviant behavior of some of them.

Usually, discussions about Islam deal mainly with some outward or visible phenomena or symbols. Only rarely is there a discussion about religious principles themselves.

Discussions deal with, for instance, women wearing the veil in public life. It being used in Europe is met with opposition, because it is often being seen there as a symbol of non-integration, also limiting the freedom of women.

Other topics of Islam which attract particular attention and usually have a negative connotation in the West are: the carrying out of Sharia regulations such as beheading, cutting off hands, stoning to death or caning; polygamy (men allowed to marry up to four women); marrying girls at a very young age; violent jihad; the issue of having 60 or more virgins in Paradise after men have been "martyred" during a jihad operation; and other phenomena which are not necessarily Islamic, but are nevertheless often being portrayed as such, such as female circumcision (which also is very common in non-Islamic parts of Africa), honor killings, condoning violence against women at home (which occurs even stronger in non-Muslim parts elsewhere in the world like South America)

When such practices are being propagated or carried out in certain parts of the Islamic world, even if they are exceptional, they may in Western public opinion also have a negative side effect on the perception of those parts of the Islamic world where such practices are not followed, or where they are even rejected.

For instance, the Acehese Sharia bylaw which makes it possible for adulterers there to be stoned to death (rajam) may negatively affect the positive image existing abroad of Indonesia as a moderate country, even if all other Indonesian provinces would reject this practice.

It should be stressed that what may have been considered normal or acceptable in the past is no longer necessarily acceptable by 21st century standards; it is often no longer acceptable to a majority of Muslims, some of whom may take issue with these outdated attitudes. But this is not always clearly seen as such in the West.

It would therefore be very useful if the more moderate Muslims would let their voices and views resonate much clearer and louder, so that they may compete with those radical voices that are currently distorting the image of Islam and so that they may help correct this distorted image of Islam which presently prevails among some people in the West and in some parts of the world. It would be equally useful if people in the West would listen attentively, not dismissively, to these voices.

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