

Islam in the Western Media

Bashy Quraishy

ABSTRAK

Setelah serangan 11 September 2001 atas gedung World Trade Center, AS, kata Islam menjadi topik aktual dalam berbagai media barat, yang disandingkan dengan istilah-istilah terorisme, fundamentalisme, vadalisme, dan kata-kata berkonotasi buruk lainnya. Media barat, bahkan telah mengonstruksi persepsi tentang pertentangan Islam dan Barat dengan Amerika sebagai pemimpinnya. Sejak itu, secara perlahan tapi pasti, media barat memberitakan dunia Islam dalam gambaran begitu buruk: gambar-gambar para demonstran Pakistan, wanita yang ditanggannya Quran dan pedang, film-film yang bertendensi anti-Islam. Ditayangkan berulang-ulang, terus-menerus, tiap hari. Upaya merendahkan Islam, bukan sekadar dalam ungkapan implisit, atau lewat gambar-gambar buruk, tapi juga sudah pada tingkat terang-terangan yang begitu eksplisit, seperti ungkapan: peradaban Islam lebih rendah daripada Kristen, orang Islam tidak beradab atau barbar, mengatasi terorisme Islam harus melalui pembaratan. Media barat menjadi kehilangan objektivitas. Liputan tentang Islam, sebagian besar sekadar berita atau opini negatif; terjadi distorsi begitu jauh. Media mengingkari kenyataan bahwa sesungguhnya Islam bukan hanya di anut oleh bangsa Timur Tengah, tapi juga oleh banyak ras dan bangsa lain, termasuk sebagian masyarakat barat. Pada kehidupan sosial, akibatnya, para muslim minoritas di barat, sering diperlakukan tidak adil. Terdapat diskriminasi untuk non-Eropa dan non-Kristen, khususnya Islam. Citra buruk tentang Islam di media barat, memang berlangsung jauh sebelum peristiwa 11 September. Ketika Uni Soviet bubar, Amerika dan sekutunya kehilangan musuh nomor satu; permusuhan itu kemudian diarahkan kepada Islam, yang dipandang sebagai ancaman. Untuk membangun jurnalisme barat yang objektif, maka media barat perlu membangun sikap terbuka dan mengakui kenyataan bahwa masyarakat itu, bahkan di negaranya sendiri, plural.

Stereotyped image of Islam has become a crutch on which the survival of the Western cultural identity depends.

15th of September 2000 was the day of Olympic inauguration in Sydney Australia. I was attending a conference in Brussels. In the lunchtime I went to my room to see the news on BBC. After few tries, I zapped on a German TV Channel, which was covering the Olympics. Out of curiosity, I let myself hung on for few moments to see the opening. The commentator was introducing each country by its sporting achievements, history or just by passing pleasant remarks. I soon noticed that every time a delegation from a country with a Muslim background appeared on the screen, Is-

lam, terrorism, fundamentalism, or civil war was mentioned. Countries as diverse as Algeria, Indonesia, Sudan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were introduced in the similar fashion. I was astonished at this deliberate effort to mix religion and sports.

As a journalist with minority roots, I am aware of the discussions taking place about Islam in Europe and my own country, Denmark. I am not a religious person, nor am I a practicing Muslim, but over the years I have learned to respect and admire all religions. I have become much more aware of the depth of a person's need to belong to a religion, an ideology, a certain philosophy, a trade union or just a sports club. Some how after living

in the Western World, one thing has become very clear to me that, no matter how secular and non-practicing I am, I would always be reminded by the media, politicians, and the people around me, that I am a Muslim and thus not a part of the Danish/European/and Western culture.

It is sad and it hurts to admit that all my efforts to be a normal law abiding, tax paying, peace loving, and contributing citizen of Denmark has no value to the society. I am judged by the parameter of my religion. I know that I am not alone in this situation. There are millions of people sharing the same fate in the Western World. On the bright side of this sorry state of affairs, I can express my sincere thanks to Denmark, to Europe, and to the entire Western World that they have given me my original identity back. Through this painful process, it has dawned on me, that my own religion - Islam - has played an important part in my upbringing and intellectual setup.

Islam in the Western Media

When the organizers of an important International Media Conference, which took place in Finland in October 2001, asked me to speak on this topic, I was pleased because this has been an issue I have worked on, for the last many years. But little did I know that Islam in the Western media would become such an actual topic after those terrible attacks on American targets on 11th September 2001, which resulted in the loss of many innocent lives and destruction of property worth billions of dollars. One horrible outcome of this tragedy is the talk of "Clash of civilizations", "War between Islam and the West" and a "New World Order" based on American leadership.

Few hours after terrorist attack on World Trade Center in New York and Pentagon in Washington D.C, President Bush held his first speech addressed to the American people. His face appeared on every USA TV Channel as well as on the national networks through out the planet. The first caption on CNN was "America under attack". Few days later it was changed to "America is at war" and soon after Osama Bin Laden was de-

clared as the enemy number one, the caption in CNN reporting changed to "America's New War". The same happened in Great Britain, where Tony Blair as a true and faithful supporter of USA, declared war against fundamentalism. He said: "This attack on USA is an attack on our civilization, our democratic values, and our way of life".

BBC and other media followed the footsteps of American press with an unending barrage of reports from foreign correspondents from Middle East, interviews with experts, military analysts, and politicians.

Every body was asked by the journalists, who they thought was behind these hideous acts. Was it Osama Bin Laden or was it some other radical fundamentalist group from Middle East?

It is worth noting that from the start, the blaming finger of the Western politicians was pointing towards Islamic groups. There was no proof, no one took the responsibility and not one particular country or group was signaled out, but a suspicion was hanging in the air with big letters, Islamic terrorists.

An American military expert, William Taylor, on 16th Sept 2001, was interviewed on CNN. He said: " There is no concrete proof as to who has done this but I think there is a great possibility that militant Muslims are involved in this."

Very slowly but surely, the whole focus of the media started to involve Islam in this discussion. TV reports, newspaper articles, radio broadcasts and internet chats were flooded with issues such as Islam, Fundamentalism, terrorism and war. Words like Extremist Muslims, Fundamentalists, Militants Muslims, Osama Bin Laden, Muslim terrorist groups, and Islamic terrorism were used again and again on the networks. Old pictures of terrorist acts from around the world, Bin Laden's picture shooting a gun, Taleban's mistreatment of Afghan women, few Palestinian demonstrations and scenes of jubilation were repeated constantly. President Bush declared a "Crusade" on terrorism and Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, went as far as to declare that "Islamic civilization was inferior compared to the Christian West". The leader of rightwing, Danish People's Party, declared war

against Islam from the podium of Danish Parliament on 5th October 2001.

The member of European Parliament from Denmark, Mogens Carme at his party's annual meeting said: "All western countries are infiltrated by Muslims. Some of them are nice people, who are waiting to kill us all when they will be sufficient in numbers."

The former Prime Minister of Britain, Lady Thatcher, accused Muslims for failing to condemn the terror attacks on the World Trade Center enough. She said in an interview to *Times* newspaper on 4th October 2001, "The people who brought down these towers were Muslims and she has not heard enough condemnation from Muslim priests."

A reputed British Professor Micah Dembo wrote in the newspaper *Independent* on 5th Oct 2001, "The cultural and intellectual foundations of terrorism in Islamic societies can only be destroyed by westernizing them."

An American Internet newspaper, *Information Times*, brought a thought provoking letter from a veteran policy maker from Richard Nixon's era in its edition of 28.11.2001. Under the title, **THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS**, Jude Wanniski wrote a memo to Henry Kissinger. The memo is dated September 18, 2001 and involves Richard Perle, Chairman, Defense Policy Board, U.S. Department of Defense. The memo describes the discussions of American foreign policy towards Islam on CNN and other TV stations:

"I was surprised to see you (Henry Kissinger) on television last night making arguments I associate with the world's No. 1 hawk, Richard Perle, who has been the chief architect of our policy toward the Arab/Islamic world. There is no single American more responsible for inciting outrage among Muslims globally than Richard, whose maniacal prescriptions led inexorably to last week's cataclysm.

It was no surprise to me to see Richard on CNN's Evans & Novak, Hunt & Shields program on Sunday, the 16th Sept calling for all-out war against the Arab world with a coalition entirely composed of western Europeans. If he were just an ordinary maniac, we could live with him, Henry, but he is chairman of the Defense Policy Board, which ad-

vises the Pentagon, and which gives him total access to all military secrets."

Most of the media brought letters, comments, articles and news that were clearly meant to inflame the situation. Flag waving, emotional, and biased reporting replaced the objectivity. Highly respected American author and critic Susan Sontag heavily criticized the media in her article in *The New Yorker* on 19th September 2001. She wrote, "Un-proportional overdoses of reality, the display of self justice and direct misinformation from authorities and TV commentators is amazing and depressing."

Immediate Results

This uncritical and nationalistic journalism and intentional use of anti-Islam terminology as a tool of propaganda unfortunately had immediate side effects. International terrorism became synonymous with Islam as a religion, Muslims as its followers and Middle East/Arabs as its co-habitants. Attacks on Arab and Asia looking people resulted in many deaths of innocent people. Vandalism and looting of property, fire bombing of homes, harassment of Muslim women and girls on the streets, children in the schools and boycott of co-workers has been widely reported. European Union's Racism Monitoring Center in Vienna has published its report in the end of September detailing attacks and harassment of Muslims in EU. It is not a pleasant reading. Many European telephone callers to ethnic minority politicians with Muslim background said, "Get ready for the gas chambers".

These attacks were taking on such a momentum that alarm bells started ringing in the halls of Western power bases. Many Arab and Muslim countries also complained bitterly and the Middle Eastern communities together with local populations started raising their voices. After that political pressure and diplomatic contacts, President Bush appeared in a Mosque in Washington D.C. and appealed to the Americans to show decency and restraint. Tony Blair and Romano Prodi did the same. They clearly expressed that the war against terrorism is not a war against Islam or

Muslim people. President Bush even proclaimed that Islam is a religion of peace.

These very commendable gestures did lessen the tensions. Unfortunately these same political leaders are also talking about fundamentalism and terrorism as the main enemy - in the same breath. The common person in the West has no way to separate and distinguish between fundamentalism and fanaticism. It seems that these Western leaders are not aware that the mere mention of the word fundamentalism evokes anger among their populations, which in turn is quickly and automatically attached with religion, not Christianity, Hinduism, or Judaism but exclusively with Islam? Pictures of few Pakistani women, with a copy of Quran in one hand and a gun in the other, few hundred young men with long black beards shouting "Jihad or Allah is great" and other customary emotional slogan are repeatedly used to illustrate the evils of terrorism and fundamentalism. Anti-Islam film such as "Not without my daughter" and "Peace maker" together with the documentary films about women situation in Afghanistan, forced marriages among ethnic minorities, crime committed by Arab youth etc. are shown almost every day. These images sit deep in the psychic of innocent and ill-informed public and create hate. A hate which has its own cycle, rhythm and logic. A hate, which every person among ethnic minorities - Muslim or Non-Muslim can feel, taste, and see.

One of the great American sociologists and linguist, Noam Chomsky was interviewed on an independent Serbian Radio B 92 in Belgrade on 25th September 2001. He was asked, "How do you comment on the explanation given by many in USA media that the terrorists struck USA because they hate Western values (civil liberties, tolerance, welfare, etc)." He replied: "The second question about hate, we can simply dismiss. It is self-serving nonsense, and its purveyors surely know that, at least if they have any familiarity with the current history, including the Middle East. Naturally, these are convenient pretenses, which serve to deflect attention from the actual grievances expressed even by the most pro-western elements in the Middle East. As for the media, we have to ask how

they dealt with the basic questions that arise in the case of crimes, small or horrendous: who was responsible? What should the response be? Why did it happen? There has been virtually no discussion of any of these questions. Apart from a few exceptions like the wall street journal, there is very little in the mainstream media."

Salman Rushdie commented the war on terror and the refusal of the Western leaders to connect it with Islam, in a long article in *New York Times* and *Guardian* in October 2001. He said: "Let us call spade a spade. Of course this deals with Islam. Mantra that this war against terror is not against Islam is simply not true. Bush and Blair needs to say so, because they can not afford to have the whole Islamic world on their neck."

Political Signals

In the following 30 days after the World Trade Center attacks, I have personally experienced a lot of hostility. Not only in Denmark but also in places like, Sweden, Germany, and even in Portugal, where I was attending a conference in the 3rd week of September. Staring looks in the public places, spitting on the streets and uncomfortable questions from the media. But two things really hurt me deeply. First, a dear Danish friend of mine who is very kind, educated and has many friends among ethnic minorities wrote me an e-mail and said "Bashy, I have known you for a long time. You are one of the most decent human beings, but we must part our ways after terrorist attacks on USA. I do not think we Danes and you Muslims can live together any more."

Secondly on 27th September 2001, my organization, POEM which is the "Federation of Ethnic Minority Organizations in Denmark" held a private meeting with the Danish Prime Minister, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen to discuss a common strategy to deal with the aftermath of Sept 11th attacks. Instead of having a dialogue with the representatives of ethnic minorities, he insisted on that, "Ethnic minorities should condemn terrorism, pledge loyalty to Denmark, allow our women freedom to marry whom they want, get an education, respect

the ideals of democracy, and should not accept that Quran is above the Danish Constitution.”

Most of the meeting delegates could not understand why the Prime Minister was questioning their loyalty and good citizenship in such a brutal fashion. Most of them have lived all their life in Denmark, but because Islam happens to be the religion of their birth, their loyalty to Denmark was being subject of discussion. Next day the media expectedly described the political meeting as “Prime Minister meets moderate Muslims”. Among the eight female members attending the meeting only one was wearing scarf while the rest were dressed in casual European clothes. The journalists intentionally used the picture of the Somali delegate wearing head scarf in their stories. Is it a coincidence or an intentional signal? One can judge for oneself.

Media Surveys

The press and internet media material, I went through from different countries between 12th September to 12th October 2001, I could see that the whole Western media used texts, pictures, and terminology which did aim at painting Islam as barbarian, fanatic, and uncivilized. Recently I also made a survey of Danish media’s coverage of religions in Denmark. Over a three months period from 15th May to 15th August, 6 national newspapers and 2 national TV channels were researched. 75% of media coverage was about Islam and nearly 60% of the material was negative stories.

This Stereotyping of Arab Muslims

Prior to terrorist attacks in USA, the American news agency APP on 31st July 2001 brought a story about negative stereotyping of Arab Muslims in USA media.

According to Jack G. Shaheen, author of two books on the subject, “There is an unending barrage of the same hate-filled images portraying Arabs as less than human. Not only are they bashed and vilified on a constant basis, the religion is thrown in too.”

Jack G. Shaheen believes that: “Hurtful and

harmful stereotypes do not exist in a vacuum. Continuously repeated, they dehumanize people, narrow our vision and blur reality.”

This Stereotyping of Arab Muslims Continues Despite Protests from the Community

Shaheen told the *Los Angeles Times*, that Arab families were never shown on TV or film. You never see people who look like and act and behave like other people.

“The Agency” a CBS series which started at the end of summer 2001 extols the “heroic” role of the CIA. The film’s opening scene shows a CIA agent giving a briefing on terrorists, “sworn to wage holy war” against the United States and its friends. The rest of the episode shows the CIA fighting back to defeat a plot by Arab “terrorists” who are also said to control a non-terrorist Arab diplomat in Washington. Another CBS series is ‘The President’s Man: Ground Zero’ with famous action hero Chuck Norris who plays the role of a secret operative working for the White House. His aim: to stop “an Islamic terrorist” who is intent on taking out a US city with a nuclear device.

The original title of the series was ‘The President’s Man: Holy War’ which CBS agreed to drop after a group of Muslims called on its higher management. However, later a CBS spokesman said that the decision to change the name had already been taken. Nevertheless, there is no change in the content. It is still an “Islamic terrorist” plotting to destroy an American city with a nuclear device.

In a “concession” to the sentiments of American Muslims, CBS says it has agreed to write in the character of an Arab-American Attorney General. It has also agreed to take out all references to Allah (God) “except one.” It is ironic that a Jewish or Zionist terrorist is never seen on US television or in Hollywood movies. By definition all “terrorists” have to be Muslim, according to some prejudicial and racist ‘journalists’ in the American media.

Runnymede Trust, a charitable British organization in its September 2001 bulletin said: “It

could be argued that the media portrayal of the alleged perpetrators of these acts of terrorism is racist and Islamophobic. A glance at the media coverage of the last weeks is sufficient to establish that reporting of the event is unbalanced and likely to stir up feelings of Islamophobia."

The organization published a major report in 1997 under the title "Islamophobia –a challenge for us all". In this report, it was highlighted how media has a tendency to express wrong views about Islam, by maintaining and in times of crisis, inciting racist and Islamophobic attitudes."

Göran Rosenberg, who is a well known Swedish writer and journalist, has published a book *Thoughts on Journalism* last year. The book has been translated in Danish in September 2001. He comments on the sorry state of journalism in today's world in this way, "It must be very difficult to distinguish between constructed media events which are presented as real events and the real events which are dubbed as media events."

The one million Dollar question to be asked is, "Why all these fine explanations and praises of Islam, by George Bush, Tony Blair, or Romano Prodi, when the damage is already been done and the minds and souls of ordinary innocent people poisoned."

Islam and the West –a Historical Look Back

Growing anti-Muslim sentiment in the Western media, particularly in the United States, is an inevitable backlash created in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. For decades the Soviets provided a convenient scapegoat. When Public Enemy Number One became a new-found friend, the Europeans and Americans through their media looked around for a replacement which they found in fundamentalists, a word all too frequently used as a synonym for Muslims. This has led to a surge of anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, racist attitudes among the western public.

The average person in the Western world is friendly but wary when meeting a foreigner. Europeans and Americans in general are particularly

ethnocentric and anything different is viewed with suspicion. The virtual geographical isolation of the United States has contributed to American insularity. The bombing of the World Trade Centre was a direct strike not only at the financial heart of the country but a hit on the American nervous system. When word got around that Egyptians had been arrested in connection with the bombing, Americans reacted with fear – a fear born of ignorance and self-righteousness. Mosques were vandalised, homes and businesses of Muslims targeted. The anti-Muslim violence was contained but the seed for racial hatred was sowed. One week after the terrorist attacks, a young Muslim policeman in New York reportedly committed suicide because of racial taunts. Disney was finally forced to remove part of racist lyrics in its opening theme song from its new film "Aladdin" after protests from Arab-Americans.

The media has contributed heavily to the negative image of Muslims. Naïve interpretations of Muslim laws and customs are reported out of context. Arabs are equated with terrorists and Muslims with fundamentalists. Islam, in general, is perceived as a Middle East phenomenon with Pakistan thrown in for good measure. This is not a recent trend. Biased and negative reporting has tainted media reports coming out of Lebanon and Iran for years. But when a prestigious international news magazine, *Newsweek*, chooses to run a cover story on the rise of "militant Islam" to the exclusion of most other aspects of the faith, it becomes the recurrent image in most people's eyes. Rarely, these days, will you find articles in mainstream magazines or newspapers on Islamic art, architecture, philosophy, poetry, history, or of general knowledge.

There is little mention of the fact that there are Muslims all over the world, from all racial groups. While the majority of Muslims may trace their roots to the Middle East, the Bosnian Muslims are white, the Indonesians and Malaysians are oriental, and Senegalese and Sudanese are black. Until the past few years, "Muslim fundamentalists" were "Shi'ite" and geographically limited to Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan and a few scatterings in some other

countries. What the West is now faced with is Sunni Islam that transcends all national boundaries.

The New, a Pakistani International newspaper, published from London very clearly pointed out in its editorial, "The Western media can continue to react to Islam with hostility, fear, and ignorance. Or it can try to understand the faith, its traditions, and its history. Instead of portraying Muslims and Islam in derogatory terms, the West should seek to explore the positive. There is so much they would appreciate and learn."

Communication with Islam is Vital

Islam in relation to the Western media or even Human Rights is an old issue for the Ethnic Minorities, particularly those with a Muslim background - and especially from the developing world, living in the West. There are many questions, which need to be addressed, many answers to be sought, and a lot of soul searching to be done.

Why so, one may ask?

Why should the West bother to question the established truth, the hard facts, the huge quantities of research papers which tell the Western audiences the story of the sorry state of affairs in the so called Islamic World, the fanatics of the Mullahs, the ignorance of the Muslim masses, the strict Sharia laws practices in Saudi Arabia, or the violence in Algeria, Palestine, or Indonesia.

The answer lies in three facts. First factor is to balance the discussions about Islam, which are taking place on all levels of the European societies. The second fact is that Muslim minorities are an integral part of the European reality now. One may like it or not, but the presence of 10-12 million people can not be ignored. Their lawful needs must be met and they must enjoy the same rights as every one else in the society. Most important of all, they must not be discriminated because they have an other religion, life style, or geographical association. The third factor is that the journalists have a moral duty to uphold their own integrity, professionalism, and neutrality. They are the providers of the information which can result in har-

mony in the society or it can also destroy the whole fabric of a civil society, which they are a part of.

Understanding through Serious and Constructive Efforts

It is also necessary to point out that Islam is a religion and not a nationality. Islam is a universal religion, spanning over 60 countries, with 1.1 billion followers. These so called Muslims are not a united mass. They have different cultures, way of life, history, colour, ethnicity, languages, dressing, mentality, social status, upbringing, and experiences. The only thing which they have in common is five tenants of Islam.

The standard picture of Muslims, we see in the media all the time is a distortion, simplified and outright dangerous. To illustrate my point, I want to use my own life as an example.

I am born in India, brought up in Pakistan, studied in America and England, and settled down in Denmark. I travel now on an European passport and most likely will be buried in Pakistani soil after my death.

Who I am then? Am I an Indian, a Pakistani, a Dane, a Muslim, a European, or a citizen of this planet? Do all these diverse identities create a conflict inside of me and in my relationship with the West or Denmark?

On an European level there are two types of identities available to Muslim Ethnic Minorities. The French model, which is all inclusive, meaning that when you live in France you must assimilate and be French. The famous case of expulsion of two teenage girls with Moroccan background who insisted on wearing headscarves in a French public school, is a good illustration. The French language and culture is the common denominator. The German model, on the other hand, is the exclusive type, meaning that you are German only by blood, a common history and a particular geography. Up until now, this has lead to severe difficulties for ethnic minorities to obtain German citizenship.

Other models fall in between isolation, integration, segregation, and in very few cases, mutual understanding and respect. A dramatic pic-

ture of Muslims has been put forward as a group who can not or does not want to be part of any of these experiments or simply refuses to fall in line.

Why this Crossed Channels of Communication?

In almost all forms of the media, 'experts' seek to enlighten us on the new dangers from East; Holy wars, fanatical masses, the revenge of the Middle Ages on modernity and of religion on the Enlightenment. Islam is sometimes a 'challenge', sometimes a threat. The conquest of Vienna by the Turks is apparently once again imminent. With Khomeini, Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein, Arafat, and the Algerian fundamentalists, the anti-Western wave is rolling on, at any rate splashing across popular magazines and television screens. The threat might be a spiritual one, an Oriental counter-model to Western civilization; it might result in stopping the flow of oil, or in a cultural invasion by immigrants from Turkey, Pakistan, or the Maghreb. It might lie in the Islamic atom bomb, in terrorism, or in a threatened Islamic fundamentalist world revolution in the Iranian mould. Simple minds might even see it as a battle of Islam against Christianity, or against 'unbelievers'. In Europe and the USA all these perceptions of threats exist, sometimes side by side and at other times separately. Sometimes they crop up suddenly and compete with each other, and at other times they are systematized and compounded, all depending on what is required or desired in a particular situation.

When a person with a Muslim background criticizes the prevailing perception of Islam in the West as 'the enemy', one does so, not to justify all aspects of Muslim politics and societies, or to sweep them under the carpet of 'cultural difference'. Rather, one highlights the fact that popular constructs of 'the enemy' are not a serious way of confronting oppression, corruption, abuses of human rights, and other such phenomena present throughout the so called Islamic World.

But these are precisely not what the ideologues that conjure these hostile images are con-

cerned with. Rather, they and their 'followers' are concerned with making themselves feel good by associating these problems with another culture and religion. Instead of critique West has arrogance and scheming. Europeans are against the fanaticism, which is an integral part of another culture; fanaticism does not belong to the core of 'Western-Christian culture', it only sometimes merges as a regrettable exception. Instead of criticizing the faults in our own societies, and using the same yardsticks in their criticism of other societies, many authors set the two cultures against each other. In January 1992, the semi-official German weekly *Das Parliament* even went so far as to contrast the Islamic countries with 'the free world'. 'The free world' - that means the West. This way of thinking professes to fight foreign irrationality through European enlightenment while doing precisely the opposite.

Crusades are Back

The idea of an Islamic threat is nothing new. It has deep historical roots. Some scholars and politicians in the Western World explain the upsurge in official anti-Islamic propaganda, negative feelings, and religious phobia as a result of Soviet Unions disintegration. Looking at this argument historically one can not but wonder how little truth there is in such way of thinking. Islam has always been treated as an enemy, a threat and a challenge - geopolitically, culturally, economically, philosophically, and last but not least, theologically. Not only that Islam claimed to be the last divine religion but also presented itself as a complete system of life. This posed great strain on the civilization which was based on Christian faith, norms, and political power base.

From the early days of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad was insulted with names as 'false Prophet', 'a mad man', and 'an impostor', by Christians of that day. Quran was labeled as a copy of the Bible and a mad man's work. There was every effort to undermine and destroy Islam by the Byzantine Empire and the Christian church. Crusades, Arab conquest of Spain followed by sacking of

the Moors, Turkish Ottoman Empire's inroads in the heart of Europe and colonization are events one can not ignore.

In the 1970s, following the oil price crises of 1973 ('the oil Sheiks are turning off our oil supplies') and a little later in the context of the Islamic revolution in Iran, the issues were heavily emotionalized. This was also true then, although sentiments then were marked more by anti-Arab/anti-Palestinian than religious feeling. As a result of the end of the Cold War, the perceived Islamic threat has, however, acquired a particularly explosive power in the 1990s. We no longer have the Soviet Union or communism to serve as enemies justifying expensive and extensive military apparatus. It was in the mid-1980s at the very latest that the search began for new enemies to justify arms budgets and offensive military policies, at first as part of the communist threat and then in its place - Islam. Gulf War against Saddam Hussain is a classic show of force against a tiny dictator to scare others to tow the line.

In this sense, making Islam into 'the enemy' (as opposed to having a real one) only contributes to the fact that an important opportunity, the end of the Cold War, has been wasted. Now, given the loss of the old military opponent, instead of reducing the military apparatus in the West to a symbolic level or getting rid of it altogether and thinking about 'security' completely afresh, new threats are being invented to serve the old purpose. This is the main problem, not an Islamic fundamentalist threat which, in any case, could only be dealt with by political and economic means and most importantly by the Muslims themselves.

I Do not Know but —

A certain gap of knowledge emerges when the talk about Islam is on the agenda. There is a noticeable lack of rationality between the judgments on the other and reality.

"I don't know anything about Islam, but —" is certainly one of the most common phrases to be heard in discussions on the subject. And nobody wants to be shaken out of this 'I don't know'. For

it allows the West to construct another world, the Islamic World, even though the construction does not correspond with the reality of Islamic countries. West invents an Islam that suits it, that best fulfils the Western political and psychological needs. This is exactly how one arrives at a clean separation between 'us' and 'them', between inside and outside that are never supposed to meet and thus succeed in fencing off and fortifying the Western identity. Similarities and parallels between the cultures would only disturb this image, because it would mean recognizing the Western values in the other and blur the distinctions. Instead the differentness of the Islamic countries is stressed and Islamic culture, and 'the Orient' is stylized as the anti-thesis to the West. West thus creates a polar opposite against which the West can assure itself and of its values, and against which it can shape its perception of the Western World.

Regions of misery and unrest in the Muslim World stand in contrast to the apparently well and clearly ordered West. The affluence in the West stands out against the reality of need in the developing countries, and is to be psychologically defended. The fear of the Third World is in a certain sense a fear of poverty, a fear of being infected again by its evils.

One of the preconditions of this fear lies in the fact that the West is no longer as sure of its achievements as it would like to be. This does not only apply to the rational enlightened and secular character of Western societies, which is constantly being called into question by racism, the rise of nationalism, orthodox fundamentalist advances or 'tribal' and religious wars as in former Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland.

What must be criticized however is the unequal portrayal of parallels and differences by the media, and the almost automatically negative evolution of all that differs from Western culture. West does not meet the other with a desire to understand. Rather this other derives from a comparison, which suggests that the Western culture is more comprehensible and therefore- usually- better.

Cultural Conflicts or Socioeconomical Problems

Today after 50 years presence, Muslim Ethnic Minorities have colossal problems in every European society. High unemployment, concentration in poor deprived housing areas, lack of education among youth, a rise in crime, drug abuses, breaking up of families, and discrimination in every sector of life are some of the problems we daily face. Some of the problems are created by the societies they live in and others are created by themselves. Problems are piling up but no remedy is in sight. Minority's socioeconomical and political problems are reduced to a simple matter of cultural and religious differences and their lack of expertise in European languages.

Muslim minorities in Europe and Denmark feel very isolated criminalized and neglected. In Denmark, which according to the latest EU survey has the minimum poverty, 50% immigrants and 70% refugees are out of job. Often due to discrimination on labour market. They are allocated housing in socially poor areas, their youth are not given equal opportunities. Minority children are spread over different schools against their families permission. Media is very hostile and often portrays Muslim minorities as uncivilized, primitive, and a problem for the continuation of European culture.

Media Knows it's Power

The role and power of media in spreading information in a modern society is awesome. Once an information - right or wrong, manufactured or factual goes out to public, it creates its own rhythm. One can retreat, amend or correct it, but you can not nullify it. A word, spoken written, or heard has its own magic and life. In public discussions and in this atmosphere of non-cooperation and national chauvinism, there is very little space for different religious identities.

The rejection of anything non-European and Christian has stifled the debate, thus has resulted in the polarization of the society. Consequently the tolerance level of the population, vise-vies the

Muslim ethnic minorities have dramatically dropped. Genuine acceptance of foreigners is now missing. Weather these other people differ in thinking, color of skin, or sexual orientation has no bearing on this attitude.

Why a Response is Necessary?

As the media has become more and more sophisticated over the last twenty years, it has become apparent that one must be clever to use it. Today there are more groups trying to grab the attention of the media or trying to wrestle with it.

Those who work with and against media distortion of information found out that media in general has become 4th State power. One can not just throw stone at it from a distance and hope that one day it will hit the right spot. All media criticism is usually rejected out of hand with the following arguments.

- Media is just doing their job of informing the public. Media critic is a hidden form of censorship which does not fit with democracy.
- Muslims can not expect special treatment from journalists.
- Freedom of expression must be upheld at all costs.
- If media does not cover anti-Islam feelings in the society and give people a chance to vent their anger through media, it can result in race riots.
- If Muslim minorities feel misrepresented, they can use their right of reply, complain to editor, write to Press Ethic Committee, or just sue the media in the court.

Although these points are valid, make sense and in a certain way reflect the mind set of the journalistic community, these are also based on assumptions of holiness and smack of professional arrogance.

Journalists should know that freedom of speech was never meant for the journalists only but for the little man who had difficulty opposing the ruling class. There has never been and never would be any form of absolute freedom of expression. It is always linked with responsibility and common sense.

Four Principles of Journalism

The distinguished journalist and scholar Edmund Lambeth formulated four principles to serve as the foundations for ethics in journalism. These basic principles which journalists should use for inspiration and the basis of media ethics.

- Truth telling must always be paramount
- Freedom for journalistic independence must be maintained
- Justice must combine fairness in reporting as well as exposing of injustices
- Journalists should always address the issue of humanity, and should not be guilty of committing direct, intentional harm to others and they should, wherever possible, prevent suffering.

There will always be ethnic groups and for the foreseeable future, there will be many ethnic, cultural and religious problems. However, journalists have to show professionalism, awareness and sensitivity to avoid being an unwitting instrument of conflict escalation.

What Can be Done?

Defending religious identity without the extremes of "cultural minimalism" or violent conflict is possible, providing the Western media accepts the condition of democracy and the reality of pluralism. Identity, whether, of an individual or a group, religious or political, ethnic or racial takes on a decisive importance in a violent context if it is not allowed to manifest freely and peacefully. It always affirms itself through struggle of power and domination. The absence of identity in the European context is because of dissolution of society's inner cohesion. The question of identity is not relevant in communities that are sure of themselves and stand firmly united by a common culture or a strong sense of religious affiliation.

In the case of European media, the thinking journalist's great contribution lies in helping political leaders to re-examine the path via which a modern society gets its pluralistic nature. Tomorrow's European journalists should no longer be obsessed with the idea of a single identity, even less so by the quest of a strong sense of European

civilization. They must advance towards a flexible and open society. They will then become vanguards in a society where journalism will not focus on race, culture, religion, and colour but on fellowship of human beings.

If European journalists really want to have a pluralistic and cosmopolitan coverage, then they must do away with Eurocentrism and enlarge the scope of professionalism to be all-inclusive. They must think multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious.

Some important practical suggestions to journalists can be proposed as few guidelines. Not a directive or a pointed finger towards media world and the countless decent, hard working and professional people who write stories, produce programmes, compile broadcasts and inform the public about the changes, developments and events in the society. Merely a suggestion. Working, both- with the ethnic minorities and the European media, we have collected information and factual knowledge, we wish to share. It is up to an individual to decide, on how to use it.

10 Media Commandments

- Freedom of speech is a basic human right and so is the right to be free of discrimination. Any reporting which enhances racism, perpetuate prejudices, and divide the society must be avoided
- Reporting and covering ethnic minority issues should be done with the same objectivity and neutrality, which is practiced in the case of the majority.
- Journalists should be aware of the pitfalls of their own Eurocentric upbringing and ideological education while describing other cultures and religions, specially Islam. Use of contacts among minorities can be helpful.
- Words like Nigger, Paki, Fundamentalist, Ghetto, Ethnic gangs, Criminal second-generation immigrants are derogatory to minorities. One should not use term which has a negative impression attached to it.
- The culture, religion, ethnicity, colour or nation-

ality of ethnic minorities should not be used as an explanation model to write or talk about an individual or a group of people.

- Use of unconfirmed statistic, data, or facts can be very dangerous as it can be misused by anti-immigrant politicians, right wing movements, and racist organizations. It can also damage a journalist's own reputation and integrity.
- While writing about a particular issue among an ethnic group, multiple sources should be used so that one sided impression and information do not dominate the story.
- The opinions of ethnic groups should be involved while covering issues important to society such as environment, traffic, sports, foreign affairs or the general development. It will give them a sense of belonging.
- The ethnic minorities lack sociopolitical influence and means to voice their own concerns. Therefore they are not in a position to defend themselves. Journalists are morally bound to give the underdog a voice.
- The pen is mightier than sword. A spoken word, a written paragraph or a televised picture has a momentum of its own. It can not be withdrawn. Its damage takes time to repair. Journalists should realize the power they possess and act accordingly. ☺

Notes:

- Tulisan ini diterbitkan Jurnal Komunikasi "MediaTor" atas izin penulisnya melalui kontak e-mail dengan Erna Khotimah (From: bashy quraishy <bashy@get2net.dk>; Subject: Re:permission to publish; Date: Thu, 31 Jul 2003 15:23:08 +0200; To: Erna Khotimah <emakho@plasa.com>)
- It has been printed in Nov 2001, in the magazine "Equal Voices" which is published by the European Union's Monitoring Center in Vienna. EUMC can be contacted on media@eumc.eu.int
- Catholic Media Council from Germany has brought a special issue with this article in Nov 2001. CMC can be contacted on cameco@cameco.org
- German Overseas Institute in Hamburg has included this article in its scientific magazine "Nord-Sud Aktuell" which is working on a special issue "Media and the immigration"
- Antiracist organization Fair play has published the entire article as a booklet in Dec 2001 for distribution among journalists

References

"Islam in the Western media" has been posted on the following media web sites:

- www.Stoa.nl
- www.mediachannel.org/news/media reader
- www.bashy.dk
- www.multicultural.net/newsletter/article
- www.11-september.nl

