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Is the Fear of Islam Rational?

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Abstract

The fear of Islam is not a rational fear. The fear is based on the misrepresentation of the religion and a lack of knowledge of the religion that has allowed this fear to spread.

Introduction

In this paper author will explore the religion of Islam and what has caused many to fear the religion itself and its followers. Christianity is closely related to Islam, even though it is not widely seen as being compatible. Many see Islam as some foreign religion, but it is based upon many of the same beliefs of that Christians have. Islam is a religion that has many followers, but the ones that are very radical have used terms like, jihad, and turned it into something meaning holy war, when it is truly meant to mean a struggle within. A struggle that is not much different than a struggle of faith that any other religious person may face. And the Koran tells its believers to fight those who want to take away their religious rights or freedoms, but that the innocent should not be harmed. It is the use of this word in a manner in which it is not meant that has cause fear to spread around the world about a religion that has nothing to do with violence. The belief that Muslims don't have problems with other Muslims and that they only dislike outsiders, is a huge misrepresentation. Because even within the religion there are sects of Islam that don't always agree with each other and many that show great dislike for each other. There are many Muslims that also condemned the people who were involved with attacking the United States on September 11, 2001 and that say they were not true Muslims. The terrorist attacks that are being carried out by radical Islamic groups, is not the way of Allah. But because these terrorists are carrying out these attacks in the name of Allah, they have made many see the whole religion as terrorist threat to society. But yet, Muslims are required by their pillars of faith to give to the poor and oppressed and to not turn their backs on their neighbor, but because people have come to fear Islam as a whole, because of a few, the good that they do by giving to the poor is not seen.

Fear of Islam has increased by the incorrect use of terms like jihad, but it has also been cause by the media. The media rarely shows good stories of the Islamic faith and the stories of Muslims doing good things for people and their communities. It is because of this negative media that many people don't get to see the better side of Islam, and it increases the fear or dislike of Islam. Our fear has become so intense at times and our want for revenge against those who harmed us on September 11, 2001, that we agreed with our government to go to war with a country that had nothing to do with the attacks of September 11, 2001. And now that we have gone to war and we have been at war for almost ten years, we want our government to pull out and not complete our new mission of democracy. We are now choosing to leave the people of Iraq and the Middle East holding the bag, thus it is going to cause more chaos. Our fear of losing more military has caused us to abandon thousands if not millions of people who need our help the most.

Background and Discussion

Jihad

There are many definitions for the word jihad. Mohideen and Mohideen research this word in terms of how the word is defined. They define Jihad as a Islamophobic term. They show that there are many different definitions of the term, "the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. A jihad refers to 1) a holy war against non-Muslims who wage war against them and 2) a struggle/war against something negative or undesirable for instance, corruption, poverty, illiteracy, prostitution, etc. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English…"a holy war fought by Muslims". According to Macmillan, it is "a holy war or fight the Muslims take part in to defend Islam," meaning that it is a defensive and not a offensive one. According to the Oxford Reference Dictionary, "One of the basic duties of a Muslim, prescribed as a religious duty by the Koran and by tradition, is to struggle against threats to the vigor of the Islamic Community and also resistance to the rule of divine law within oneself [1]. The differences in the definitions can easily show how a person could be confused about what jihad means. How is someone to know what something means if the dictionaries, which we look to for answers, can't even agree with each other? Things like this breed fear into the mind of people everywhere, but effects Americans even more when Jihad/Jihadist is associated with September 11th.

Author argue that the media, government, and uneducated people are the ones who spread the fear and they help spread the ignorance of what jihad really means. Even today many people believe that Saddam Hussein was involved directly with 9/11. I find that Jihad is best defined as, "the "struggle" or effort to follow God's path, to lead a good life-remained central to Muslim spirituality" [2]. It seems that many people, including terrorists take the term Jihad and twist it to use it in a way that will benefit them and their cause. Author argue that not all Muslims define the term Jihad in the way to use it against people that are not of their faith. Author think that it is the terrorists that have

made this term, a term of fear, not only for Americans but for anyone that does not believe the way that they do. But the fear of a Holy War is something that people fear, they are afraid that the Muslims as a whole will bring a Holy War and kill all non-believers. But this is a true misunderstanding as true Muslims do not believe in killing the innocent and they do not condone violence.

There are some people in the media who are trying to correct the American way of viewing the word Jihad. Like, P.W. Singer who says in his New York Times article, "The word "jihad" means to "strive" or "struggle", and in the Muslim world it has been taken to mean either a quest to find one's faith or an external fight for justice [3]." He also mentions that the term Jihadists has been used many times by our government officials and despite the State Department telling them not to, their ignorance in using the term in a derogatory way has made it impossible for some Americans to understand the real term. Jihad is a personal struggle of faith, to remain faithful to your God. It is not any different than any other religious believer, because all believers struggle with their faith at some point in life.

Jihad in the Koran

The misunderstanding of the term Jihad, is one that can easily be put to rest by people taking the time out to learn about the religion from their own text. The Koran says, "And fight in the way of Allah with those who fight with you, and do not exceed the limits, surely Allah does not love those who exceed the limits. And kill them wherever you find them, and drive them out from whence they drove you out, and persecution is severer than slaughter, and do not fight with them at the Sacred Mosque until they fight with you in it, but if they do fight you, then slay them; such is the recompense of the unbelievers. But if they desist, then surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. And fight with them until there is no persecution, and religion should be only for Allah, but if they desist, then there should be no hostility except against the oppressors [4]." This passage in the Koran is one that is greatly twisted by many terrorist organizations and many people who do not know the religion. This passage means that you should fight with those who fight with you, but you have limits and those limits are that women, children and the elderly are off limits. They are not meant to harm people who are not trying to harm them. So the fact that terrorist will kill anyone that is on a plane with them, is someone who is not following the verses of the Koran.

Not only is a terrorist going against killing anyone, they are killing innocent people who have not fought with them or tried to harm them. This defense that the Koran allows for is also allowed for in the Bible. For example there is that story of David and Goliath, where David kills him because the Philistines are fighting with David's countrymen and when David succeeds he is celebrated and made king, and he is described in the Bible as one of, if not the best king. Just as the Bible states, that those who do not accept God, will be damned or burn for eternity. So there are stories or passages in both the Bible and the Koran that support the defense of a person or the religion. But one of the biggest misconceptions of the Koran is that it says you must be Muslim, but the Koran clearly states, "Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve [4]". It shows that the Koran accepts all who believe in God, not just the Muslims.

Muslims vs. Muslims

"The vision of a Muslim world at war with the West is a fantasy. This "Muslim world" does not exist. Most of the conflicts affecting the Middle East involve Muslims against Muslims" [5]. This is the thesis of Olivier Roy's book, and author argue that he has a point in saying that the problems in the Middle East are many times disputes between the sects of Islam itself. You have to understand the difference between the Sunni and the Shia and even the Kurds to know why these people are fighting amongst themselves. They also fight over land and oil. The problem in the Middle East is a much bigger problem than what many people want to believe. But the mass confusion among the American citizens is understandable, because when you have the press feeding you news like, Iranian President Ahmadinejad's call, to wipe Israel off the map and the Holocaust denia" [5]. Author can understand how people could be outraged and think that the Middle East is really out to get us, or harm us in some way. But Roy's book points out that the struggle for power among the different sects of Islam, for who is more Muslim or who is greater is a struggle that is on going and that is effecting how the Middle East works. For example, now that Saddam Hussein has been taken out of the picture of ruling Iraq, there is much fear that Iran will try to take over. Being that the majority in Iraq is Shia and Iran is a Shia Islamic country, they would want to help the Shia in Iraq. But if they take over Iraq, the United States would loose and ally and all the work we have done would be for nothing. Not to mention that they would have more power to do harm to our other allies and most importantly they would be able to harm Israel. So the belief that the Middle East or Muslims are only against the West is not completely true and the continued push by the media or the government on this issue has cause many to turn away from their religious beliefs, not to judge their brother and their judgment of the Islamic faith is not based on a person by person basis but by a few radicals that are not even practicing the Islam that the majority practices.

Terrorism

"Islam does not inspire, nor does it aspire that its followers resort to terrorism, radicalism, and militancy" [5]. Many Muslims are even terrorized themselves by terrorists. Many Muslims resist terrorism and do not want it to happen. Terrorists like Osama bin Laden are Muslims who want an Islamic state with religious leaders, they want to convert people to Islam and persecute those who will not convert. There are many countries that are affected by terrorism, whether it be September 11th or the July 7th bombings in London. But what is it that causes people to turn to terrorism? Treacher addresses this by asking the question in reference to the July 7th bombers, what is it about the political and social conditions that enabled these young men to carry out such vicious acts of aggression?" [6].

It makes you wonder why someone would become a terrorist. Is it because they are living in a place where they feel that they have no other choice, like a gang mentality. Or are there reasons to make a statement that is not going to be interpreted or understood the way that they want it to be. All human beings are born the same, we are not al born into the same situations, but as humans we all have hearts, it is our realities that change our hearts and what we can do. Thomas Hobbes would say that all men are inherently wicked, and might say that this is what can breed terrorism. But I think John Locke might have the best definition, that ones society shapes us, therefore a person's reality is what breeds terrorism.

Islamophobia

A term that is defined as, "the hatred for and fear of Islam and Muslims, manifests itself in physical, political, cultural, linguistic and other forms" [2]. It could also be defined as a racist or prejudice act against the religion of Islam and its followers. Islamophobia can be seen both in general society but also in the media. Although many times the governments can be seen trying not to offend all of Islam, this is shown in Malashenko's paper, "President George Bush repeatedly mentioned his respect for Islam. British Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac are quick "to pay their respects" to Islam" [7]. This seems to be a conscious effort to not offend all of Islam, which author believe that they do not want to offend the religion as a whole but they want to deal with the terrorists, who just happen to be mostly Muslim.

Author argue that in society that there are many people who do not like Muslims or even people who are of Middle Eastern decent. Author have seen many times that people of Middle Eastern decent are not served in the same way that author may be at a restaurant, a store, or even a theme park. It is a sad thing that people are so ignorant to fear people who are Muslims, as a majority of them are not terrorists and dislike the terrorists as much as we do, they are just the ones who happen to share the same religion and/or look like them. There have been many times in the past that Islam has been a friend of Americans, but now because of acts of a few, Islam is now considered an enemy.

American media and orientalism

Islamophobia is something that has not been helped out by the American Media, because many times you turn on the television or read a magazine and you see all of the bad. And if a person only sees the bad then they are more likely to think everything is bad and that there is no good in the world or in Islam. Statements like, "most Muslims are very primitive people and can't be treated as sophisticated ones" [8] that make many Americans believe that we are dealing with some type of animal and not just a group of people with beliefs other than ours.

Many times orientalism plays a huge role in how we see or view the Middle East. Orientalism is the views that the west places on the east based upon what we think it is or what we think it should be and many times our beliefs are not based upon any fact. Many times we have this romanticized vision of the Middle East like it is this Arabian wonderland, like ones depicted in movies like Lawrence of Arabia and even the Disney movie like Aladdin. Some have this opinion of this ancient land with jewels and coins and plentiful food, when in real life the land is so harsh that the people can't even grown food to feed their families and many can't find jobs. So instead of the media reporting about how we could help these people, the report on the terrorism and how the people support the terrorist groups, but they fail to mention that many people only support some terrorist groups because they gain food and money for their family. The unfortunate truth is that many do support terrorist but many times it is because the government has failed to meet their essential needs and the people have no where else to turn. There are still some media outlets that push the boundaries of what is right and moral by publishing even comics like one of Muhammad with a bomb, which is talk about by John Esposito in his excerpt Islam and the West, which is not only offensive because it portrays the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist, but even worse it portrays Muhammad. Muhammad is not supposed to be depicted in any way in the Muslim faith because it is believed that he would become an idol and idol worship is not allowed.

Yet, there are some media outlets that try and report on good things about Islam and Muslims like an article in Parade Magazine about a family from Iraq who moved to Lincoln, Nebraska for a new start and they now consider that their home and community and not where they come from. The father of the family even says, "When I go to Iraq to visit…I miss Lincoln every day" [9]. It is articles like this that should make people realize that not all Muslims hate America, some even make their homes here and love it so much that they would never move back to the Middle East. But at the fault of the media, we rarely see glimpses of this in the news.

Democracy and what happens if we leave

Our mission to spread democracy in the Middle East has started to cost us more than just money, it has cost us the lives of American soldiers. In Wittes' book she says, "The United States cannot afford to take a neutral stance in the face of the region's mounting governance and legitimacy challenges and the stalemated efforts by Arab regimes to address them" [10] author argue that we cannot afford to take a neutral stance because we cannot run the risk of some other super power trying to take our spot in the work by controlling the Middle East. But author also argue that our half hearted attempts to create democracy have been a failure because at the first sight of failure, or realizing that it is going to take longer and cost more than we are willing to give, we cut and run. Wittes agrees with me on this point as she says, "It is possible that such a half-hearted, inconsistent policy will in the long term have a more detrimental effect than a simple hands-off approach [10]".

We are creating our own terrorism, because we have taken over places like Iraq, destroyed any system of order that they had, place in a more temporary system, because in the long run it will not work for the people of Iraq because we based it off of what would work for us here in the United States. And we have now decided to leave due to pressure of the American people and other nations, and we are leaving these people with a government and a military that is not capable of running or defending themselves. So in the long run we run the possibility of more terrorist groups taking charge because the people will support them because they can provide for them, where the government cannot. We also run the risk of Iran taking control because the majority Shia has more of a connection with them than their own government, and because they are Iraq's majority an uprising could allow this without us there to stop it.

We are repeating the same betrayal that we committed in the Afghanistan War, by leaving and letting the people fend for themselves and thus the Taliban took over control because they had the connections to help the people recover from a war they now say we provoked the Soviets to engage in with Afghanistan.

Our fear of losing more people in battle because we are afraid of terrorist has caused us to call for our government to withdrawal. But what the American people don't realize is that the terrorists in Iraq are not Iraqi, they are Saudi, and we cannot abandon these people because we are afraid. Because in turn we will create our own enemies and possibly allow an enemy like Iran to possibly become a larger threat if they can acquire Iraq as an ally. We must stick with our spreading of democracy for a longer period of time if we expect it to be successful and not be afraid to spread it, as it is needed in the world.

Fear

"It is said that fear, in some instances, is a lifesaving emotion" [11] "Indeed, our fears rarely concern immediate danger" [11]. Fear is a natural human emotion that all people possess, no matter who they are, what they are, or where they come from. It is true that our fear of Islam is something that is born out of ignorance, but it is one that is something that has nothing to do with a true and present danger. When a Middle Eastern person goes to a restaurant with their family, odds are they are not there to bomb the place, they are there to eat just like all of the other people. Yet there are many times that they are refused service or their service is worse than someone who is not Middle Eastern. Or when a Middle Eastern person boards and airline, many people become so afraid that all they think about the whole time they are on the flight is that person, to the point that they may focus all their attention to that person, causing others to also.

Now this is not always the case, but it is a reality, and it is wrong. It is wrong that people cannot understand that there is a huge difference between a Muslim and a Radical person who is misrepresenting the faith. Fear is a powerful thing that is not easily erased, and when it is a fear for your life and all the aspects of it, it becomes almost an impossible thing to erase. The fear of Islam is not an American phenomenon; it is a world wide phenomenon. Possibly this fear is because Islam is one of the fastest growing religions at this time. An example of this is one took place in Italy and the building of a mosque. "The presence and nature of conflict around mosque construction in European cities largely depends on the extent to which Muslims are seen as 'legitimate' members of public space" [12]. This is an expression of fear, because if it were a group of Christians, Catholics, or Jews wanting to build, there would be probably be no resistance to the building. The media has not helped this fear of Islam, because they focus in on many of the bad stories involving the people of the Islamic faith but rarely if ever do you hear a good story about Islam or the Middle East. You hear stories like that talk about acts of terrorism like bombings, killings, or hostage takings.

Our fear is something that is not always based on false pretenses. There are reasons for us to fear terrorism, but not Islam as a whole. "To many people, "Islam" conjures up negative impressions of fundamentalists, intolerance and terrorism" [12]. Islam is many times confused as being the same thing as terrorism. It is our responsibility to start understanding that Islam is not a bunch of terrorist. Islam is a religion that is based upon peace, but has been twisted by terrorists to further their cause. "The Qur'anic verses are all taken out of context and the translations are done in such a way to serve their purpose - this use of texts is dangerous"[11]. Even many Muslims realize that the terrorists are doing this, and they condemn them for using the Koran in such a way. Like Bauer, author argue that we must overcome our fear of Islam. It is something that has consumed our life as Americans.

But the fear is something that is not exclusive to Americans or to just non-Muslims. But the fear has caused much worse ideas or sayings like, "…ISLAM: I=Intolerance S=Slaughter L=Looting A=Arson and M=Molestation of women" [13]. Things like this cause fear in non-Muslims but also Muslims, because they become scared that this is how they are seen. Muslims fear going to places because they are afraid of being hurt, interrogated, harassed or even arrested because of the way the look or their religious affiliation. Many times Muslim American citizens are taken in by police or government agents in this country, on suspicions of terrorism or knowing about terrorism [14,15]. This is not always based upon facts, but when they are taken in they are terrorized. Naomi Klein says that they call this "fear up", where

they use tactics to get information that most citizens would never be subjected to and that we would find these acts disgusting and unforgivable.

Many Muslims or people of Middle Eastern decent are subject to this brutality and are so afraid of this form of interrogation, that they will only go where they have to go. Author mean could you imagine being a Muslim living in America and seeing the photos of Abu Gharib and Guantanamo? This fear and hatred is not just a one way street, it is something that is on both the West and Islam's side [16]. But it is fear that breeds ignorance, and what we need at this is wisdom. But, John Esposito says that it was not just the uneducated people, who were Islamophobic, but some where people who claimed to be fighting for equal rights but they choose not to see the inequality that Muslims face.

Consequences of fear

Our fear of Islam has caused us in America to turn away from our beliefs that people have freedoms. For example, when the media first reported that there was going to be a mosque built in New York City, a lot of people first thought that it was going to be built on the exact same spot as the Twin Towers. But in reality it was going to be a few blocks down from it [17]. Although author believe this was publicized the way it was, was because it was around election time. But either way, many people were outraged that anyone would even consider having a mosque built near the site of the September 11th attacks. But it is the mis-education or the lack of education on the Muslim faith and the facts of September 11th, that led many people to become outraged. It was not the Muslim faith that attacked the twin towers on September 11th, 2001, it was a group of Radicals, that most Muslims would say are not Muslims, because suicide and harm to innocent people is against Allah. In a recent article in the August 2010 TIME magazine, Is America Islamophobic? Islam in America [18], it polls people and asks if they oppose the mosque near Ground Zero and 61% said yes. They also asked if they believe that Islam is more likely than others to encourage violence against nonbelievers, the majority said yes, it is more likely to.

It is sad that American still have these opinions about a religion. A religion that they probably know little to nothing about, except what they have heard on TV from media personalities or even our own government officials [19]. The fear has become so rampant in America there are even militias in the United States that want to take out our government because they believe that they are not protecting us from terrorists or other threats[20]. For people to be this delusional is a sad because all they need is to be educated on the religion of Islam and to be educated on our foreign policies and affairs. But because our government is not translucent to us, and we many times do not know what they are doing and because of that the government has lost a lot of support and created hostility in America amongst its citizens [21].

Conclusion

Author personally could never truly understand how a Muslim or Middle Eastern person must feel when they go out to eat with their family and are mistreated, but author can say that author try my best to never make them feel out of place. It is hard not to feel anger towards people who remind you of the people who have hurt Americans, but author argue that based upon history that racism is not the path that America needs to go down again . Americans need to realize that not all Muslims and people of Middle Eastern decent are

terrorists. And even that not all terrorists are Middle Eastern, there are many who look just like we do but use Islam in a wrong way to do something that is so unforgivable. The West also needs to understand that there are many Muslims and Middle Eastern people who want change just like we do. The West and those in the Middle Eastern and Muslim world need to start communicating and try to stop this epidemic. But it is not just the West that is judgmental, but the Middle Eastern and Muslim world also does not always want the West involved in their countries. But author suggest that to stop this we must all work together to stop something that is bigger than one of us can handle.

This process of eliminating the fear of Islam is one that is going to be a long hard road. It is going to be difficult to get people to stop living in the past and start living in the future. Though this is hard to forget, when our media is always putting in our face the sad realities of the war that we are fighting. The research suggests that the Fear of Islam is something that will ever go away completely, but if everyone doesn't start working together we will continue to live in our current turbulent state. We also need to call for our media to stop using terms that are derogatory towards Muslims as we would not allow them to use them against African Americans or Caucasians on television. We also need to call for more news about good things that are going on in the world. But we need to also realize that television news networks are a propaganda source. They don't get news ratings for cute and sweet stories, they get big money and ratings when we watch the bad and Americans tend to be more interested in the bad. So maybe it is time for us to change what we will watch and what we will support."The knowledge of one another's traditions is not simply to inform our curiosity about the beliefs or customs of our neighbors. People of every religious tradition depend upon one another to interpret one another fairly and accurately. We are the keepers of one another's image. This is one of the most critical aspects of our interdependence and it is a sacred trust" [22]. This is a moving statement and it is a great way to say that we must understand each other's religions if we are going to co-exist in the world. We must be willing to listen, learn and not judge. But somewhere along the way we as Americans have lost this ability and are not willing to engage with people enough to learn about them and their culture. We are quick to judge and if something takes to long to accomplish, we don't want to be involved.

Our fear is unfounded fear but also an understandable one. But we must direct our anger and fear towards the radical people who are a threat to us, and not lump all Muslims into one category or group. All people are different. Just like there are Americans who are bombers and serial killers, but people don't think that all Americans are this way. And we shouldn't oppose this upon others. One thing that people need to realize is that even Muslims condemn the actions of the terrorists of today and the ones who were involved with September 11, 2001. Muslims are not our enemies, if we would only accept them as they are, they could be a great ally. But because we choose not to educate ourselves on the matter we have caused a great divide that may never be able to be repaired.

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