

5.

A WESTERN VIEW OF ISLAM

Throughout history, the Western view of Islam can be divided into periods of time and has generally been characterized by ignorance of the doctrines and culture of the latter.¹

The Crusader Era. For around three and a half centuries after the establishment of Islam as a major force in the Middle East, Westerners were said to be almost totally lacking in knowledge of Islamic civilization, a fact made more astonishing by the extensive contacts between the two civilizations by way of military skirmishes and Catholic pilgrimages through Muslim-occupied territories.² According to Dana Carleton Munro, former Princeton University Professor of History and President of the American Historical Association, the way that most Westerners viewed the Islamic world in the years leading up to the First Crusade was shaped by the “propaganda” of the Roman Catholic Church.³ In order to achieve its

own political goals, the Roman Catholic Church aroused both the religious fervor and the underlying Western desire for conquest present in its adherents by portraying the Islamic world as an inferior culture, oppressing Christians, threatening the West, and needing to be subdued militarily.

The Colonial Era. In the Early Modern Era, when Europe was more interested in colonies than in crusades, the same misconception—albeit with different motivations—was in vogue in the West. The Western world still felt the need to subjugate the Middle East through the sheer force of its military might, though this time for economic and political reasons rather than religious. In order to maintain a balance of power, Western states needed to find new spheres of influence to exploit to prevent other Western states from developing political or economic hegemony on a regional or global scale.⁴ This insatiable thirst for new colonies and spheres of influence led the West, inevitably, to turn its eyes to the Islamic world. The Westerners' mindset was that they could eventually win over the inhabitants of their colonial fiefdoms, as they were sometimes able to do elsewhere, and, within a generation or two, develop a relatively stable political and economic system. However, this was a mistake, for, as John P.

Pinkerton of The New America Foundation writes, "To put it another way, Islam is a tough nut to crack. Nowhere in the world, except maybe Attica prison, does a white minority rule successfully over a Muslim majority [...]." ⁵

The Conciliatory Era. In recent years, the attitudes of Western governments and media have been far more conciliatory toward the Islamic world. The prevailing view of Islam is that it is a "religion of peace" ⁶ that has been "hijacked" ⁷ by extremists, and that with more moderate elements there is the potential for an intercultural understanding marked by compromise and cooperation. ⁸ This is evidenced by the conciliatory rhetoric of "common values" issued by Western governments, including that of the United States of America. ⁹ This too stems from a mistaken view of the Islamic world. Christian broadcaster Reza Safa, himself an Iranian and former Shiite Muslim, argues against this effort to placate Islam, writing, "[It] makes the radical Muslims even more furious. They consider [it ...] pandering to Islam and a mockery of the Islamic faith." ¹⁰

Regardless of the era examined, the West's various historical perceptions of Islam have been wrong in that they all germinate from the same fallacious premise that the Islamic world is qualitatively the

same, and can be treated the same, as any other non-Western civilization. History has conditioned Westerners to the idea that they can conquer other civilizations by military force and eventually expect a reasonably stable conclusion. For example, the Romans conquered Celts, Germans, Greeks, Israelites, and North Africans, and eventually assimilated them into their civilization. During the Colonial Era, Europeans were *eventually* able to establish reasonably stable relationships with their subjects in India, China, Africa, and the Americas.

Believing—whether consciously or otherwise—that Muslims are the same as other non-Westerners, the West too often operates under the assumption that they can do the same in the Islamic world. *Dar al-Islam*, however, is driven by its religion to resist conquest more fiercely than other civilizations.

Chapter Notes

¹ Dana Carleton Munro, “The Western Attitude toward Islam during the Period of the Crusades,” *Speculum* 6, no. 3 (1931): 329, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0038-7134%28193107%296%3A3%3C329%3ATWATID%3E2.0.CO%3B2-O> (accessed October 30, 2007).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 331.

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⁴ Charles W. Kegley and Eugene R. Wittkopf, *World Politics: Trends and Transformation*, 10th ed. (Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), 505.

⁵ John P. Pinkerton, "7 Habits of Highly Effective Imperialists," *The American Conservative* (2004), http://amconmag.com/2004_10_11/cover.html (accessed October 30, 2007).

⁶ Mike O'Brien, "The Threat of the Modern Kharijites," Foreign & Commonwealth Office, United Kingdom, 2002, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Servlet?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029391629&a=KArticle&aid=1037385356207> (accessed February 13, 2008).

⁷ Gary Brown, "Mutual Misperceptions: The Historical Context of Muslim Western Relations," Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia, 2001, <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/cib/2001-02/02cib07.htm> (accessed February 13, 2008).

⁸ "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council concerning Terrorist Recruitment: Addressing the Factors Contributing to Violent Radicalization," Commission of the European Communities, 2005, 9, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2005:0313:FIN:EN:PDF> (accessed February 13, 2008).

⁹ George W. Bush, "President's Ramadan Message, 2006," The White House, 2006, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/ramadan/2006/> (accessed February 12, 2008).

¹⁰ Reza Safa, *The Coming Fall of Islam in Iran*, (Lake Mary: FrontLine, 2006), 2-3.