

Understanding Islam

Is Islam compatible with Western values?

With more than 1 billion adherents, Islam is the world's second-largest religion after Christianity. Within its mainstream traditions, Islam teaches piety, virtue and tolerance. Ever since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, however, many Americans have associated Islam with the fundamentalist groups that preach violence against the West and regard "moderate" Muslims as heretics. Mainstream Muslims and religious scholars say Islam is wrongly blamed for the violence and intolerance of a few. But some critics say Muslims have not done enough to oppose terrorism and violence. They also contend that Islam's emphasis on a strong relationship between religion and the state is at odds with Western views of secularism and pluralism. Some Muslims are calling for a more progressive form of Islam. But radical Islamist views are attracting a growing number of young Muslims in the Islamic world and in Europe.




Muslim men pray at a mosque in suburban Annandale, Va., during Ramadan in October 2006.

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Understanding Islam

BY KENNETH JOST

THE ISSUES

Aishah Azmi was dressed all in black, her face veiled by a *niqab* that revealed only her brown eyes through a narrow slit.

"Muslim women who wear the veil are not aliens," the 24-year-old suspended bilingual teaching assistant told reporters in Leeds, England, on Oct. 19. "Integration [of Muslims into British society] requires people like me to be in the workplace so that people can see that we are not to be feared or mistrusted."

But school officials defended their decision to suspend Azmi for refusing to remove her veil in class with a male teacher, saying it interfered with her ability to communicate with her students — most of them Muslims and, like Azmi, British Asians.

"The school and the local authority had to balance the rights of the children to receive the best quality education possible and Mrs. Azmi's desire to express her cultural beliefs," said local Education Minister Jim Dodds.¹

Although an employment tribunal rejected Azmi's discrimination and harassment claims, it said the school council had handled her complaint poorly and awarded her 1,100 British pounds — about \$2,300.

Azmi's widely discussed case has become part of a wrenching debate in predominantly Christian England over relations with the country's growing Muslim population.

In September, a little more than a year after subway and bus bombings in London claimed 55 lives, a government minister called on Muslim



A Muslim woman in Blackburn, England, protests in October 2006 against criticism of face veils by House of Commons leader Jack Straw. Disputes over veils have erupted in several European countries, as well as the United States, reflecting the increasingly strained relations between Islam and the West.

Getty Images/Christopher Furlong

parents to do more to steer their children away from violence and terrorism. Then, in October, a leaked report being prepared by the interfaith adviser of the Church of England complained that what he called the government's policy of "privileged attention" toward Muslims had backfired and was creating increased "disaffection and separation."²

The simmering controversy grew even hotter after Jack Straw, leader of the House of Commons and former foreign secretary under Prime Minister Tony Blair, called full-face veils "a visible statement of separation and difference" that promotes separatism between Muslims and non-Muslims. Straw, whose constituency in northwestern England

includes an estimated 25 percent Muslim population, aired the comments in a local newspaper column.

Hamid Qureshi, chairman of the Lancashire Council of Mosques, called Straw's remarks "blatant Muslim-bashing."³

"Muslims feel they are on center stage, and everybody is Muslim-bashing," says Anjum Anwar, the council's director of education. "They feel very sensitive."

Britain's estimated 1.5 million Muslims — comprising mostly Pakistani or Indian immigrants and their British-born children — are only a tiny fraction of Islam's estimated 1.2 billion adherents worldwide. But the tensions surfacing in the face-veil debate exemplify the increasingly strained relations between the predominantly Christian West and the Muslim world.

The world's two largest religions — Christianity has some 2 billion adherents — have had a difficult relation-

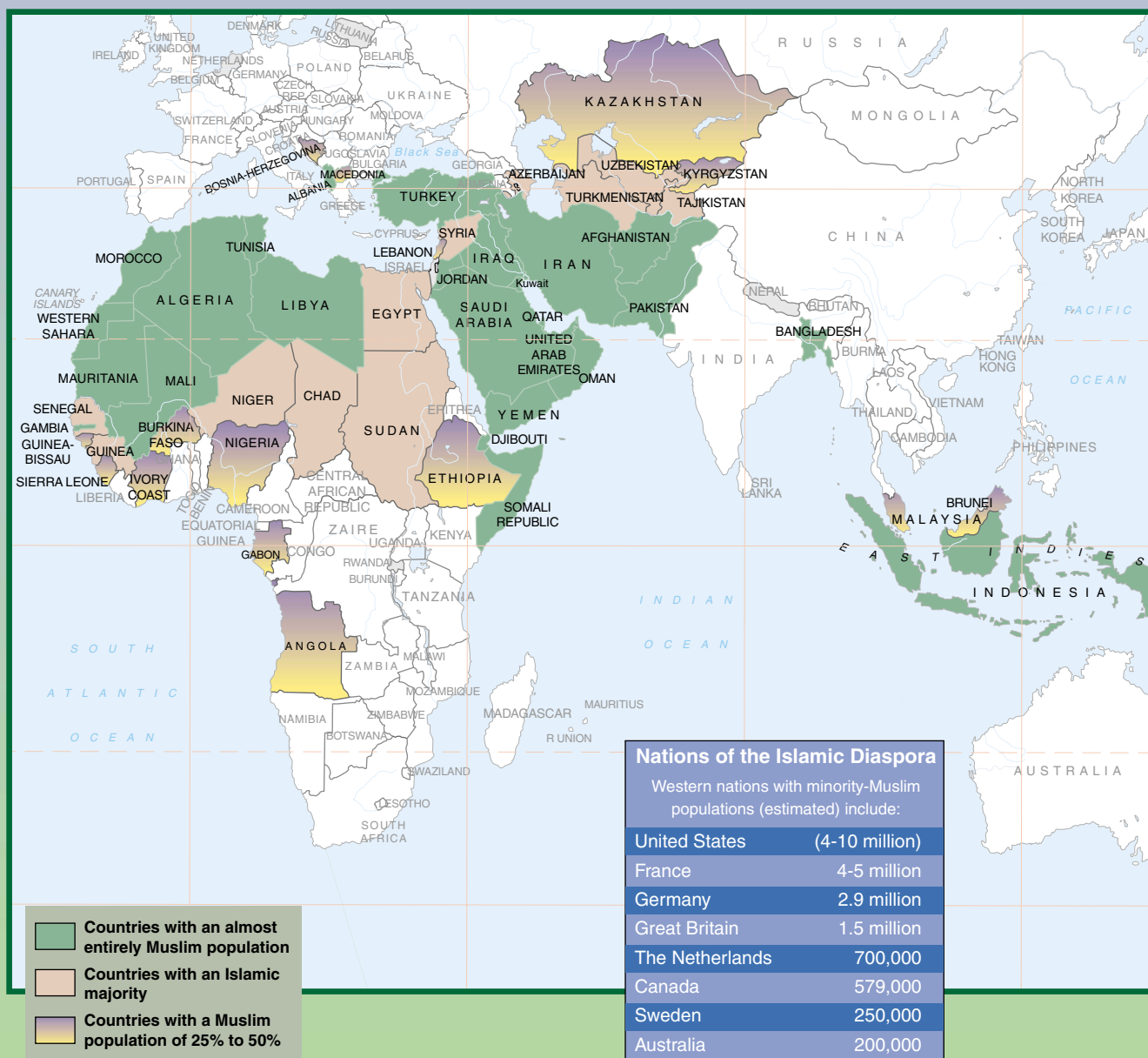
ship at least since the time of the European Crusades against Muslim rulers, or caliphs, almost 1,000 years ago. Mutual suspicion and hostility have intensified since recent terrorist attacks around the world by militant Islamic groups and President George W. Bush proclaimed a worldwide "war on terror" in response to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States.⁴

Bush, who stumbled early on by referring to a "crusade" against terrorism, has tried many times since then to dispel perceptions of any official hostility toward Islam or Muslims generally. In Britain, Blair's government has carried on a 40-year-old policy of "multiculturalism" aimed at promoting cohesion

Continued on p. 917

The Muslim World

Islam is the world's second-largest religion (after Christianity), with an estimated 1.2 billion adherents. Some 40 nations from Senegal in West Africa to Indonesia in Southeast Asia either are virtually all Muslim or have Islamic majorities. Another 14 nations have substantial Muslim minorities. Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population — 215 million people — followed by India, with approximately 150 million. In addition, several million Muslims live in nations of the Islamic diaspora (insert). From 1997 to 2002, Islam grew by nearly 7 percent; Christianity grew slightly less than 6 percent.



Sources: Paul Grieve, *Islam: History, Faith and Politics: The Complete Introduction*, 2006; Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, 2006.

Continued from p. 915

among the country's various communities, Muslims in particular.

Despite those efforts, widespread distrust of Islam and Muslims prevails on both sides of the Atlantic. In a recent poll in the United States, 45 percent of those surveyed said they had an unfavorable view of Islam — a higher percentage than registered in a similar poll four years earlier. (See chart, p. 920.)

British Muslim leaders also say they feel increasingly hostile anti-Muslim sentiments from the general public and government officials. "Muslims are very fearful, frustrated, upset, angry," says Asghar Bukhari, a spokesman for the Muslim Public Affairs Committee in London. "It's been almost like a mental assault on the Muslim psyche here."

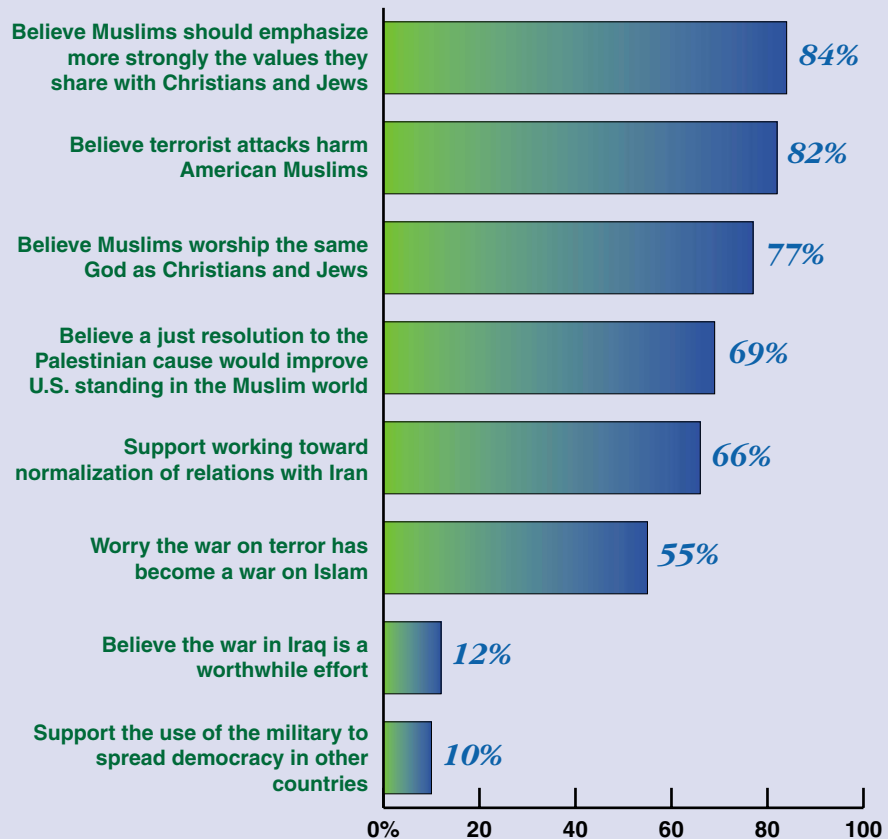
As the face-veil debate illustrates, the distrust stems in part from an array of differences between today's Christianity and Islam as variously practiced in the so-called Muslim world, including the growing Muslim diaspora in Europe and North America. (See map, p. 916.)

In broad terms, Islam generally regards religion as a more pervasive presence in daily life and a more important source for civil law than contemporary Christianity, according to the British author Paul Grieve, who wrote a comprehensive guide to Islam after studying Islamic history and thought for more than three years.⁵ "Islam is a system of rules for all aspects of life," Grieve writes, while Western liberalism limits regulation of personal behavior. In contrast to the secular nation-states of the West, he explains, Islam views the ideal Muslim society as a universal community — such as the *ummah* established by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century.

Those theological and cultural differences are reflected, Grieve says, in Westerners' widespread view of Muslims as narrow-minded and extremist. Many Muslims correspondingly view Westerners as decadent and immoral.

How American Muslims View the Issues

Most Muslim voters in America oppose terrorist attacks and say they harm U.S. Muslims. More than half worry President Bush's "war on terror" has become a war on Islam.



Source: Council on American-Islamic Relations, October 2006

The differences also can be seen in the debates over the role Islam plays in motivating terrorist violence by Islamic extremist groups such as al Qaeda and the objections raised by Muslims to what they consider unflattering and unfair descriptions of Islam in the West.

Muslim leaders generally deny responsibility for the violence committed by Islamic terrorists, including the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States and subsequent attacks in Indonesia, Spain and England. "Muslim organizations have done more than ever before in trying to advance community cohesion," Anwar says. They also deny

any intention to deny freedom of expression, even though Muslims worldwide denounced a Danish cartoonist's satirical portrayal of Muhammad and Pope Benedict XVI's citation of a medieval Christian emperor's description of Islam as a violent religion.

For many Westerners, however, Islam is associated with radical Muslims — known as Islamists — who either advocate or appear to condone violence and who take to the streets to protest unfavorable depictions of Islam. "A lot of traditional or moderate Islam is inert," says Paul Marshall, a senior fellow at Freedom House's Center for

Religious Freedom in Washington. “Many of the people who disagree with radicals don’t have a developed position. They keep their heads down.”

Meanwhile, many Muslims and non-Muslims alike despair at Islam’s sometimes fratricidal intrafaith disputes. Islam split within the first decades of its founding in the seventh century into the Sunni and Shiite (Shia) branches. The Sunni-Shiite conflict helps drive the escalating insurgency in Iraq three years after the U.S.-led invasion ousted Saddam Hussein, a Sunni who pursued generally secularist policies.⁶ “A real geopolitical fracturing has taken place in the Muslim world since the end of the colonial era,” says Reza Aslan, an Iranian-born Shiite Muslim now a U.S. citizen and author of the book *No god but God*.

The tensions between Islam and the West are on the rise as Islam is surging around the world, growing at an annual rate of about 7 percent. John Voll, associate director of the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Christian-Muslim Understanding at Georgetown University, notes that the growth is due largely to conversions, not the high birth rates that are driving Hinduism’s faster growth.

Moreover, Voll says, Muslims are growing more assertive. “There has been an increase in intensity and an increase in strength in the way Muslims view their place in the world and their place in society,” he says.

Teaching assistant Azmi’s insistence on wearing the *niqab* exemplifies the new face of Islam in parts of the West. But her choice is not shared by all, or even, most of her fellow Muslim

women. “I don’t see why she needs to wear it,” says Anwar. “She’s teaching young children under 11.” (Azmi says she wears it because she works with a male classroom teacher.)

Muslim experts generally agree the Koran does not require veils, only modest dress. Observant Muslim women generally comply with the admonition with a head scarf and loose-fitting attire. In particularly conservative cultures, such as Afghanistan under Taliban rule, women cover their entire bodies, including their eyes.



Pakistani Muslims torch a Danish flag during a February 2006 protest in Karachi to denounce a Danish cartoonist’s satirical depictions of the Prophet Muhammad. First published in September 2005, the cartoons provoked protests from Muslims throughout the world.

Still, despite the varying practices, many Muslim groups see a disconnect between the West’s self-proclaimed tolerance and its pressure on Muslims to conform. “It’s a Muslim woman’s right to dress as she feels appropriate, given her religious views,” says Ibrahim Hooper, director of communications for the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Washington. “But then when somebody actually makes a choice, they’re asked not to do that.”

Indeed, in Hamtramck, Mich., a judge recently came under fire for throwing out a small-claims case be-

cause the Muslim plaintiff refused to remove her full-face veil. (See sidebar, p. 924.)

As the debates continue, here are some of the questions being considered:

Is Islam a religion that promotes violence?

Within hours of the London subway and bus bombings on July 7, 2005, the head of the Muslim World League condemned the attacks as un-Islamic. “The heavenly religions, notably Islam, advocate peace and security,”

said Abdallah al-Turki, secretary-general of the Saudi-funded organization based in Mecca.⁷

The league’s statement echoed any number of similar denunciations of Islamist-motivated terrorist attacks issued since 9/11 by Muslims in the United States and around the world. Yet many non-Muslim public officials, commentators, experts and others say Muslims have not done enough to speak out against terrorism committed in the name of their religion.

“Mainstream Muslims have not stepped up to the plate, by and large,” says Angel Rabasa, a senior fellow at the Rand Corp., a California think tank, and lead author of a U.S. Air Force-sponsored study, *The Muslim World after 9/11*.⁸

Muslim organizations voice indignant frustration in disputing the accusation. “We can always do more,” says Hooper. “The problem is that it never seems to be enough. But that doesn’t keep us from trying.”

Many Americans, in fact, believe Islam actually encourages violence among its adherents. A CBS poll in April 2006 found that 46 percent of those surveyed believe Islam encourages violence more

Getty Images/Rizwan Tabassum

than other religions. A comparable poll four years earlier registered a lower figure: 32 percent.⁹

Those perceptions are sometimes inflamed by U.S. evangelical leaders. Harsh comments about Islam have come from religious leaders like Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and Jerry Vines, the former president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Graham called Islam “a very evil and wicked religion,” and Vines called Muhammad, Islam’s founder and prophet, a “demon-possessed pedophile.” Falwell, on the CBS news magazine “60 Minutes” in October 2002, declared, “I think Muhammad was a terrorist.”¹⁰

Mainstream Muslims insist Islam is a peaceful religion and that terrorist organizations distort its tenets and teachings in justifying attacks against the West or other Muslims. But Islamic doctrine and history sometimes seem to justify the use of violence in propagating or defending the faith. The dispute revolves around the meaning of *jihad*, an Arabic word used in the Koran and derived from a root meaning “to strive” or “to make an effort for.”¹¹ Muslim scholars can point to verses in the Koran that depict *jihad* merely as a personal, spiritual struggle and to others that describe *jihad* as encompassing either self-defense or conquest against non-believers.

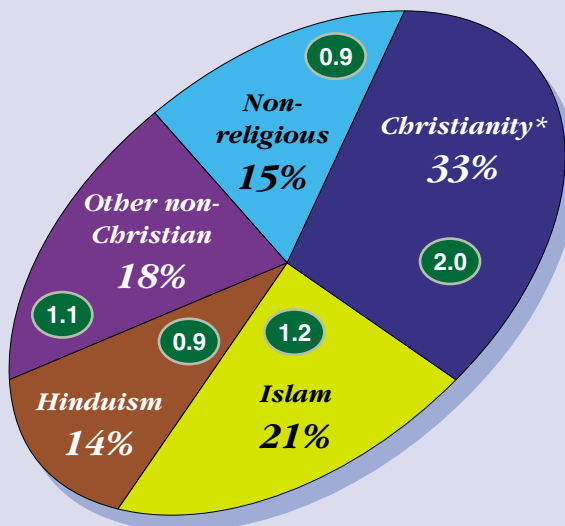
Georgetown historian Voll notes that, in contrast to Christianity, Islam achieved military success during Muhammad’s life and expanded into a major world empire within decades afterward. That history “reinforces the idea that militancy and violence can, in fact, be part of the theologically legitimate plan of the Muslim believer,” says Voll.

“Islam, like all religions, has its historical share of violence,” acknowledges Stephen Schwartz, an adult convert to Islam and executive director of the Center for Islamic Pluralism in Washington. “But there’s no reason to single out Islam.”

Islam Is Second-Largest Religion

Twenty-one percent of the world’s 6 billion population, or 1.2 billion people, are Muslims. Christianity is the largest denomination, with 33 percent of the population, or 2 billion people.

Major World Religions



* Includes Roman Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostal, Anglican, Evangelical and other sects.

Totals do not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Sources: www.adherents.com; Angel M. Rabasa, et. al., “The Muslim World After 9/11”; Encyclopedia Britannica online

Modern-day jihadists pack their public manifestos with Koranic citations and writings of Islamic theologians to portray themselves as warriors for Allah and defenders of true Islam. But Voll and others stress that the vast majority of Muslims do not subscribe to their views. “You have a highly visible minority that represents a theologically extreme position in the Muslim world,” Voll says.

In particular, writes Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University, Islamic law prohibits the use of force against women, children or civilians — even during war. “Inflicting injuries outside of this context,” he writes, “is completely forbidden by Islamic law.”¹²

Rabasa says, however, that Muslims who disapprove of terrorism have not said enough or done enough to mobilize opposition to terrorist attacks. “Muslims see themselves as part of a community and are reluctant to criticize radical Muslims,” he says.

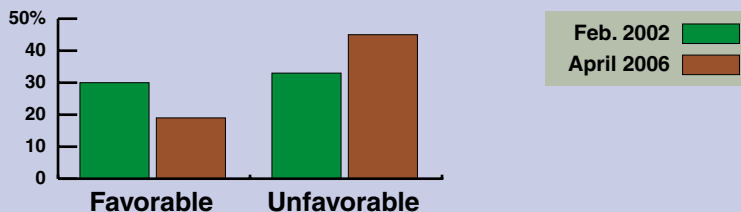
In addition, many Muslims are simply intimidated from speaking out, he explains. “Radicals are not reluctant to use violence and the threat of violence,” he says. Liberal and moderate Muslims are known to receive death threats on their cell phones, even in relatively peaceful Muslim countries such as Indonesia.

Voll also notes that Islamic radicals have simply outorganized the moderates. “There is no moderate organization that even begins to resemble

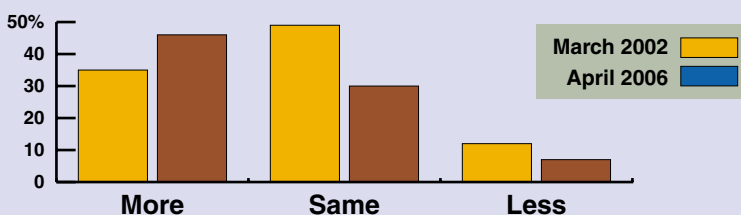
Negative Impressions of Islam Have Increased

The percentage of Americans with a favorable view of Islam dropped from 30 percent in 2002 to 19 percent in April 2006. There was a similar increase in the percentage who believe Islam encourages violence more than other religions.

What is your impression of Islam?



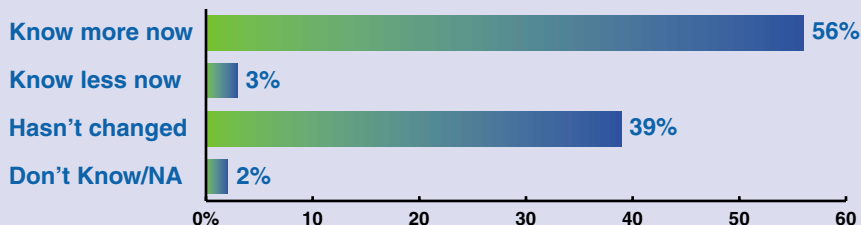
Compared with other religions, Islam encourages violence . . .



What is your impression of . . . ?

	Favorable	Unfavorable	Don't Know
Protestantism/other Christians	58%	12%	30%
The Catholic religion	48	37	15
The Jewish religion	47	16	37
Christian fundamentalist religions	31	31	38
The Mormon religion	20	39	41
Islam	19	45	36
Scientology	8	52	40

Do you know more or less about Islam now than you did five years ago?



Sources: CBS News Poll, April 2006; Gallup Poll, 2002

some of the radical organizations that have developed," he says.

In Britain, Bukhari of the Muslim Public Affairs Committee criticizes Muslim leaders themselves for failing to channel young people opposed to Britain's pro-U.S. foreign policy into non-violent political action. "Children who could have been peaceful react to that foreign policy in a way that they themselves become criminals," he says.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations' Hooper details several anti-terrorism pronouncements and drives issued following the London bombings by various Muslim groups and leaders in Britain and in the United States, including *fatwas*, or legal opinions, rejecting terrorism and extremism.¹³

For his part, Omid Safi, an associate professor of Islamic studies at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, points out that virtually every Muslim organization in the United States issued condemnations of violence almost immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.¹⁴

"How long must we keep answering this question?" Safi asks in exasperation. But he concedes a few moments later that the issue is more than perception. "Muslims must come to terms with our demons," he says, "and one of those demons is violence."

Is Islam compatible with secular, pluralistic societies?

In 2003, Germany's famed Deutsche Oper staged an avant-garde remake of Mozart's opera "Idomeneo," which dramatizes the composer's criticism of organized religion, with a scene depicting the severed heads of Muhammad, Jesus, Buddha and Poseidon. That production was mounted without incident, but the company dropped plans to restage it in November 2006 after police warned of a possible violent backlash from Muslim fundamentalists.

The cancellation prompted protests from German officials and artistic-freeedom advocates in Europe and in the

United States, who saw the move as appeasement toward terrorists. Wolfgang Bornsen, a spokesman for conservative Chancellor Angela Merkel, said the cancellation was “a signal” to other artistic companies to avoid any works critical of Islam.¹⁵

The debate continued even after plans were discussed to mount the production after all — with enhanced security and the blessing of German Muslim leaders. “We live in Europe, where democracy was based on criticizing religion,” remarked Philippe Val, editor of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. “If we lose the right to criticize or attack religions in our free countries . . . we are doomed.”¹⁶

As with the issue of violence, Islam’s doctrines and history can be viewed as pointing both ways on questions of pluralism and tolerance. “There are a great many passages [in the Koran] that support a pluralistic interpretation of Islam,” says the Rand Corp.’s Rabasa. “But you also find a great many that would support an intolerant interpretation.”

“Intellectual pluralism is traditional Islam,” says Schwartz at the Center for Islamic Pluralism. An oft-quoted verse from the Koran specifically prohibits compulsion in religion, he says. Voll and other historians agree that Muslim countries generally tolerated Christians and Jews, though they were often subject to special taxes or other restrictions.

“Islam is the only major religious system that has built-in protections for minorities,” says Hooper at the Council on American-Islamic Relations. “You don’t see the kind of persecutions of minorities that we often saw in Europe for hundreds of years. Many members of the Jewish community fled to find safety within the Muslim world.”

Even so, Islam’s view of religion and politics as inseparable creates difficult issues. Outside the Arab world, most Muslims live in practicing democracies with fair to good human-rights records. But some Muslim countries — Arab

Basic Tenets of Islam

Islam is the youngest of the world’s three major monotheistic religions. Like the other two, Judaism and Christianity, Islam (the word means both “peace” and “submission”) holds there is but one God (Allah). Muslims believe God sent a number of prophets to teach mankind how to live according to His law. Muslims consider Jesus, Moses and Abraham as prophets of God and hold the Prophet Muhammad as his final and most sacred messenger. Many accounts found in Islam’s sacred book, the Koran (Qur’an), are also found in sacred writings of Jews and Christians.

There are five basic pillars of Islam:

- **Creed** — Belief in God and Muhammad as his Prophet.
- **Almsgiving** — Giving money to charity is considered a sacred duty.
- **Fasting** — From dawn to dusk during the month of Ramadan.
- **Prayer** — Five daily prayers must be given facing Mecca, Islam’s holiest city.
- **Pilgrimage** — All Muslims must make a *hajj* to Mecca at least once during their lifetime, if they are physically able.

and non-Arab — have either adopted or been urged to adopt provisions of Islamic law — *sharia* — that are antithetical to modern ideas of human rights, such as limiting women’s rights and prescribing stoning or amputations as criminal penalties.

Muslims participating in a society as a minority population face different issues, according to author Grieve. “Islam is difficult to accommodate in a determinedly secular Western society where almost all views are equally respected, and none is seen as either right or wrong,” he writes.¹⁷

The tensions played out in a number of controversies in recent years were provoked by unflattering depictions of Islam in Europe. A Danish cartoonist’s satirical view of Muhammad provoked worldwide protests from Muslim leaders and groups after they were publicized in early 2006. Scattered violence resulted in property damage and more than 30 deaths.

Somewhat similarly, Pope Benedict XVI drew sharp criticism after a

Sept. 12, 2006, lecture quoting a medieval Christian emperor’s description of Islam as “evil and inhuman.” Along with verbal denunciations, protesters in Basra, Iraq, burned an effigy of the pope. Within a week, he disclaimed the remarks and apologized.

Freedom House’s Marshall says such controversies, as well as the cancellation of the opera in Berlin, strengthens radical Muslim elements. “Bending to more radical demands marginalizes the voices of moderate Muslims and hands over leadership to the radicals,” he says.

Many Muslims in European countries, however, view the controversies — including the current debate over the veil in England — as evidence of pervasive hostility from the non-Muslim majorities. “There is a growing hatred of Muslims in Britain, and anybody who bashes Muslims can only get brownie points,” says Bukhari of the Muslim Public Affairs Committee.

“These are not friendly times for Western Muslims,” says Safi, at the Uni-

versity of North Carolina. “Whenever people find themselves under assault, opening their arms and opening their hearts is difficult.”

Does Islam need a “reformation”?

If Pakistan’s Punjab University expected a chorus of approval when it decided to launch a master’s program in musicology in fall 2006, it was in for a surprise. At the Lahore campus, the conservative Islamic Assembly of Students, known as I.J.T., rose up in protest.

Handbills accused school authorities of forsaking Islamic ideological teachings in favor of “the so-called enlightened moderation” dictated by “foreign masters.” Undeterred, administrators opened the program for enrollment in September. When fewer students applied than expected, they blamed the poor response in part on the I.J.T. campaign.¹⁸

The episode reflects how Islam today is evolving differently in the West and in some parts of the Muslim world. Many Muslim writers and scholars in the United States and Europe are calling for Islam to adapt to modern times by, for example, embracing pluralism and gender equality. Introducing a collection of essays by “progressive” Muslims, the University of North Carolina’s Safi says the movement seeks to “start swimming through the rising waters of Islam and modernity, to strive for justice in the midst of society.”¹⁹

In much of the Muslim world, however, Islam is growing — in numbers and intensity — on the strength of literal interpretations of the Koran and exclusivist attitudes toward the non-Muslim world. “In the Muslim world in general, more extreme or reactionary forms of Islam are getting stronger — in Africa, Asia and the Middle East,” says Freedom House’s Marshall, who has previously worked on issues pertaining to persecution of Christians around the world.

Islamist groups such as I.J.T. talk about “reforming” or “purifying” Islam

and adopting Islamic law as the primary or exclusive source of civil law. In fact, one version of reformed Islam — Wahhabism* or the currently preferred term Salafism — espouses a literalistic reading of the Koran and a puritanical stance toward such modern practices as listening to music or watching television. It has been instituted in Saudi Arabia and has advanced worldwide because of financial backing from the oil-rich kingdom and its appeal to new generations of Muslims.

“The Salafi movement is a fringe,” says the Rand Corp.’s Rabasa. “But it’s growing because it’s dynamic and revolutionary, whereas traditional Islam tends to be conservative. It has this appeal to young people looking for identity.”

But the Center for Islamic Pluralism’s Schwartz, an outspoken critic of Salafism, says many Muslims are rejecting it because of its tendency to view other branches of Islam as apostasy. “People are getting sick of this,” he says. “They’re tired of the social conflict and upheaval.”

Voll at the Center for Christian-Muslim Understanding also says some Muslim legal scholars are disputing literalistic readings of *sharia* by contending that the Islamic law cited as divinely ordained is actually “a human construct subject to revision.”

Some Western commentators refer to a “reformation” in calling for a more liberal form of Islam. Nicholas D. Kristof, a *New York Times* columnist who focuses on global human-rights issues, sees “hopeful rumblings . . . of steps toward a Muslim Reformation,” especially on issues of gender equality. He notes that feminist Muslim scholars are reinterpreting passages in the Koran that other Muslims cite in justifying restrictions on women, such as the Saudi ban on women driving.²⁰

* Wahhabism originated in the Arabian peninsula in the late 1700s from the teachings of Arabian theologian Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab (1703-1792).

Safi says he avoids the term reformation because it has been adopted by Salafists and also because it suggests a need to break from traditional Islam. He says “progressive” Muslims return to the Prophet’s vision of the common humanity of all human beings and seek “to hold Muslim societies accountable for justice and pluralism.”

Rabasa also says reformation is historically inappropriate as a goal for liberal or progressive Muslims. “What is needed is not an Islamic reformation but an Islamic enlightenment,” says Rabasa. The West’s liberal tradition, he notes, was produced not by the Reformation but by the Enlightenment — the 18th-century movement that used reason to search for objective truth.

Whatever terms are used, the clash between different visions of Islam will be less susceptible to resolution than analogous disputes within most branches of Christianity because Islam lacks any recognized hierarchical structure. Islam has no pope or governing council. Instead, each believer is regarded as having a direct relationship with God, or Allah, with no ecclesiastical intermediary.

“In the face of contemporary Islam, there is absolutely the sense of an authority vacuum,” says Safi. Islam’s future, he adds, “is a question that can only be answered by Muslims.” ■

BACKGROUND

Two Faces of Islam

Islam began as the faith of a small community of believers in Arabia in the seventh century and grew within a matter of decades to be the dominant religion of a powerful empire. The Muslim world expanded

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Chronology

Before 1900

Islam grows from origins in 7th-century Arabia to become dominant religion of a global empire but recedes as European nations become colonial powers in 18th, 19th centuries.

1900-1970

Muslim world throws off European rule.

1932

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia formed, adopts radical Islamist branch of Wahhabism as state religion.

1947-48

Pakistan becomes world's first avowedly Islamist state following Indian independence, partition. . . . Indonesia gains independence to become world's most populous Muslim nation. . . . Israel established, displacing Palestinians and creating lasting conflict with Arabs, Muslims.

1952

Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser gains power in Egypt, adopts secular Arab socialism as platform.

1965

Immigration and Naturalization Services Act of 1965 abolishes national-origins quota system in U.S., opening door for more Muslim immigrants.

1970s-1980s

Radical Islam advances in Muslim world despite resistance, reluctance by conservative regimes.

1979

Iranian Revolution ousts U.S.-backed Reza Shah Pahlavi, brings Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini to power as head of Islamist regime.

1987

Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi expatriate, forms al Qaeda terrorist network as "base" for Islamic crusade.

1989

Islamic National Front gains power in Sudan, triggering long civil war against Christian south.

1990s *Islamist movements have gains, setbacks.*

1990-91

U.S.-led invasion drives Saddam Hussein's Iraq out of Kuwait; U.S. forces use Saudi Arabia as staging area, angering bin Laden.

1991

Algerian military cancels scheduled parliamentary run-off to thwart possible victory by Islamic Salvation Front.

1996

Islamist Taliban movement gains power in Afghanistan.

2000-Present

Islamist movement advances; U.S. declares "war on terror" after 9/11 attacks.

Sept. 11, 2001

Terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon kill nearly 3,000. President George W. Bush declares war on "global terrorism," wins international support for invasion of Afghanistan over its role in harboring bin Laden, al Qaeda; Arabs, Muslims targeted in domestic crackdown.

2002

Islamic Justice and Development Party wins parliamentary majority in secular Turkey.

2003

U.S.-led invasion ousts Iraq's Hussein but fails to bring order as insurgency grows into civil war between majority Shiites and long-dominant Sunnis.

2004

France bans wearing of religious garb, including Muslim head scarves, by public school pupils. . . . Terrorist bombing of Madrid subway kills 190 people. . . . Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh slain, apparently over film critical of Islam's treatment of women.

2005

Shiites gain upper hand in Iraqi parliamentary elections; banned Muslim Brotherhood makes gains in Egyptian assembly. . . . More than 50 people killed in terrorist subway, bus bombings in London. . . . Taliban resurgent in Afghanistan. . . . Muslims riot in France.

2006

Danish cartoonist's satirical depictions of Prophet Muhammad provoke protests, violence in much of Muslim world. . . . Militant Hamas wins majority in Palestinian elections, displacing more moderate Palestine Liberation Organization. . . . Pope Benedict XVI draws fire for quoting medieval emperor's criticism of Islam. . . . German opera company cancels production of opera with satirical depiction of Islam, other faiths. . . . British officials criticize Muslim veil (*niqab*) as separatist.

U.S. Muslims Feel 'Under a Spotlight'

A taxicab board in Minneapolis vetoes a plan to make it easier for Muslim drivers to refuse on religious grounds to transport passengers carrying alcoholic beverages.

A local school board member in Ohio objects when a high-school principal allows two Muslim students to be excused during lunchtime as they fasted during Ramadan.

A judge in Michigan dismisses a Muslim woman's complaint against a car rental company because she refuses to remove her veil while testifying.¹

The United States' rapidly growing Muslim population is presenting American society with a host of new issues. At the same time, many Americans anxious about terrorism are distrustful or fearful of Muslims around the world and here at home.

Government officials from President George W. Bush on down have tried to dispel Americans' concerns about U.S. Muslims generally. But government action against alleged Islamist terrorist cells or Muslim charities suspected of funding terrorists has created widespread feelings of official harassment or persecution among American Muslims.

"They really feel they're completely under a spotlight," says author Geneive Abdo, author of the new book *Mecca and Main Street*. Muslims "went from being a virtually invisible minority [before 9/11] to being completely the focus of attention" ever since.²

In fact, Muslims are barely mentioned in most accounts of the building of America, even though Arab explorers may have reached the New World seven centuries before Columbus. Many of the African slaves transported to the English Colonies brought their Muslim faith with them, as did some of the Arab immigrants who came to the United States from the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.³

Muslims did not begin immigrating in substantial numbers, however, until after the 1965 Immigration Act, which abolished

national quotas favoring northern European countries. Today, a survey by Georgetown University's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding and the polling firm Zogby International indicates that about two-thirds of the country's more than 4 million Muslims immigrated to this country.⁴ But Islam is the country's fastest-growing religion also in part because of an increasing number of conversions by Americans of other faiths.

In contrast to Europe — where Muslim immigrants have been predominantly lower-income — the United States has been receiving a larger proportion of well-educated, higher-income professionals and managers. Overall, about 62 percent of American Muslims have a college degree, according to a survey by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), while 43 percent have household incomes above \$50,000.⁵

The demographics make American Muslim communities a generally inhospitable environment for radical Islamists, observers say. "What we have here among Muslim-Americans is a very conservative success ethic," says John Zogby, president of Zogby International in Utica, N.Y., whose polling firm surveys the Muslim-American community.⁶

American Muslims have been becoming more observant for several years. Abdo cites a survey indicating that mosque attendance doubled from 1994 to 2000. From her own reporting, Abdo says Muslims generally and younger Muslims in particular have become more pious since 9/11 and more assertive in speaking up for Islam in the face of public criticism or ignorance. Still, the CAIR survey found that only 31 percent of those questioned — slightly less than one-third — attend mosque weekly, while 27 percent said they attend seldom or never.

With their growing numbers and the growing sense of being under siege, Muslims have been increasingly active politically in the years since 9/11. Muslim and Arab political action committees have been increasing campaign contributions, and a

Continued from p. 922

over the next 1,000 years, eventually stretching from Spain and western Africa east to China, the Indian subcontinent and Indonesia, but most of that world came under European domination in the 1700s and 1800s. The 20th century opened with roiling debates within Islam between secular nationalists and Islamic fundamentalists over how best to regain a measure of the glories of times past.²¹

Muhammad (c. 570-632) was a respected businessman in the commercial and religious center of Mecca when, according to Islamic belief, he re-

ceived the divine revelation now preserved in the Koran. The central monotheistic message — "there is no god but Allah" — incorporated beliefs of Judaism and Christianity and challenged the prevailing polytheism as well as the wealth and status of Mecca's power structure.

Facing possible assassination, Muhammad accepted an invitation in 622 to serve as a judge in Medina, 400 kilometers to the north. There, the Prophet became — as historian Voll describes it — the leader of the *ummah*, or community, "in all matters of life," both religious and temporal. By the

time of his death in 632, the new Muslim community was successfully established. Mecca had been defeated and incorporated into the *ummah* in important ways. Today, observant Muslims are called to undertake a pilgrimage, or *hajj*, to Mecca at least once in their lives.

Within barely three decades, the Muslim community became a major global empire by conquering the Persian Empire to the east and the Syrian territories of the Byzantine Empire to the west. But the rapid expansion ended with a civil war (656-661) that split Islam into two traditions that, as

growing number of Arab-Americans have been seeking elective office: 49 in 2004, 52 in 2006, according to the Arab-American Institute. Keith Ellison, a black attorney who converted to Islam as a college student, is highly favored to be elected on Nov. 7 as a Democrat in Minnesota's 5th Congressional District, becoming the country's first Muslim member of Congress.⁷



Muslim friends dine at an Afghan restaurant in Alexandria, Va., in October 2006 after daytime fasting during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Getty Images/Stefan Zaklin

ously a problem," says Aslan, "but they're not representative of the larger perception of Muslim or Islam among Americans."

"There's always going to be a sector of American society that is unaccepting not only of Muslims but of any group that is 'the other,'" Aslan continues. "It's going to take a while for Americans to recognize Islam not as a religion of the other but as part of the country's rich, pluralistic religious experience."

President Bush's role in the war on terror and the Iraq conflict appears to have cost him heavily among Muslim-Americans. A plurality of Muslims supported Bush over Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election, but Muslims heavily favored Democrat John Kerry over Bush in 2004, according to the Georgetown-Zogby survey. In its more recent poll, CAIR found that 42 percent of those surveyed identified as Democrats compared to 17 percent as Republicans.

Muslims' growing visibility and assertiveness produces a reflexive defensiveness among many public officials, commentators and private citizens. "We are a Christian nation, not a Muslim nation," school board member Jennifer Miller in Mason, Ohio, said when complaining about the Mason High School principal's decision to accommodate the two Muslim students' wishes to be excused from the lunchroom during Ramadan.

Muslim and Arab-American groups also continue to report increases in anti-Muslim incidents. But Reza Aslan, an Iranian-American author, plays down their importance. "They're obvi-

¹ See Oren Dorell, "Cabbies, culture clash at Minn. airport," *USA Today*, Oct. 11, 2006, p. 3A; Michael D. Clark, "Room for Fasting Muslims Raises Furor at School Board," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Oct. 26, 2006, p. 1A; Zachary Gorchow, "Veil Costs Her Claim in Court," *Detroit Free Press*, Oct. 22, 2006, p. 1.

² Interview with Madeleine Brand, "Day to Day," National Public Radio, Sept. 11, 2006.

³ Some historical background drawn from Geneive Abdo, *Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America After 9/11* (2006). See also Mary H. Cooper, "Muslims in America," *CQ Researcher*, April 30, 1993, pp. 361-384.

⁴ Project MAPS/Zogby International, "Muslims in the American Public Square: Shifting Political Winds and Fallout from 9/11, Afghanistan, and Iraq," October 2004 (www.projectmaps.com/AMP2004report.pdf). Project MAPS — "Muslims in the American Public Square" — was a project of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

⁵ Council on American-Islamic Relations, "American Muslim Voters: A Demographic Profile and Survey of Attitudes," Oct. 24, 2006; www.cair.com/pdf/American_Muslim_Voter_Survey_2006.pdf.

⁶ Quoted in Alexandra Marks, "Radical Islam finds US to be 'sterile ground,'" *The Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 23, 2006, p. 1.

⁷ See Claude R. Marx, "American Arabs and Muslims Begin to Flex Political Muscles," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, Oct. 25, 2006.

Voll relates, live on to this day. The mainstream or Sunni tradition — sunna refers to the life and sayings of the Prophet — traces its origins to the first four "rightly guided" *khalifabs* (caliphs), successors to Muhammad. Sunni Muslims combine an emphasis on consensus and piety with a pragmatic focus on governmental stability.

The Shia tradition — shi'ah is Arabic for faction or party — begins with Ali, a cousin of Muhammad who became the leader of a breakaway group of mutinous troops and others in Medina in 656. Ali — viewed by his supporters as Muhammad's right-

ful successor — prevailed militarily, only to be murdered five years later. Shi'a Islam reflects a belief in a divinely guided imam, or leader, with authority unbound by human consensus or pragmatic reasons of state.

The Muslim world expanded initially through military conquest and later through global trade. During the golden age of Islam (750-1300), Islamic civilization dominated in art, architecture, mathematics and other fields as Christian Europe languished during the so-called Dark Ages before 1000. Over the next 500 years, the rising states of Europe waged war against

Muslim rule — most famously in the seven Christian Crusades fought between 1095 and 1291 — in an unsuccessful effort to free the Holy Land from rule by Muslim "infidels."

To more tangible effect, the Mongols began their conquest of the Islamic states early in the 13th century. Later, the Christian reconquest of Spain ended Muslim rule on the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, while Christian forces stopped the Muslim Ottoman Empire's advance from the Balkans at the gates of Vienna in the 16th and 17th centuries. Even as Muslim military might receded, however, Muslim merchants

were gaining converts for Islam in Africa, central Asia and India.

Most of the Muslim world came under European control in the 1700s and 1800s, but Islam remained the dominant religion and most important source of resistance to European expansion. The decline of Muslim power provoked self-examination and calls for reform. One of the Islamic “reformers” was Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), an Arabian theologian who preached a strict interpretation of the Koran. Wahhab allied himself with a prince, Muhammad Ibn Saud, whose family would unite the Arabian Peninsula two centuries later. In contrast to Wahhab, reformers in the late 19th century such as Muhammad Abduh in Egypt and Sayyid Ahmad Khan in India sought to integrate Islam with modernity by showing that faith and reason were compatible and that Islam and the West were not necessarily in conflict.

World War I marked the end of one era in the history of Islam and the beginning of another. The Ottoman Empire, allied with Germany, was defeated, occupied and dismembered. At the heart of the former empire, the Turkish nationalist Mustafa Kemal Atatürk established a new, avowedly secular state while the Muslim lands to the east were divided into French and British protectorates. Nationalism helped drive opposition to European colonial rule among Muslims in India, Indonesia and elsewhere.

As Voll recounts, other emerging movements advocated a more all-encompassing adoption of Islam in modern society, including the Muslim Brotherhood, established in Egypt by Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949), and the Jama’at-I Islami (Islamic Society), founded in India in 1941 under the leadership of Mawlana Abu al-Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979). These movements criticized the secularism of Western life and called for applying Islam to economics and politics as well as to individual religious life.

Islamist Movements

The Muslim world threw off European rule after World War II and gained control of its own destiny for the first time in several centuries. Many majority-Muslim countries followed a secular path, several under leaders who combined socialist programs with authoritarian practices. Oil-rich Saudi Arabia, however, adopted Wahhabism as the state religion and followed its dictates by imposing a pervasive web of social controls. Strict Islamist movements contended with secular regimes elsewhere but gained power in only two: Iran (1979) and Sudan (1989). Meanwhile, the establishment of Israel in 1948 — with the strong support of the United States and its European allies — created a deep estrangement between the Muslim world and the West.

Two of the most populous Muslim-majority countries gained their independence shortly after World War II. Muslims joined in the resistance to British rule in India that brought independence in 1947 along with the partition of the subcontinent into a secular, predominantly Hindu India and a separate, majority-Muslim Pakistan. A year later, an Indonesian independence movement led by the nationalist leader Sukarno threw off Dutch colonial rule, but he elevated nationalism and socialism over Islamism during his nearly two decades in power. Islam played a larger role in Pakistan as the source of national identity, but the government defined its policies in largely secular terms through the 1950s and ’60s.

Egypt, partially independent since 1922, won full independence from Britain after World War II. Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power in a military coup in 1952 and disappointed Islamist supporters by espousing a largely secularized Arab socialism. Nasser banned the Muslim Brotherhood in 1954 after an attempted assassination and imprisoned many of its members. Among

those jailed was Sayyed Qutb, a U.S.-educated author whose anti-Western Islamic manifestos continued to inspire radical Islamist movements even after his execution in 1966 for attempting to overthrow the state.

Iran provided a different model of a secular, majority-Muslim country through the 1970s. The United States and Britain helped install Reza Shah Pahlavi on the Peacock Throne in 1941 and used him in 1953 to engineer the ousting of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, who had called for nationalizing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. Combined with U. S. and British aid, Pahlavi’s Westernizing policies helped spur economic growth. But his support for women’s rights and his good relations with Israel angered Islamic fundamentalists and — along with his harsh, autocratic practices — led to his downfall in the 1979 Iranian Revolution that propelled the Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini to power as head of an Islamist regime.

The Iranian Revolution marked the beginning of a new era that, as historian Voll explains, saw political Islam move from militant, often-underground opposition into the mainstream of political life in many majority-Muslim countries. Many Muslims — significantly including well-educated professionals — came to view such Islamization of state and society as a more promising path for the Muslim world than the leftist ideologies and nationalist state policies that had held sway in the postwar era. As Islamist parties formed, however, they met resistance from conservative monarchies and regimes that had relied on traditional Islam for support but viewed more radical Islam as a challenge.

Islamization, including the adoption of *sharia*, advanced in many parts of the Muslim world from the 1970s on, despite the resistance or reluctance of conservative regimes.²² Egyptian President Anwar Sadat promised to adopt *sharia* but angered fundamentalists by signing a peace treaty with Israel in 1979. Two

years later, he was assassinated by members of the Muslim Brotherhood. His successor, Hosni Mubarak, has tried alternately to co-opt the organization with partial Islamization or to suppress it with mass arrests. In Pakistan, President Muhammad Zia al-uh-Haq instituted strict enforcement of Islamic law during his 11-year dictatorship before his death in 1988 in a still unexplained plane crash. The government has been largely secular since, but — as author

Grieve writes — has “trotted out” *sharia* as “a diversion” from recurrent crises.²³

A military coup brought the Islamic National Front to power in Sudan in 1989, ushering in pervasive Islamization despite opposition from most Muslims and a bloody civil war aimed at the Christian minority in the country’s south. The fundamentalist Taliban movement pursued a similar policy of thorough Islamization during the five years it effectively controlled Afghanistan (1996-2001), but only three countries formally recognized the regime: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.

In the most important setback for Islamist movements, the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria appeared on the verge of winning a majority in a second round of balloting for the national parliament in 1992, but the military suspended the election after the front’s strong showing in the first round in December 1991. The move touched off a civil war that claimed an estimated 200,000 lives before the front’s military wing surrendered in 2002.

Iran instituted *sharia* to some extent but also left elements of the old civil-



Islamic-inspired head coverings are displayed at a shop near Paris. France banned the wearing of “conspicuous” religious symbols — such as Muslim head scarves, Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses — in public schools, but the measure is seen as aimed primarily at creeping fundamentalism among France’s 5 million Muslims.

Getty Images/Joel Robine

justice system in place. Electoral victories by secularizing reformers in the 1990s further slowed Islamization. Despite setbacks, however, the advance of Islamization could be seen across the Muslim world, even in such traditionalist countries as Indonesia and Malaysia.

‘War on Terror’

The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States came after a decade of growing militancy by Islamic extremist groups and ushered in a period of increased tensions between Muslims worldwide and the United States and its allies in Europe and in the Middle East. Muslims in the United States complained of harassment and discrimination in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, despite efforts by President Bush to dispel anti-Muslim attitudes. Increased Muslim immigration in Europe fueled conflicts in several countries, including England, France and the Netherlands. The United States, meanwhile, initially found support within the Muslim world for its invasion of Afghanistan but

encountered widespread opposition from Muslim populations and leaders after the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

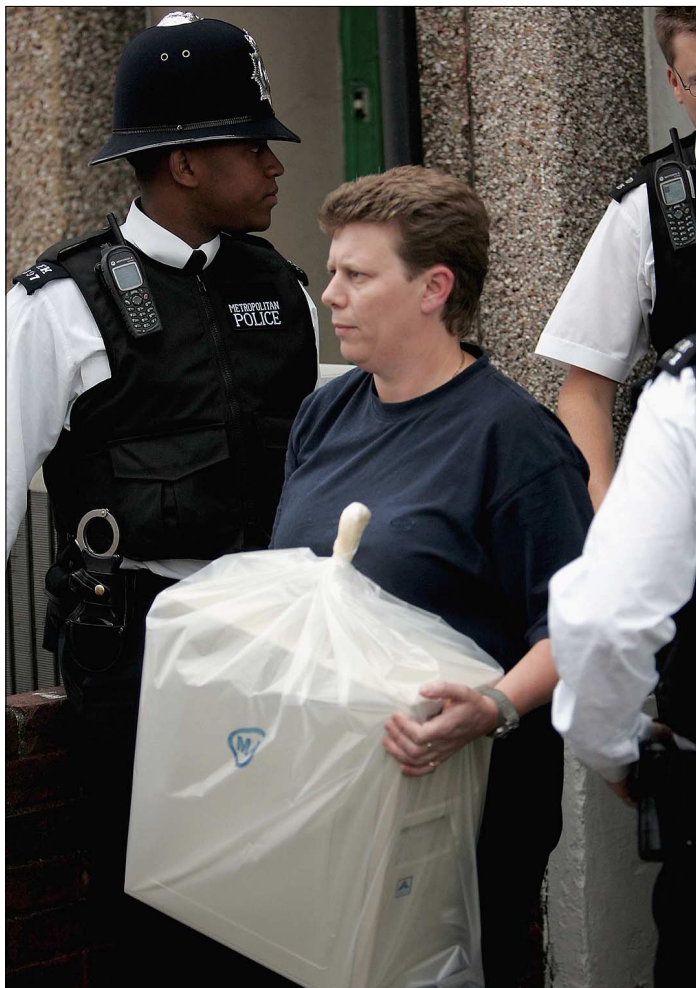
The Sept. 11 attacks were readily traced to the terrorist organization al Qaeda, led by the wealthy Saudi expatriate Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden had fought with other Islamic militants to drive the Soviet Union from Afghanistan and then turned his attention to the United States and his former homeland after the Saudi government agreed to allow “infidel” U.S. troops to use the country — home to Islam’s holiest sites — as a staging

area for the 1991 Persian Gulf War. With backing from the United Nations and quiet support from some Muslim countries, the United States responded to the 9/11 attacks by launching an invasion to oust Afghanistan’s Islamist Taliban regime for its role in harboring al Qaeda.²⁴

Within the United States, meanwhile, Muslims bore the brunt of a crack-down aimed at ferreting out terrorists, potential terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. Government investigators asked hundreds of foreign Muslims legally in the United States to submit to voluntary questioning about terrorists in or outside the United States. Later, immigration officials moved to track down Muslim immigrants who had failed to comply with deportation orders issued before the attacks. The Council of American-Islamic Relations accused the government of “sacrificing the civil rights of Arabs and Muslims in the name of fighting terrorism.” At the same time, the group blamed “anti-Muslim agitation on television and radio” for what it described as “the worst” wave of anti-Muslim hate crimes in U.S. history.²⁵

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 ousted the dictatorial Saddam Hussein but left the United States in the middle of a sectarian dispute between the country's long dominant Sunni minority and the Shiite majority, which had suffered under Hussein's rule. The Sunni-Shiite conflict provided the backdrop for difficult political negotiations in the writing of a new constitution and contentious campaigning in the run-up to the January 2005 parliamentary elections, where Shiites emerged with a near majority. Armed Sunni and Shiite militias continued battling for control after the election even after the leading Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, called in July 2006 for all Iraqis "to exert maximum effort to stop the bloodletting."

In Europe, meanwhile, ethnic and religious tensions were surfacing as increased immigration from Muslim countries and high birthrates combined to make Islam the fastest-growing religion on the continent.²⁶ Increased religiosity in Europe's 15-million-strong Muslim community — as measured by construction of mosques or attendance at prayers — coincided with widespread feelings of alienation, especially among young, native-born Muslims. In France — with more than 5 million Muslims — riots erupted in the mostly Muslim suburbs of Paris and other French cities in October 2005 amid complaints of high unemployment and frequent discrimination. The burgeoning new mi-



A police officer removes a computer from a house in London on Aug. 11, 2006, following the arrest of 24 men, mostly Muslim fundamentalists, believed to be involved in a plot to blow up planes flying from Britain to the United States. Police said the men had ties to the al Qaeda terrorist network.

nority is also challenging European concepts of national and personal identity, as when France banned Muslim girls from wearing head scarves in schools in 2004.

In addition to generalized grievances, Europe also fell victim to terrorist attacks by Islamists. The bombing of three Madrid train stations at rush hour in March 2004 left 190 people dead and more than 1,200 injured; a year and three months later coordinated bombings of three subway trains and a bus in London killed 52 people plus the four bombers. In the Netherlands, meanwhile, the Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh was slain in No-

vember 2004 by a 26-year-old Moroccan after he had directed a film critical of Islam's treatment of women. And in August 2006 police in England arrested 24 people, nearly all of them Muslims, on charges of plotting to detonate explosives aboard aircraft destined for the United States.

Within the Muslim world, Islamic groups were making significant gains in several countries, according to historian Voll.²⁷ In Turkey, the Islamic Justice and Development Party won an outright majority in the parliament in 2002. In Egypt, the still-illegal Muslim Brotherhood won almost a quarter of the seats in 2005. In Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a non-cleric who emphasized populist issues of poverty and economic justice, was elected president in 2005 with the support of the country's more conservative clergy. The United States found itself facing a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan along with the escalating conflicts between Sunni and Shiite groups in Iraq. And in January 2006 the militant

Palestinian group Hamas won an unexpected and resounding victory in elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council, defeating the more moderate Palestine Liberation Organization.

Many Muslims in the United States and elsewhere viewed the trends as a backlash against the widespread perception that the U.S.-proclaimed war on terror amounted to a war against Islam. "More and more you're seeing moderate Muslims being pushed away from the movement toward progressivism and moving toward the other camp," says author Aslan. ■

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Getty Images/Chris Jackson

At Issue:

Should Islam liberalize its view of women's rights?



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WRITTEN FOR CQ RESEARCHER, OCTOBER 2006

This loaded and misguided question suggests that Islam must change fundamentally to recognize the rights of women. Instead, I would suggest that a profound reading of the Koran leads one to conclude that God has formed both men and women already in full possession of humanity at every layer: physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. Humanity's God-given capacity to bear the divine covenant is shared by men and women, Muslim and non-Muslim.

The Islamic tradition historically has cultivated such a beautiful understanding. But local and cultural gender roles have shaped Islamic thought and practice in some domains — particularly in Islamic law — and the patriarchal prejudices of pre-modern societies have crept into historical interpretations of Islam. So when we encounter statements suggesting women are deficient in reason and intellect — statements that we also find in the pre-modern Jewish, Christian and Greek traditions — we must ask whether these understandings reflect God's call for humanity and the example of the Prophet Muhammad or whether they reflect the patriarchies of human societies.

The Koran and Islamic law in many ways were centuries ahead of developments elsewhere regarding women's rights. Muslim women had the right to own and inherit property, manage their own finances and pray to God directly without using male intermediaries. Yet today much work remains to be done in Muslim communities with respect to gender issues. In Iran and Saudi Arabia women are told they must cover their hair this way or that way, and in Turkey, France and Great Britain they are told not to cover themselves this way or that way. Where is the recognition that women must come to God on their own terms? That seems to be the challenge of our day with respect to Islam and women's rights.

The emerging women's rights movement in Islam insists that a proper understanding of Islam will recognize men and women as spiritual and social equals. To be successful, it must insist on its own religious legitimacy and tap into the rich reservoirs of Islamic sources. In other words, it is not a matter of "restoring" or "giving back" women's rights, it is a matter of recognizing that women are divine creations intended to fully possess rights and privileges. The manifestations of patriarchy — both inside and outside of religious traditions — that have robbed humans of their vitality and moral agency must be dismantled.



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WRITTEN FOR CQ RESEARCHER, OCTOBER 2006

Islam need not liberalize its view of women because problems of women's rights are not inherent to Islam. While Islam unfortunately is perceived in the West as a bastion of female oppression, this results from the conjunction of differing perspectives on the religion.

There are many ways to be Muslim, just as there are many ways to be Christian, Buddhist or Jewish. Although Islamic prayer is performed in Arabic and the Koran was delivered in Arabic, Islamic practice and culture are not restricted to an Arab paradigm. While the worst anti-female practices are maintained in the Arabian peninsula and its near neighbors, so-called honor killings have been exported to the non-Muslim world by uneducated people. But honor killings are also known to occur among non-Muslims.

Moreover, Arab customs are subject to change. A women's protest movement centered in Jiddah — near the holy cities of Mecca and Medina — opposes mandatory face covering and other forms of intimidation by the Saudi-Wahhabi religious militia or *mutawwua*. The women point out that they never covered their faces in the past, do not wish to do so now and say the *mutawwua* should return to their place of origin in eastern Arabia.

If women in the region of Mecca and Medina reject oppressive practices, how can such practices be considered Islamic? Similarly, the vast majority of young Bosnian Muslim women — who served as soldiers or mobilized civilians in the war of the 1990s in which 250,000 Muslims died — refuse to cover their hair, much less their faces.

Islam settled in the Eastern world, where progress has always been slow. But Islam also contrasts with other traditions in its early empowerment of women. Islam allowed women to divorce from the beginning, while divorce is still obstructed for Catholic and Orthodox Jewish women. Islam also abolished female infanticide — one of the first Islamic "reforms" among peninsular Arabs.

Muslim women never suffered bound feet or the common Indian habit of sari death. Capitalist democracies in Korea, Japan and East Asia do not encourage women to have political or media careers, while Muslim countries — even some of the most extreme — have female political leaders such as Tansu Ciller in Turkey. Israeli Arabs have *sharia* courts with women judges.

Social problems in Islamic countries reflect local culture and history, not the Islamic faith.

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CURRENT SITUATION

Muslim Identities

Muslims around the world are returning to their normal routines following Ramadan, the Islamic calendar's holiest month, traditionally marked by dawn-to-dusk fasting, daily prayers and self-examination. The apparent worldwide increase in observances of Ramadan corresponds with Islam's increasing visibility and importance in the Muslim world and elsewhere — and the increasingly cacophonous debate over the role and meaning of Islam in the modern world.

"There is a very open and public debate in many cases about who speaks for Islam throughout the [Muslim world]," says Dale Eickelman, a professor of anthropology and human relations at Dartmouth College, in Hanover, N.H. "Even in areas where there are repressive regimes, this debate has become increasingly public."

"Within the greater Middle East there is now a much greater emphasis on Islam as the primary source of identity," says Freedom House's Marshall. From his travels, Marshall says he sees the change not only in avowedly Islamist countries such as Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Iran but also in more secular Egypt, the most populous Arab nation and the historic seat of Islamic learning. "Each time I go there, the number of women who are completely covered up is increasing," he says.

Egypt's authoritarian President Mubarak continues to have a difficult relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, which won 88 seats in the national parliament in 2005 despite being officially banned since 1954. In October, Mo-

ammed Mahdi Akef, the leader of the Brotherhood, said the government barred him from traveling to Saudi Arabia for Islamic rituals. "They promised to let me travel but then banned me," Akef told The Associated Press. "It's nonsense."²⁸

Meanwhile, religious officials and Egyptians generally appear to be less tolerant of opposing religious views. As noted in *The New York Times*, religious officials moved in three recent cases either to condemn or seek criminal prosecutions of people or publications for promoting unpopular religious views. "The people, of course, oppose anybody who talks about things that violate religion," remarked Sheik Omar el-Deeb, deputy in charge of Al Azhar, the famed Islamic seminary and university founded in the 10th century.²⁹

The religious resurgence among Muslims coincides with increased religiosity elsewhere in the world — including in the United States, according to historian Voll. Eickelman also notes historical parallels to the role that religion played in the Solidarity movement in Poland and in the liberation-theology movements in Latin America in the 1980s.

As in those historical examples, Islam's present-day appeal in majority-Muslim countries stems in large part from the failures of established governments, Eickelman says. Secular authorities "have not been seen to be concerned" with improving the standard of living or reducing economic inequality, he says. "It's not clear that religious authorities can do better," Eickelman adds, but Muslim publics are increasingly willing to give them a chance.

Other experts stress that Islamist movements are — in contrast to their negative image in the West — neither monolithic nor necessarily anti-democratic. Established regimes, not Islamists, are the major impediments to democratic reform, according to Amr Hanzawy, an Egyptian and a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Islamist groups are eager to participate in politics, he says, both to cap-

italize on their popular appeal and to gain protection from repression.³⁰

As in Egypt, secular governments elsewhere are resisting the Islamist advance. In Syria, the government of President Bashar al-Assad bans the Muslim Brotherhood, which is allied with the secular opposition in calling for political reforms. In Tunisia, the government of President Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali is conducting a campaign against Islamic head scarves, calling them "sectarian."

Any efforts to contain the religious impulse — whether by existing regimes or from Western governments or groups — appear unlikely to succeed, according to many experts. "Anybody trying to secure an audience in the Muslim-majority world would want to indicate a respect for Islam," says Eickelman. "You have to have answers on how to make society better — and better for religious reasons."

Religious Clashes

Suspended Muslim teaching assistant Aishah Azmi is still fighting for the right to wear a veil in her classroom but with little public support in England. Meanwhile, the veil controversy is sparking debate in other Western countries, including the United States — adding to tensions created by other clashes between Islam and the non-Muslim world.

The Muslim Member of Parliament (MP) from Azmi's constituency is among those urging her not to appeal an unfavorable ruling by an employment tribunal on her suspension. The tribunal rejected Azmi's claim that the local school council in northern England discriminated against her by suspending her for refusing to take off the veil in class, although it awarded her about \$2,300 because the council had "victimized" her.

MP Shahid Malik said that local Muslim parents have told him they would not send their children to schools where

women teachers wore the veil. "I would appeal to Mrs. Azmi just to let this thing go," Malik said the day after the ruling. "There is no real support for it."³¹

Reefat Drabu, the chair of social and family affairs at the Muslim Council of Britain, declared that Azmi's position was making things harder for Muslim communities in Britain. He said publicity about the case since September has led to "more attacks on Muslim women" and mosques and "a continuous hammering of Muslims throughout the country."

Azmi herself was avoiding additional comment after talking with reporters on the day of her decision. Nick Whittingham, her lawyer, said she was tired and feeling pressure after the verdict. "I expect she wishes it would all go away," he said. Still, Whittingham said he was exploring grounds for an appeal and considering seeking additional legal aid to take the case further, even possibly to the European Court of Human Rights.

Muslim leaders noted that wearing the veil is generally not considered obligatory and that only about 5 percent of Muslim women in Britain do. But an encouraging sign for women who choose to wear the veil emerged in a poll that showed a generation gap on the issue: 65 percent of Britons over age 65 expressed discomfort with the veil but only 31 percent of 18-24 year olds.³²

Meanwhile, the controversy in Britain focused attention on similar episodes elsewhere in Europe. Jan Creemers, mayor of the small Belgian town of Maaseik, banned the *niqab* earlier in 2006 — and reportedly won the back-

ing of most of the town's Moroccan Muslim population. Other Belgian towns followed suit. Italy's anti-terrorist laws have the effect of a ban by prohibiting hiding one's face.³³

In addition, France effectively bars Muslim public school pupils from wear-



Iraqi youngsters inspect the remnants of a car bomb that killed nine people and wounded 27 in a largely Shiite area of Baghdad on Oct. 9, 2006. Fighting between Sunni and Shiite Muslims is helping to drive the escalating insurgency in Iraq three years after the U.S.-led invasion ousted Saddam Hussein.

ing even the less obtrusive head scarf under a law that bans religious accessories. Several states in Germany bar schoolteachers from wearing head scarves.

The issue flared in the United States when a state district judge in Michigan threw out a Muslim woman's court case because she refused to remove her veil when she testified. Judge Paul Paruk told Ginnah Muhammad that he needed to see her face in order to judge her veracity.

Meanwhile, the Vatican appears to be making progress toward healing the rift that Pope Benedict XVI created on Sept. 12 with a lecture that included a medieval Christian emperor's critical comment about Islam.³⁴ The quotation was part of what amounted to a contemporary interfaith dialogue between the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and a Persian Muslim.

As Benedict recounted, the emperor described Islam in blunt terms: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." News accounts of the

speech provoked outrage in much of the Muslim world and forced Benedict to dissociate himself from the criticism. The views, he said, "were a quotation from a medieval text which does not in any way express my personal thought."

The pope also met in the Vatican with representatives of all Muslim nations that had diplomatic representation. By late October, the efforts at rapprochement appeared to be bearing fruit. In a letter to the pope, 38 Muslim leaders accepted his explanation and welcomed his call for dialogue

between Christians and Muslims. ■

OUTLOOK

Misunderstandings?

When France moved to ban head scarves from public schools in 2004, Britain's Labor government pointedly dissociated itself from any limits on religious attire. "In Britain we are comfortable with the expression of religion," Foreign Office Minister Mike O'Brien said. "Integration does not require assimilation."³⁵

Two years later, however, Prime Minister Tony Blair joined in criticizing the wearing of the Muslim veil as a "sign of separation." And Blair's

government — concerned about the homegrown Islamist extremists blamed for the London subway and bus bombings in 2004 and a foiled airplane sabotage plot last August — is quietly funding an Islamic Web site appealing for moderation and distributing CDs promoting moderation to Muslim students at universities.³⁶

Among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, many Britons view the recent pronouncements from government officials on the veil issue as divisive. “If we go and demonize a substantial section of our own population, my advice would be to watch out,” says Roger Ballard, an anthropologist affiliated with the University of Manchester who has studied the Pakistani Muslim community in Pakistan and England.

Bukhari of the London-based Muslim Public Affairs Committee says the criticisms amount to a “vilification” of Muslims from some quarters — due in part to the separation between Britain’s Muslim and non-Muslim communities. “If you don’t know a Muslim, you don’t hang around with Muslims, then you have no one to rely on for your perceptions of Muslims besides the media,” he says.

“Both the Muslim community and the non-Muslim community need to communicate with each other about each other,” says Anwar with the Lancashire Council of Mosques. “I’m not very keen on this word ‘tolerate.’ I prefer understanding.”

A combination of historical and contemporary circumstances, however, makes understanding Islam diffi-

cult both for the non-Muslim West and for Muslims themselves.

Historically, the three “religions of the book” — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — may share a common heritage, but they have engaged in theological, cultural and political disagreements and conflicts through much of the past 14 centuries. Islam and Christianity came to hold sway over different parts of the globe — the Muslim world and the Christian West — while Islam and Judaism have been drawn into a deadly conflict in their common homeland because of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

Mutual fears and recriminations have intensified since the 9/11 attacks and the proclaimed war on terror, according to British author Grieve. “To rise up with this nationalist fury was to completely misunderstand the event,” he says.

Muslims reacted with understandable defensiveness, Grieve continues. “Islam in the current world situation has taken on this combative stance,” he says. “It explains to them why their life is not just right.”

Foreign-policy issues appear certain to be a continuing source of division, at least for the short term. Most notably, the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is “an open wound, a symbol for Muslims of the fundamental injustice of the region,” according to progressive Muslim scholar Safi at the University of North Carolina. The Iraq insurgency may pit Sunnis against Shiites, but the vast majority of Muslims in the region appear united in wanting the United States to withdraw.

In Britain — as in many other parts of Europe — many Muslims expect divisions to increase. “Nothing’s going to change,” says Bukhari. “It’s only going to get worse.”

Prospects for successful integration may be better in the United States. “Attitudes toward Muslims in America are more accepting than in Europe,” says author Aslan.

But Anwar says Muslims must also engage in self-examination. “As a Muslim community, we need to look at extremism internally,” she says. “Are we really living our faith to the high standards we impose, or have we separated the religion from the faith?”

“If Muslims started to live the faith as it is, then we can make a difference,” Anwar continues. “The United Kingdom is a very fertile land, and it can take on new philosophies. But it has to be give-and-take. It will take time, but it will happen.” ■

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¹ Coverage from these London newspapers, all on Oct. 20, 2006: Andrew Norfolk, “‘I won’t be treated as an outcast,’ says Muslim teacher in veil row,” *The Times*; Ian Herbert, “Teaching assistant ‘victimised’ for wearing veil, tribunal rules,” *The Independent*; Martin Wainwright, “Tribunal dismisses case of Muslim woman ordered not to teach in veil,” *The Guardian*. See also Jake Morris, “The Great Veil Debate,” *The Mirror*, Oct. 14, 2006, p. 9.

² Jonathan Wynne-Jones, “Drive for multi-faith Britain deepens rifts, says Church,” *Daily Telegraph*, Oct. 8, 2006.

³ See David Harrison, “Government policy on multiculturalism has been left in tatters,” *The [London] Daily Telegraph*, Oct. 8, 2006. Other accounts of controversy taken from various English newspapers in October 2006. For coverage in a U.S. newspaper, see Alan Cowell, “British Leader Stirs Debate With His Call to Raise Veils,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 7, 2006, p. A8.

⁴ For background, see these *CQ Researcher* reports: Peter Katel, “Global Jihad,” Oct. 14, 2005, pp. 857-880; David Masci and Kenneth Jost, “War on Terrorism,” Oct. 12, 2001, pp. 817-848.



About the Author

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⁵ Paul Grieve, *Islam: History, Faith and Politics: The Complete Introduction* (2006), pp. 21-22.

⁶ For background, see Pamela M. Prah, "War in Iraq," *CQ Researcher*, Oct. 21, 2005, pp. 881-908; and David Masci, "Rebuilding Iraq," *CQ Researcher*, July 25, 2003, pp. 625-648.

⁷ For the full text of his remarks, see www.aljazeera.com/me.asp?service_ID=8831.

⁸ Angel M. Rabasa, et al., *The Muslim World after 9/11* (2004).

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¹⁰ Laurie Goodstein, "Seeing Islam as 'Evil' Faith, Evangelicals Seek Converts," *The New York Times*, May 27, 2003, p. A1; The Associated Press, "Threats and Responses; Muhammad a Terrorist to Falwell," *The New York Times*, Oct. 4, 2002, p. A17.

¹¹ See Sohail H. Hashmi, "Jihad," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Politics* (2d ed.), 2006 [forthcoming].

¹² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam and the Question of Violence," *Al-Serat: A Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, available at www.al-islam.org/al-serat/IslamAndViolence.htm.

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¹⁴ Safi has collected some of the post-9/11 statements at <http://groups.colgate.edu/aarislam/response.htm>.

¹⁵ Account drawn from Judy Dempsey and Mark Landler, "Opera Canceled Over a Depiction of Muhammad," *The New York Times*, Sept. 27, 2006, p. A1; Craig Whitlock, "Fear of Muslim Backlash Cancels Opera," *The Washington Post*, Sept. 27, 2006, p. A24.

¹⁶ Quoted in Jeffrey Fleishman, "Europe Raising Its Voice Over Radical Islam," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 16, 2006, p. A4.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Center for Islamic Pluralism, (202) 232-1750; www.islamicpluralism.org. A think tank that opposes the radicalization of Islam in America.

Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University, 37th & O Sts., N.W., Washington, DC 20057; (202) 687-8375; www.cmcu.net. Dedicated to achieving a better understanding between Islam and Christianity and between the Muslim world and the West.

Center for Religious Freedom, 1319 18th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20036; (202) 296-5101; www.freedomhouse.org/religion. Defends against religious persecution of all groups throughout the world.

Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, 1050 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Suite 1000, Washington, DC 20036; (202) 772-2022; www.islam-democracy.org. Studies Islamic and democratic political thought and merges them into a modern Islamic democratic discourse.

Council on American-Islamic Relations, 453 New Jersey Ave., S.E., Washington, DC 20003; (202) 488-8787; www.cair.com. Works to enhance understanding of Islam and empower American Muslims.

Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 1615 L St., N.W., Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036-5610; (202) 419-4550; www.pewforum.org. The nonpartisan forum "seeks to promote a deeper understanding of how religion shapes the ideas and institutions of American society."

¹⁹ Safi, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁰ Nicholas D. Kristof, "Looking for Islam's Luther," *The New York Times*, Oct. 15, 2006, sec. 4, p. 13.

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²³ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

²⁴ For background see David Masci and Kenneth Jost, "War on Terrorism," *CQ Researcher*, Oct. 12, 2001, pp. 817-848.

²⁵ Council on American-Islamic Relations, "American Muslims: One Year After 9-11," 2002, pp. 1-2.

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²⁸ "Muslim Brotherhood head says Egypt bars him from travel to Saudi Arabia," The Associated Press, Oct. 11, 2006.

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³¹ Quoted in Paul Stokes, "Muslim MP tells veiled class assistant to give up fight," *The Daily Telegraph* [London], Oct. 21, 2006, p. 8. Other background and quotes drawn from Paul Malley, "Top MPs in warning to Muslim," *Daily Star*, Oct. 21, 2006, p. 2; Huw Thomas, "Veil hang-ups may pass," *The Times Educational Supplement*, Oct. 27, 2006, p. 21.

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³³ "Muslim Veils Spark Debate in Europe," Voice of America English Service, Oct. 21, 2006.

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Schulze, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Berne, provides a comprehensive account of the history of the Islamic world from the rise of nationalism and independence movements in the early 20th century through the reassertion of Islamic ideologies beginning in the 1970s. Includes notes, chronology, glossary, 26-page bibliography.

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The Next Step:

Additional Articles from Current Periodicals

Head Scarves and Veils

"Australia Fury At Cleric Comments," BBCNews.com, Oct. 26, 2006.

Australia's most senior Muslim cleric raised hackles when he said women who did not cover their bodies were like "uncovered meat" to cats and invite sexual assault.

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More than 40,000 Muslims were admitted into the United States in 2005, the highest number since Sept. 11, 2001.

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