

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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A More Religious World?

Biblical Christianity has long taught that human beings are not only physical, emotional and psychological beings; humans are also spiritual beings. That spiritual aspect of being human has produced religion—the multi-faceted attempt by human beings to find a way to God. Hence, the many world religions. Biblical Christianity is not a religion; it is a relationship with the living God based solely on the finished work of Jesus Christ on Calvary's cross and His subsequent resurrection. Appropriating that work by faith establishes the relationship. Through Christ, God has done it all; but humans continue to insist that they must somehow earn or merit God's favor. Human effort marks the world's religion, not faith in a God who solved the fundamental problem of the human condition in Christ. Yet, religion, as I am defining it in this essay, continues to dominate the world scene. In fact, religion seems to be growing—and with it a growing hostility and intolerance. When one combines meritorious religion with political, military and financial power, you have a lethal combination. This has been much of the narrative through human history—and it continues today. Let's consider modern Islam as an example. Several thoughts.

- First, the Pew Research Center continues to be a valuable source for understanding the shape and characteristics of the world's religions. The columnist David Ignatius has recently summarized some of the more salient findings of recent Pew Research Center studies.
 1. According to a December 2011 Pew study, Europe is no longer the center of Christianity. In 1910, 66.3% of the world's Christians lived in Europe; by 2010, only 25.9% of the world's Christians lived in Europe. North, Central and South America still have the largest and highest proportion of Christians, but sub-Saharan Africa is where Christianity is growing the fastest. In 1910, Christians were 9% of the population; today they are about 63%.
 2. Last month the Pew Center published a report on the world's Muslims. The practice of the Muslim faith was one of the most interesting aspects of this study. About 93% of Muslims worldwide fast faithfully during Ramadan, 77% pay alms and 63% pray five times a day. These three practices are central to Islam, being three of the five pillars of the faith. Other important beliefs of Muslims include 88% believe in angels; 94% believe in heaven; but only 87% believe in hell. In Egypt, 74% of younger Muslims say their religion is important in their lives, while 76% of older Muslims affirm Islam's importance. Muslim women are more religious than men, the study showed.
 3. As mentioned above, it is in sub-Saharan Africa that religious growth is occurring. The Pew Center shows that since 1900, the Muslim population has increased 20-fold, to 234 million. In contrast, Christianity has grown 7-fold to 470 million. For both Muslims and

Christians in Africa, nine in 10 say their faith is important in their lives. For both Muslims and Christians in Africa, their belief about the future is quite vital to their faith. For African Christians, 61% believe Jesus will return in their lifetime. For Muslims, 52% believe the caliphate will be established in their lifetime.

It seems quite logical to conclude then that in sub-Saharan Africa we are seeing a struggle for the future. Both Islam and Christianity are growing at astounding rates. Those respective beliefs affect how people live. These two religions are in growing conflict with one another for the hearts, souls and minds of the African continent. That struggle has important implications for the rest of the world.

- Second, there have been riots and widespread violence all over the world because of a poorly made video concerning Islam, specifically its mocking of the Prophet Muhammad. The film is considered blasphemy by Muslims and they have shown their hatred of it in violent ways. [Despite what the Obama administration has said, the murder of our Libyan ambassador in Benghazi had nothing to do with this film. It was a coordinated attack by terrorists, probably al Qaeda.] Several of these violent outbursts have included demands for apologies from America and an affirmation of their right as Muslims to demand respect and honor for their faith from Christians and all other religions. But have Muslims practiced that same respect and honor in their countries? As they demand respect and honor have they shown that to Christians and Jews? The answer is no! In fact, a study of the radio, TV and Internet productions across the Middle East show exactly the opposite. There is widespread hate against Christians and Jews over the entire region. Columnist Tom Friedman recently summarized some examples of this hate:
 1. Hasan Rahimpur Azghadi of the Iranian Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution said of Christianity: It “is a reeking corpse, on which you have to constantly pour eau de cologne and perfume, and wash it in order to keep it clean.”
 2. Sheik Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi: “It is permissible to spill the blood of the Iraqi Christians—and a duty to wage jihad against them.”
 3. A Saudi professor of Islamic law seriously calls for “positive hatred” of Christians.
 4. An article on the Muslim Brotherhood’s website praises jihad against America and the Jews, who are called “Descendants of Apes and Pigs.”
 5. Pakistani cleric Muhammad Raza Saqib Mustafi: “When the Jews are wiped out, the world would be purified and the sun of peace would rise on the entire world.”
 6. Dr. Ismail Ali Muhammad, a senior Al-Azhar scholar: “The Jews [are] a source of evil and harm in all human societies.”

Muslims are fond of saying that we must respect and honor one another’s faith but that runs both ways. This above kind of hate is spewed out regularly throughout the Muslim world. The children of this region grow up with this every day. The film that caused so much of the rioting in the Muslim world was stupid and filled with errors. But as Friedman argues, “. . . let’s cut the nonsense that this is just our problem and the only issue is how we clean up our act . . . We should respect the faiths and prophets of others . . . Our president and major newspapers consistently condemn hate speech against other religions. How about yours?”

- Third, why is the Muslim world so defensive and hostile toward the West? In 2002, Bernard Lewis published an important book, *What Went Wrong?* In it, Lewis charts the course of Muslim history from Islamic supremacy under the great caliphate centered in Baghdad. With the Mongol invasions of the 13th century and the rise of the Muslim Turks that displaced the Arabs and then the Crusades, Arab supremacy was lost. Then the West came. Fouad Ajami correctly summarizes the Arab/Muslim response: “The coming of the West to their world brought superior military, administrative and intellectual achievement into their midst—and the outsiders were unsparing in their judgments. They belittled the military prowess of the Arabs, and they were scandalized by the traditional treatment of women and the separation of the sexes that crippled Arab society. [They] insist that their defects were inflicted on them by outsiders. . . The assumption is that westerners bear Arabs malice, that Western judgments are always slanted and cruel.”

Today, the Muslim world looks back to the glory days of the great caliphate when Islam ruled so much of the Mediterranean world but cannot look forward into the modern world. Many Muslim Arabs are defensive about everything. The victim mentality defines so much of who they are and what they want. As Ajami argues, “there is in this complex world of Islam ambivalence toward modernity” and it is “unlikely to abate.” When Muhammad the Prophet is attacked, the last remaining aspect of the unique identity of Muslims is attacked. When the West does it (e.g., Salman Rushdie in his book, *The Satanic Verses*, or filmmaker Theo van Gogh who made a film about the abuse of women in Islamic society), it reinforces their hatred of the West as the demons who destroyed their glorious past. To be modern in the 21st century is to follow the West and Arab/Muslims are not certain they can or that they even want to. They are confused, defensive and filled with hate toward the West, toward Christians and toward Jews. Is the Arab Spring about going back to the caliphate or embracing modernity? Is the struggle in Syria about going back to the caliphate or embracing modernity? Is the Iranian Shiite revolution with its penchant for nuclear weapons about going back to the caliphate or embracing modernity? It is difficult to see any of these movements embracing tolerance, respect for others and the dignity of Christians and Jews, as well as Muslims. It is also difficult to believe that any of these movements will find the correct balance between some form of freedom and the order necessary for a stable civilization. Unless the Arab/Muslim world can secure that balance, continuing confusion, chaos and violence will mark this region of the world.

See David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* (10 September 2012); Tom Friedman in the *New York Times* (19 September 2012); and Fouad Ajami in the *Washington Post* (17 September 2012).