

and they impact on human lives and have far reaching consequences. As such, I urge Muslim jurists to face this emerging challenge fully, to apply the fairness and justice of Islamic Shari'ah law in all matters, and to protect all the rights of women.

## Chapter Ten

### **A Muslim Approach to Western Studies of Islam**

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Especially with the September 11, 2001 events, as one of the most horrific manifestations of terrorism falsely committed in the name of religion, Islamophobia in the West has seen an increase not only in the media and academe but also in the increase of threat to the personal safety of Muslims. Given a calamitous connection between the popular news media and the academic world, in an America that is beset by a zealous nationalism characterized by the most insidious Islamophobia, it is easy to understand the gross generalizations and simplifications about Islam. By not developing a foundation in religious studies and the ability to structure adequate terminology, media and academe often fall prey to the use of non-Muslim-designed, derogatory, political coinages in a religious setting, thereby reinforcing negative images of Islam. Following are some examples of the problem as it applies to the Qur'an. By focusing on narratological analyses, Muslim researchers can refute some of the wrong ideas and play a meaningful role in removing negative images of their religion.

There is a vast disconnect between Islamic and religious studies. Many "Islamicists" who are employed in the various departments of religion are not religious specialists, and, as such, they are not generally familiar with religious theory and terminology. Some Muslim professors are not even trained in Islamic studies; they have become lecturers on the subject either because they are Arabs or claim they can teach Islam. In many instances, they do not even know Arabic. One of the most pressing problems is that many Muslim professors bring either their sectarian or faith-based prejudices, and do not objectively approach their subjects. Also, there is a great need for improvement in Islamic studies as a discipline within religion, and several studies have been conducted on the issue.

The study of religion in post-Enlightenment Germany started as Religionwissenschaft, which then spawned sub-disciplines of Wissenschaft des Judentums and Islamwissenschaft. It would be wrong, however, to think that the only difference between the mentioned sub-disciplines is the religion of focus. The most prominent names associated with early Islamwissenschaft are non-Muslim, among them Georg Freytag, Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy, Abraham Geiger, Gustav Weil, Theodor Nöldeke, Aloys Sprenger, and Ignaz Goldziher, all of whom were non-Muslims and who applied the then-condescending Orientalist perspective in their examination of Islam.

While the field of religious studies has evolved tremendously, and the overtly critical approach to Islam has largely been abandoned, the most consulted theories and texts in Western studies of Islam are still largely based on the writings of scholars who, knowingly or unknowingly, have coined problematic terminologies. Among such terminologies are words like “fundamentalist,” “radical” and “moderate.” Today, “fundamentalist” is an umbrella term denoting everything from the die-hard traditionalist to the militant anti-American extremist. The terms “fundamentalist,” “radical,” and “moderate” are meant to polarize and establish labels that can be terribly misleading. Being introduced at conferences by non-Muslims as a “moderate” Muslim is a description that deems other Muslims who do not share the same viewpoints as immoderate fanatics.<sup>43</sup>

Since Islamic Studies is not conducted under the aegis of religious studies, the Muslim “specialists” who conduct Qur’anic studies often do so without knowledge of western concepts (and the attendant vocabulary) of exegesis. Even when Muslim professors approach their subject from the perspective of religion, their presentations tend to focus on the pre-modern period. One hears of the exegeses of al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, and a host of classical scholars, but rarely does one hear of the modern discourse of Muhammad al-Ghazali or Taha Alalwani.

Further, Muslim scholars, both classical and modern, have discussed most ideas, such as logocentrism, phallogentrism, reader response criticism, preterism, presentism, the affective fallacy, the intentional fallacy, the hermeneutic circle, and the Divine Command theory, albeit under different terms. When their ideas are presented, however, if the scholar does not know the western term, s/he cannot draw parallels and make the necessary comparisons.

By failing to make themselves familiar with Biblical material and the religious theories pertaining thereto, Muslims are often unable to make the inter-textual connections. The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is a good example. In the Hebrew Bible, Abraham pleads for Lot's people, presenting his case to the point where in the final verses of Genesis 18, it would seem that if ten good people were present, the city would have been spared divine punishment. If a reader of the Qur'an brings the details of this narrative (not provided in the Qur'an), when contemplating 11:70-4, then Lot's question in 11:78 can be perceived for what it actually is: not simply a plea, but trying to evoke a certain action, in response to a divine promise.

In classes on comparative themes in Abrahamic religions, students have never failed to note the difference they found in studying the Qur'anic verses when taken along with the readings of the relevant Biblical material. The judgmental, strict, litigious God of Islam that has been created in the imagination of Western Orientalists (and to a certain extent in some Muslim perception) is in fact a forgiving, affectionate Lord.

While it is certainly easy to lay the blame for the sad state of Islamic studies at the feet of Orientalists, only by a new approach to Islamic studies in general, and Qur'anic studies in particular, can Muslims make any meaningful contribution to the field. Fazlur Rahman's identification of the two main problems in Muslim scholarship regarding Islam's scripture still applies: lack of a genuine feel for the relevance of the Qur'an today and a fear that such a presentation might deviate on some points from traditionally received opinions.<sup>44</sup> The problems are inter-connected; approaching them from the perspective of Western religious studies offers a solution.