

Globalization, Muslims, and the Indian Media

Mirza Asmer Beg

It was Marshall McLuhan who in his celebrated book *Understanding Media* brought to our notice the strong presence of the media as a principal element in any cultural definition. The only message, he informed us, was the medium (McLuhan 7). In our age the medium is the master—but sometimes it is a demon master. Yesterday, Saddam was the moderate Arab par excellence, the next day he was the greatest threat to the ‘civilized world’. The nature and influence of the media as central to the understanding of power and domination are accepted widely today.¹ Images broadcast on television can be as devastating to a country as a volley of missiles falling on it. Not only can the opposing position be triumphed over in the media but also, by denying it access, it can be more or less eliminated. Journalists, news agencies, and networks make conscious decisions about what is to be portrayed, and how. As Akbar S. Ahmed puts it in *Postmodernism and Islam: Pre-dicament and Promise*:

The powerful media offensive is compounded for Muslims: they appear not to have the capacity to defend themselves. Worse, they appear unable to even comprehend the nature and objections of the onslaught. The empty bluster of the leaders and the narrow-minded whining of the scholars make them appear pitiful, like pygmies arguing amongst themselves while a powerful giant of an enemy is at the gate. It is the ordinary Muslim . . . who senses the immensity of the danger. He is conscious of the potential scale of the battle and the forces arranged against him; his tension is made worse because he has so little faith in his own leaders. (Ahmed 1992 223)

In the Indian media, which will be in focus in this paper, no serious effort is made to understand Islam and its real meaning. The word Islam which is derived from ‘*silm*’, meaning peace. Islam has no place for violence. Islam believes that one who kills a human being has killed all of humanity. Whereas the right approach would be to judge Muslims in the light of the real teachings of Islam, the media generally tend to judge Islam in the light

¹ The media referred to here is the section of the mass media that focuses on presenting news to the public with the objective of information, education, and entertainment. The media include television, radio, pamphlets, newspapers, and film. They create and distribute news to a mass audience and engage in political communication. One of their key characteristics is that their messages are directed towards a large and relatively undifferentiated audience.

of the behavior and actions of some Muslims even though the same logic is not applied when the actions of those professing other faiths are judged. So when the Taliban regime in Afghanistan destroyed the Buddha statues in Bamiyan, the world's media were quick to link it to fundamentalist Islam and its dangerous teachings, whereas when the U.S. forces in Iraq presided over the plunder of thousands of priceless artifacts, transcripts, and archaeological material from the National Museum in Baghdad, the media did not attempt to cast aspersions on their religion or the Western civilization.

Interestingly, the media never examine critically those tenets of other religions which in the media violate basic human rights or that defy rationality; rather, they tend to glorify and create a positive image of other religions. The approach, however, is very uncharitable when it comes to Islam. It is projected as anti-democracy, anti-Western and anti-modernity. Calls are made for reform and review of different tenets of Islam.

Such calls are rarely sincere and sometimes negative, seemingly suggesting that the ancient teachings of Islam have no place in the modern world. Those who make this kind of calculated assault are aware that Muslims will react against such suggestions. Sometimes the reactions turn violent, something that, in turn, strengthens the argument of the media-created experts that Muslims are intolerant and that they do not want to change with the times.

With globalization we have seen what T. Huff in an article on "Globalization and the Internet" has called the "restructuring of the communicative space" (Huff 440). The media explosion can be seen to be contributing to the propagating of ideas and representing them in unqualified, categorical, and generic terms, and it empowers the individual to obtain and interpret such readily available information. With the universalization of ideas as a consequence of globalization, the image of Islam at the global level is transferred to national and local levels. Again, it is not a matter of interpretation in the genuine sense, but an assertion of power.

The dream of a global Islamic unity is forbidden, while the nightmare of global economic integration is seen as unavoidable. The emergence of a particular militant Islam is a reaction to the Western, aggressively secular ideologies and to the junking of all alternatives to the reconstruction of a western imperial order (Seabrook). No effort is made, however, to analyze these developments dispassionately.

Confronted with the power and aggressiveness of the media, Muslims appear to have lost the capacity to represent themselves, even to express what they see and know as the reality of their lives. Muslim reality for the world has become the images on television and the countless hostile words in the papers. Muslims in the media have no voice, no platform, so they cannot object or explain. Muslim expressions of cultural identity are dismissed as fanaticism and Muslim demands for basic rights are seen as fundamentalism. In this media game Muslims—weak and impotent—cannot win. Their frustration, therefore, at times finds expression in anger and in violence.

The Image of Islam

The mass media provide a particular picture of Islam reflecting powerful interests in the society served by the media. Along with the picture, which is not merely a picture but also a communicable set of feelings about the picture, goes what we may call its overall context. Context here means the picture's setting, its place in reality, the values implicit in it and not least, the kind of attitude it promotes in the beholder. The media follow certain codes and conventions to get things across intelligibly, and it is these codes more often than the reality being conveyed that shape the material conveyed by the media. Since these tacitly agreed upon rules efficiently reduce an unmanageable reality into "news" or "stories" and since the media strive to reach the same audience which they believe is ruled by a uniform set of assumptions, the picture of Islam is likely to be quite uniform (Said 44-45).

The present coverage of Islam canonizes certain notions, texts, and authorities. The idea that Islam is medieval and dangerous has acquired a well defined place both in the culture and the polity. Authorities can be cited for it, references can be made, arguments about particular instances of Islam can be adduced from it. And, in turn, these ideas and concepts furnish basic theoretical reasoning to be taken account of by anyone wishing to discuss or say anything about Islam. From being something out there, Islam is turned into an orthodoxy of this society. It enters the cultural canon, and this makes the task of changing it very difficult (Said 149).

Stereotypes and Caricatures

Vulgar stereotypes and caricatures are circulated by the media. The Indian media have reserved the tag of 'terrorist' for Muslims, who are alleged to be involved in acts amounting to terrorism. Thus, a non-Muslim involved in such activities can be anything but a terrorist. The media seldom question the authenticity of government reports on terrorist incidents. The national English dailies routinely carry articles with titles like "unidentified Lashkar-e-Toeba terrorist killed" without pausing to wonder how did the police know that the alleged terrorist belonged to a particular terrorist organization if he was indeed unidentified. Often those killed are so imprudent that they carry their names and addresses as well as those of their accomplices in their pockets for the convenience of the security forces.

Whenever terrorism is being discussed on the TV or in the press, the picture of a terrorist is shown as a person with a typical Muslim beard and stereotypical appearance. Long after the discussion or the writeup have been forgotten, the picture remains etched in the memory of the viewers/readers so that whenever they hear or read the term "terrorist," the picture in their memory gets refreshed. The criticism of terrorists' actions has been painted with such a broad brush that a distinction between the majority of peace-

loving Muslims and the extremely small minority whose criminal approach includes killing civilians cannot be made.

An Islamophobic climate as regards the issue of terrorism has been created. Islam has been vilified as an intrinsically intolerant religion prone to extremism. In this picture every Muslim in India figures as Pakistan's fifth column and his religion as the fount of 'global terrorism'. He needs to put in extra effort to prove his patriotism, but thanks to the media created image he is still viewed with suspicion. Thus, if the television pictures regularly show chanting 'Islamic' mobs or 'Islamic' terrorists arrested or killed by the police, the distance, unfamiliarity and threatening quality of the spectacle to those characteristics onto Islam as a whole, something that gives rise to an ominous feeling that something fundamentally abhorrent and negative is confronting us.

This has led to the social and political discourse in India getting so badly vitiated that large numbers of urban-middle class people, especially the young, now spout a rabid inflammatory anti-terrorism (read anti-Muslim) rhetoric. Middle class audiences on talk shows reflect this. In the 'Movers and Shakers' show on Sony TV, for example, Shiv Sena Supremo and Bal Thackeray won applause for demanding that Indian Muslims be sent to Pakistan as Hindustan belonged to the Hindus only.

As I have suggested thus far, then, the media's attacks on Muslim extremists is easily converted into an attack on the entire body of Muslims. It becomes difficult to distinguish between the two types of Muslims created in the minds by the media. For non-Muslims, there seems to be a mad Mullah struggling to emerge from behind the quiet facade of every ordinary Muslim, and the sooner and more effectively he is put down the better (Ahmed 1992 39).

In popular cinema, the shady character is usually a Muslim. A butcher is necessarily a Muslim who is depicted as capable of cutting the necks of animals and humans with equal excitement. Needless to say, he has countless children. A Muslim family typically, is usually shown as living in medieval times, bereft of education and out of sync with the modern world. Like the sensational stereotypes, pictures meant to be provocative, to attract the reader, feed into our ignorance, and reinforce a myopic vision of reality. The image of a typical Muslim which takes shape in the minds of an ordinary non-Muslim is that of an illiterate man with four wives and many children, running a small trade, sympathizing or colluding with terrorists and cheering for Pakistan in cricket matches against India. This is not to suggest that no Muslim comes true to this image or at least some features of it, but so do some non-Muslims. The problem, rather, is that in a ruthless and deliberate sweep an entire community has been given this image. One Muslim is, therefore, as representative of all Muslims and of Islam in general.

Islam and Jihad

The term 'fundamentalist,' in and of itself a harmless word, has been given negative connotations and has been reserved for Muslims only in the media's equation of *Jihad* with terrorism. They have been able to make people believe that *Jihad*, which is one of the basic tenets of Islam, as a religious war of aggression for the purpose of proselytizing or exacting tribute and exterminating the idolaters. In reality, *Jihad* does not classically or literally signify war, warfare or hostility, and is never used in such a sense in the *Qur'an*.

The Arabic terms for warfare and fighting are *Harb* and *Qital*. (For a detailed analysis of the defensive nature of Jihad in Islam, see Moulvi Chirag Ali's *A Critical Exposition of the Popular Jihad*). The *Quran* does not call for wars of aggression, but it has allowed wars of defense. Clearly setting forth the grounds in its justification and strictly prohibiting offensive measures, it states: "Fight for the sake of Allah those that fight against you but do not attack them first. Allah does not love the aggressors" (The *Qur'an*, II: 190).

The term 'militants' and '*Jihadis*' are used interchangeably by the media. However, these two terms are contradictory. While militancy is aggressive, *jihad* is defensive. This irresponsible linkage of an Islamic concept with militancy has led to the representation of Islam as a violent religion. Although some misguided Muslims in order to justify their inhuman actions hide under the cover of Islam, the media have been all too willing to accept their explanation as the truth. The media are fond of using terms such as 'Islamic terrorists' and 'Islamic Jihadis,' making the link between Islam and terrorism appear too obvious to all. Media reports usually suggest that terrorism is a Muslim monopoly. The facts, however, are quite different. In India, the militants in Kashmir are Muslims, but they are only one of several militant groups. The Punjab militants led by Bhirandanwale were Sikhs. The United Liberation Front of Assam is a Hindu terrorist group that targets Muslims rather than the other way around. Tripura has witnessed the rise and fall of several terrorist groups, and so have Bodo strongholds in Assam. Christian Mizos mounted an insurrection for decades and Christian Nagas are still heading militant groups (Aiyar 12). Secular terrorists in India (anarchists, Maoists) have been the worst killers. Still, the media focus overwhelmingly on Muslim terrorist.

Islam and Women

The media have presented a wholly incorrect and negative stereotype of women in Islam as inanimate objects, submissively attending to the needs of their lords and masters, locked away in darkened homes. In reality, the potential of women in Islam is far superior to anything offered in Hindu and other civilizations. From domestic decision-making to outside matters, Mus-

lim women are central to family affairs. Where their lot is miserable it is to be attributed to Muslim male tyranny, not Islamic advice.

However, an isolated incident like the marriage of a minor Muslim girl in Hyderabad to a Saudi Sheikh is converted into a general attack on women in Islam. The media give extensive coverage and the whole story is discussed threadbare. It is true that child marriage is a norm in some parts of India among non-Muslims, but this does not interest the media. This is not to justify that the marriage of a Muslim minor is right but to illustrate the media's 'great concern' for Muslim women, which actually leads to a strengthening of the negative stereotype of women in Islam. It ought to go without saying that media are profit-seeking corporations and therefore, quite understandably, have an interest in promoting certain images of reality before others.

The media never stops to ponder the rights given to women in Islam. No other major religion has given as many rights to women. Whenever this issue comes up for discussion, however, a very grim picture of women in Islam is presented. The veil which Muslim women use to cover their bodies decently and protect their modesty is seen as a symbol of physical and mental enslavement, forced upon women by men. They cannot accept that behind the veil there might be an enlightened woman who has decided to use the veil voluntarily. For the media, exposure of the female body has somehow come to be construed as a form of women's empowerment. As Islam does not subscribe to this simplistic logic, its approach is said to be antithetical to modernist tendencies. Increasingly politically active, educated women are consciously choosing to wear the veil as a source of their Islamic identity. For many of these women the veil has facilitated rather than inhibited a wider social and economic participation in bestowing respectability and modesty on female public appearance.

The media are adept at creating a controversy where none exists. The very natural and positive concept of divorce (*Talaaq*) in Islam has also been dragged in a needless debate. The controversy over 'triple divorce' has come in handy to demonize Islam. Learned editorials and researched papers are written on this subject without understanding its real meaning and context. Divorce is allowed in Islam, but not the way it is presented in the media. The irreducible basis of what the media have to say on this subject is that in Islam a married woman is like a pawn in the hands of her husband who can get rid of her by simply uttering the word '*Talaaq*' thrice in one go. This is an extremely ignorant and damaging distortion. Instead of recognizing the positive concept of divorce in Islam where the contract of marriage allows an honourable exit for both the parties after they have explored all means of living together and failed. Divorce is the last option, and not the first. This certainly is more natural and human than the irrevocable marriage in some religions where both spouses have to live together, come what may, till death, the result of which may be clandestine illegitimate affairs, secret second marriages, and, in rare cases, murder when no other option seems viable.

Instead of applauding the provision for divorce in Islam, the media have decided to concentrate upon the technicalities of its operationalization without trying to understand it properly. The irony is that a positive feature of Islam has been used as a stick to beat it.

Charge of Intolerance

One is tired of pleas in the media for ‘moderate’ Muslims to ‘speak up’. The last thing any well-wisher of India should do is to taunt and isolate moderates, especially Muslims moderates, who form the community’s bulk. The demand that they “speak up” (Sanghvi) presumes that Muslims support extremism—a shameful prejudice (Bidwai).

The media’s charge of intolerance derives from protests in 2006 against the Danish newspaper cartoons depicting the prophet in appallingly bad light; big demonstrations against Bush’s visit and Minister in the State Government, Yaqoob Qureshi’s offer of Rs. 51 crore to anyone who kills the Danish Cartoonists. The media, however, found no fault with Yaqoob Qureshi when he campaigned for Narendra Modi after the Gujarat pogrom.

Those who accuse Muslims of intolerance because they question the right of some people to offend them through the cartoons are forgetting something. In a democracy those offended have an equal right to protest peacefully. Gary Young, columnist with *The Guardian*, put the difficult situation in which Muslims find themselves very succinctly when he said that “Muslims were being vilified twice—once through the cartoons, and again, for exercising their democratic right to protest Muslims alone it seems have forfeited the democratic right to protest” (Suroor 10).

Again, to see the opposition to the Visit of President Bush in terms of religious affiliation is irrational. People across religious lines and several national political parties were in the forefront of this opposition. Those who hold that opponents of the Indian government’s foreign policy are trying to communalize it are prisoners of a stereotype, which holds that Muslims can only relate to issues which concern their identity as Muslims, and not to issues of national concern.

Qureshi’s statement to the media has been strongly condemned by countless Muslim leaders and organizations. Their condemnation, however, does not have the same news value as Qureshi’s disgraceful offer, nor does it seem to be enough. If Qureshi was not been sacked then, it was not because of Muslims. But if Narendra Modi continued to be Chief Minister of Gujarat, it was because a substantial section of the majority community voted for him, despite his all too evident involvement in the Gujarat pogrom. This does not lead the media to draw any conclusions about the majority community of Hindus. However, one action of an Indian Muslim like Yaqoob Qureshi is seen as typical of all Muslims and of Islam in general.

Muslims in the Army

So much hue and cry was created by the media over the government's harmless and routine exercise of collecting data on the status of Muslims in the armed forces in India that it was forced to drop the move. The Bhartiya Janta Party called it a 'misguided' survey aimed at 'communalizing' the armed forces, and the media happily bought this line of argument. Voices questioning the veracity of the argument were few and far between. The media renamed the Prime Minister's High Level Committee (PMHC) on the social, economic and educational status of the Muslim Community headed by Justice Rajinder Sachar as the Sachar Committee, seemingly implying that it was guided by the whims of one person. Under intense pressure of the media the Prime Minister's Office quickly distanced itself from the Committee.

However, the fact remains that Muslims are one of the most underrepresented groups in the armed forces in India. A note sent to the defence ministry by the army on January 9, 2006, stated that in 2004, there were only 29093 Muslims in the army out of a total of 1.1 million personnel. Among the Officers this may be explained by educational backwardness among Muslims, but this cannot explain the Muslim community's low representation in other ranks.

The PMHC was not wrong in asking for information about the number and status of Muslims in the army. Such information is essential to know if some groups are under-represented and why. The US army, for example, regularly compiles data on Muslims and other ethnic groups, and this data is publicly available. It is not the media's concern to highlight that certain Indian security and intelligence-related agencies simply don't recruit Muslims. These include the Research and Analysis Wing, the Intelligence Bureau and the National Security Guard.

The Case of Madaris

It is often alleged that *Madaris*, the schools where young minds are brain-washed to carry forward the messianic spirit of Islam and where the dogmatic approach and intolerance of other points of view produce fanatics are tolerated by the Governments to prove their democratic credentials despite the allegation that the *Madaris* are "breeding grounds of terrorists" (Bandyopahyay 1483). However, there are no solid grounds for believing what is generally alleged about *Madaris*. In India, Muslim *Madaris* are no different from theological seminaries of Hindus.

It is also suggested that in the *Madaris* students are taught about the *Quran*, and since the *Quran* is supposedly dogmatic, with intermittent calls for violence, their alumni must be the ideal proponents of *Jihad*. In fact, such an understanding comes from decontextualised readings of the verses of the *Quran*. The *Quran* possesses both universal and particular values. Confusion erupts when we try to mix particularity with universality. Such confusion is

what one finds in most of the recent writings about Islam, which end up quoting verses from the *Quran* meant for particular people and particular events while ignoring the universal message (Neyazi 53). If such decontextualized interpretations were attempted as regards the *Bhagwad Gita*, a similar result would follow. Would that be sufficient to conclude that Hinduism is intolerant or that Hindu religious seminaries are the breeding grounds of fanatics? Muslims are advised to revise the courses taught in their *Madaris*. The media, however, are not alarmed at what is taught in schools run by the Sangh-controlled Vidya Bharti institutions which specialize in the suppression, distortion and invention of historical facts.

For historical reasons, the personal laws of the religious minorities were not touched, but the Constitution of India prescribed in the Directive Principles of state policy that in due course the government would move towards a Uniform Civil Code. The leadership in the post-independence period hoped that people would in time transcend their religious affiliation and come to view themselves first and foremost as citizens of India. The creation of an autonomous public sphere, where people would act as citizens unencumbered by the political and moral weight of their community affiliations was to be the key to modern India (Chandhoke 53). For different historical and political reasons, this was not to be, however. We could never reach to such an ideal situation.

Another noteworthy myth about the alleged appeasement of Muslims which the media never tries to dispel concerns the demand of the rightist forces for a Uniform Civil Code in India, which they say is not being enforced for fear of annoying Muslims. The issue dates back to 1985 when a Supreme Court judgment, strengthening the rights of divorced Muslim women to maintenance from their former husbands, opened up a debate about the position of Muslim women. Questioning the system which allows for separate civil laws for various religious communities, the verdict argued for a Uniform Civil Code. Muslims all over the country took to the streets against this interference with their personal laws. In keeping with the popular Muslim mood, the Government introduced a new law which restored the special family laws for Muslims. The Hindu nationalists were very critical of the Government and accused it of Muslim appeasement. They have since then tried to create an impression, ably assisted by the media, that the whole country, but for the Muslims, is in favour of a Uniform Civil Code.

However, the results of the National Election Survey in 2004 conducted by the Centre for Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, tell a different story. The survey revealed that a majority of respondents across castes and religion support the position that every community should have separate personal laws. 56 percent people said that there should be a legal ban on inter-religious marriages and 53 percent approved of a ban on inter-caste marriages (National Election Survey, 2004). But the Sangh Parivar, as also

the media, continues to give the impression that only Muslims are opposed to the Uniform Civil Code.

Muslim Population Growth

The census has been used always as a tool by Hindu communal forces, ably assisted by the media, to compare the Hindu community with other religious communities, especially Muslims. In 1979, the Hindu Mahasabha brought out a publication called "They count their gains, we calculate our losses," a publication that, by using distorted census data, raised fears of a growing Muslim population. In 1925, Swami Shraddhanand Gupta had declared that he had been seized by the problem of 'the dying out' of 'the Hindu race.' As early as in 1912, moreover, a pamphlet was published in Calcutta by U.N. Mukherjee, entitled "Hindus—a Dying Race," whose view were to become a part of Hindu communal 'common sense.' Population fears have been especially used by communal discourses to construct myths of 'Dying Hindus' and perceptions of declining Hindu numbers. In fact, the British colonizers used such constructed fears effectively for their policy of divide and rule. On the basis of slower population growth rates of Hindus relative to Muslims, O'Donnell, the Census Commissioner for 1891, leapfrogged across simple statistical logic to deduce the number of years it would take for the Hindus to disappear altogether (Gupta). A recent book published under the auspices of the Indian Council of Social Science Research has made a negative forecast that within six decades Indian religionists would become a minority in India (Joshi).

The data from the 2001 census show that the Muslim population has grown at an average annual rate of 2.59 percent during 1991-2001, and that the Hindu population has grown at a rate of 1.82 percent during the same period. It shows a growth difference of 0.8 percent per annum. The general reasons for this minor population growth difference are poverty and educational backwardness. According to the population growth projection of the coming two decades, the annual growth rates of Muslims would remain the same, but it would start diminishing after 2021. Despite the higher growth rate, because of their lower base, Muslims will add substantially less population to their fold than Hindus. The net addition to the population during the next hundred years is estimated to be 180 million for Muslims and a whopping 440 millions for Hindus, or an addition more than twice that of Muslims. Thus, the fear that Muslims would outnumber Hindus in India is totally unfounded.

Another myth spread mainly by the vernacular press is that Muslims do not practice family planning and that the Government does not pay any attention to this issue. The figures, however, tell a different story. According to the official survey of IIPS (1995) and IIPS (2000), the current use of any method of family planning was observed to be 37 percent in 1989-99 among

Muslims, as compared to 49 percent among Hindus. Similarly, the use of any modern methods varied from 30 percent among Muslims to 44 percent among Hindus during the same period. However, the increase in the use of any methods, as well as modern methods was much faster among Muslims during 1992-93 to 1998-99 as compared to Hindus. Female sterilization constituted 65 percent of any modern contraceptives used by currently married Muslim women, compared to nearly 82 percent among Hindus. Also, Muslims use a higher level of spacing methods like pills, the IUD as well as traditional methods such as periodic abstinence, as compared to Hindus.

Another widespread belief which has become a part of national 'common sense,' is that polygamy is rampant among Muslims and this is the main reason for the growth in the Muslim population. In reality, its evidence is quite low among Muslims, and official figures have shown that an almost equal percentage of Muslims and Non-Muslims practice it. Interestingly, according to Union Ministry of Welfare's figures, 5.8 percent of Hindus practice polygamy as against 4.3 percent of Muslims.

Islam is News

The vernacular press is forthright and brazen in pursuing an anti-Islam and anti-Muslim line. Their consistency on this count has been successful in poisoning the minds of ordinary folks. Concocted stories and canards against Muslims have been responsible for many a riot in independent India. The English press, however, is more circumspect in this regard. However, it often wittingly or unwittingly contributes to the maligning of Muslims and hence is not immune to communal prejudice and stereotyping. The case in point is the result of a seven-city survey of Indian Muslims published in the *Hindustan Times* on September, 11, 2005. Crossing all limits of fair play, journalistic ethics and social responsibility, it renders Indian Muslims vulnerable to continued hate campaigns. The survey based on interviews with 813 Muslims in seven major cities of India uncovered that 'only' 42 percent of Indian Muslims supported Osama bin Laden. It is clear from the survey's findings that Indian Muslims are fanatics. The impression which an ordinary reader gets from this 'scientific survey' is that the next time he meets an Indian Muslim there is 50-50 chance that he adores a terrorist. The media's affiliation with power gives its coverage of Islam more potency, resilience and authority.

The media dutifully report what Hindu hardliners such as Advani, Togadia and Singhal have to say. Ordinary people accept what they read and hear and take to be 'the truth'. Issues and controversies about Islam and Muslims are reported or invented and that becomes News, be it triple *talaq*, alimony to divorced Muslim women, minor incidents at the Muslim University, or Muslim opposition to some blasphemous publication. These Islamic topics are picked out of a huge mass of Islamic details and for the media,

these topics define Islam so as to exclude everything not fitting in. The issue is then blown out of proportion and learned editorials are written suggesting that these are the real issues confronting Muslims. For the non-Muslims the image coming out of such coverage is that of a people who are still living in the past and are not comfortable with the present. Even their religiosity is primitivized.

While the press routinely writes about the medieval attributes of Islamic punishment, jurisprudence and the status of women, no one mentions that some orthodox Israeli rabbis have remarkably similar views on women or that some Hindu clerics are just as venomous and medieval in their outlook. Widespread outrage is expressed at the absence of freedom of press in Saudi Arabia, but no outrage is shown at the Israeli rules against Arab newspapers, schools and Universities on the West bank.

Global Islamic Fundamentalism

The creation of an imagined monolithic Islam characterized by a growing trend towards fundamentalism leads to religious reductionism that views political conflicts in purely religious terms. However, although the fact remains that Muslims everywhere may be using the cultural language of Islam to carry out their distinctive struggles in local, regional, or national contexts, this has more to do with socio-economic issues and political issues (e.g., ethnic nationalism, autonomy, and independence) than with religion (Esposito 181).

The emphasis placed on the 'Muslim World' is telling and often gives the impression of a unified, homogenous threat that simply does not exist. There is hardly any mention in the West about the 'Christian World' or, in India, about the 'Hindu world'.

Such discriminating analyses are not made in the media, and the result is a tendency to see Muslim fundamentalism as a universal and unified phenomenon. This is coupled with apprehension that all Muslims are being sucked into its grip. Much worse, the very word 'Muslim fundamentalism' gets simplified. Anyone wearing a long beard and dressed in traditional Muslim attire is viewed as a fundamentalist. The ideology and outlook that constitute Islamic and Muslim fundamentalism are commonly ignored. In this simplified mode of construction, the distinction between a traditional-conservative who abides by Islamic tradition as it came to be defined long ago, which makes it impervious to changing times, on the one hand, and the fundamentalist, who seeks to come to terms with contemporary times by drawing upon Islamic resources and reinterpreting them to suit his purposes, on the other hand, is completely ignored (Ahmad 12).

Conclusion

Of course, there are not only negative images of Islam are present in the media. The problem, rather, is that negative images of Islam are very much more prevalent than positive ones, and that such images correspond not to what Islam 'is', but to what some sections of media take it to be. These sections have the power to propagate a particular image of Islam, which therefore becomes more prevalent.

The negative images discussed stem partly from a lack of understanding of Islam among non-Muslims and partly from the failure by Muslims to explain themselves. For Muslims, therefore, it is high time to pause to reflect and to attempt to re-locate the main features of Islam. The sheer range of approaches and biases and consequent confusion should encourage Muslims to attempt clarification. The problem is not that there are too few answers but that there are too many (Ahmed 1988 1). The path ahead is difficult, but that must not deter us from trying to present the whole truth in its proper context. Instead of taking offense and getting provoked, Muslims need to engage others in a battle of ideas.

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