

A PEACEFUL ALTERNATIVE

by Shirley W. Madany

There is serious trouble in our world and it seems to center or swirl around cultural/ethnic/religious differences. One looks at the great sub-continent of India and notes the shocking amount of hatred being generated between Hindus and Muslims over the recent destruction of an historic mosque. An Indian reporter on the BBC remarked that the Muslims came to India by conquest, hence there has always been this underlying feeling of animosity among the Hindu population. Because of India's enormous population, even when you are talking about the Muslim minority you may be referring to about 90 million people!

Then there is the Bosnian/Serbian conflict which again has its roots deep in the centuries of history which found the Muslims conquering most of Eastern Europe and leaving behind sizeable remnants after the break-up of the Ottoman Turkish Ottoman.

Another trouble spot thus far contained, is the large country of Egypt where radicals are making life difficult by their terroristic activities. Besides the Christians who have been feeling increasingly that their lives are in danger, there have been attempts made on the lives of tourists. This is causing the whole tourist industry to tremble should it reach a proportion that would cause people to look elsewhere for their sun and travel. Tourism is a vital part of Egypt's economy. When you consider the 3 billion dollars of annual aid which the U.S. gives to Egypt and the 4 billion dollars from the tourist trade, where would Egypt be without all this foreign help? Without U.S. flour the Egyptians would be facing conditions of starvation similar to the Somalis since Egypt is unable to support her rapidly growing population of 60 million.

And, of course, Somalia, a Muslim land, is the ultimate example of chaos and anarchy and its sad harvest.

This is why it is extremely important for Islamic nations to have moderate rulers and thinkers who would enable their fifty countries to cope with the challenge of modernity. We are therefore thankful to read certain books which actually call Muslims to avoid extreme positions and seek to co-exist with the other nations of our small planet.

One Egyptian Muslim scholar, Dr. Zaki Naguib Mahmoud is burdened by the plight of Muslim lands today. Unlike the radicals, he offers quite different prescriptions for the renewal of Islam and the necessity to deal rationally with the challenge of today's world. He has supplied the Arabic reading public with many books on the subject. It is unfortunate that the radical speakers of Islam get the most media coverage in the West. Dr. Mahmoud has some very worthwhile ideas to share with us all.

In his book *An Islamic Vision*, Zaki Mahmoud deals with the cause of "backwardness" in the Islamic world today in contrast with the leadership and pioneering spirit of the early Muslims. He believes that "worship" must be enlarged to

include scientific endeavor and technology; that Muslims should be capable of making contribution in the field of "science" as well. He sees them standing as mere "beggars" at this moment. He senses that a climate of true freedom is the prerequisite for the flourishing of the scientific life for people must have the right to take initiatives and that within an atmosphere devoid of oppression.

He feels that Muslims today have made the mistake of not seeing the proper place of science and its application in their practical life. They imagine that there is a conflict between religious faith and the quest for discovery.

He would have the Muslims consider their strengths. They are aware of a sense of continuity between past and present and they believe in the necessity of this continuity. This he believes is good but should not be carried to the extreme so that it is at the expense of properly dealing with the contemporaneous situation.

So this modern Islamic thinker believes it is wrong to listen to the voices of those who call for a blind return to the past, a return which will minimize or nullify the importance of the present. He would remind his fellow Muslims that in the early years of their history, they embraced Islam and began to spread it in the world. Later came the flowering of the rational and the intellectual life and the Golden Age of Islam (in the 8th century A.D.)

He remarks that today the Muslim world is hearing a call to close its doors and stop its ears to the education and the culture of the age. This warning is issued because the radicals claim that there is actually a new "cultural invasion" which threatens the very existence of the faith. At the same time, these very "ultras" do not hesitate to receive from the outside world its sciences and its technological products. Unfortunately, they don't seem to realize that they are doing this as beggars and not as partners!

Thus, Dr. Mahmoud reminds his readers that one of the most important things which must change in the souls of Muslims is that "extremism" in doctrine which does not allow a person to acknowledge the right which may exist with those who have different outlooks.

At this point we take courage as Christians and see the need to become more aware of the moderate voices within Islam. In our encounter with Muslims, many of whom have become our neighbors, we should not hesitate to refer to such intellectuals as Dr. Mahmoud. It is very important to promote a moderate attitude among Muslims in order to be able to present the Gospel to them in an irenic manner.

Dr. Mahmoud remarks: "One of the saddest things which one notices among Muslims is their neglect of other people's thoughts and words. It is even worse than that: many feel it their duty to destroy others; souls have become small, and the spirit of generosity and pride have vanished!"

It is good to read books written by Muslims who do not advocate a blind return to the past and are boldly repudiating the radical movements of today.

Having referred to the example of Dr. Mahmoud as a representative of the moderates among present-day Muslims, we still wonder how come Muslims tend to be on the

whole so unwilling or not ready to consider other peoples' points of view. One of the best explanations was given recently by the well-known western expert on the Middle East and on Islam, Professor Bernard Lewis, who taught both at the University of London, England and Princeton, New Jersey.

"It may well seem strange that classical Islamic civilization which, in its earlier days, was so much affected by Greek and Asian influences should so decisively have rejected the West. But a possible explanation may be suggested. While Islam was still expanding and receptive, western Europe had little or nothing to offer.

"The Muslim doctrine of successive revelations culminating in the final mission of Muhammad led the Muslim to reject Christianity as an earlier and imperfect form of something which he, himself, possessed in its final, perfect form, and to discount Christian thought and Christian civilization accordingly.

"Later, by the time that the advance of Christendom and the retreat of Islam had created a new relationship, Islam was crystallized in its ways of thought and behavior and had become impervious to external stimuli, especially those coming from the millennial adversary in the West." (The Muslim Discovery of Europe, NY: W. W. Norton, 1982)

Let us hope and pray that radicalism will be short-lived in the Islamic world. We trust that the voices of moderation will be successful in leading the Muslim masses to peacefully co-exist with the rest of mankind.

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