

# Ignorance of Islam is shocking

By Ahmed Afzaal

I wholeheartedly agree with the call to "learn as much as possible about Islam" ("Religion of Peace' anything but peaceful" by Jim Ebsen, published in The Forum, Sept 13). In our deeply interconnected and interdependent world, it is indeed imperative for us to be aware of the faith and practice of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims and of the historical contribution that Muslims have made to what we call Western civilization.

In terms of the depth and breadth of the educational resources that have been made available today, it is no exaggeration to say that our society represents something unprecedented in human history. It comes as a shock, then, that serious ignorance about the world's second-largest religion continues to prevail in the same society that otherwise prides itself for its educational institutions, its freedom of inquiry and its democratization of access to information. This continuing ignorance becomes even more perplexing when we take into consideration that human interdependence has never been so critical in the entire history of humankind as it is now.

How can we ever hope to cultivate an environment of mutual understanding and respect when ignorance about Islam and the resulting fear, prejudice and hatred seem to be so common among the supposedly most informed people on Earth?

Since the early Middle Ages, Islamophobia (fear and hatred of Muslims) in Europe has often accompanied anti-Semitism (fear and hatred of Jews), hence the massacre of Jews by the Crusaders on their way to Jerusalem. We have come a long way since the time of the Crusades, but apparently there is still a considerable distance that we need to travel.

Today, while no educated and decent person in the West would openly express a prejudice against the Jews, a similar sensitivity toward Islam and Muslims has not yet taken root. In fact, it seems that no group of people can be attacked, disparaged and ridiculed today with relative impunity other than the Muslims. I doubt that any editor would have published a letter like Jim Ebsen's if the writer had chosen for his attacks another group of people, such as African-Americans, Hispanics or Asian-Americans.

After a long and bloody history of irrational hatred, genocides and inquisitions, we in the West have learned to respect other people's religious and cultural traditions, even when we know little about them; unfortunately, however, some of us still have to apply the same attitude of courtesy and restraint when it comes to Islam and Muslims.

In light of this, I would reiterate Ebsen's call to "learn as much as possible about Islam." Americans do need to learn a great deal about Islam, but they also need to cultivate a healthy attitude of self-reflection and self-awareness while doing so. One of the most significant discoveries of recent centuries is that we don't see things as they are, but we see them as we are. The fears and prejudices of the observer frequently determine what he or she will end up observing.

It is not enough that easy access to information is available to most Americans; information on its own does not adequately address the problem of prejudice, whose roots go deeper than mere ignorance. What we need even more than information is an attitude of humility about our capacity to know a different religion, a self-conscious attitude toward our own history and culture, and a willingness to subject our most deeply entrenched prejudices to critical scrutiny. None of these are easy tasks, but who said that world peace was easy to attain?

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