

# Western-Christian-Muslim Relations in the Current Crisis

## A Christian Challenge<sup>1</sup>

September 11 of 2001 created a shocking awareness of a dynamic that has been unleashed upon us. It was not an altogether new awareness, for we knew of earlier bombings of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and of the downing of flight TWA 800. In addition some smaller attacks had occurred in the "Middle East." But September 11 brought it home with a shock that has changed the world forever, if not for good.

The major immediate response to September 11 has been the concerted bombing and other military activities that have concentrated on Afghanistan, accompanied by many covert operations and intense behind-the-scenes politicking, especially by the U.S. The rest of this article asks some serious questions, but none of them are meant to cast doubt on the legitimacy of at least some of the bombing and related activities. Serious and drastic responses were definitely called for.

However, this article *does* question whether those responses should continue to be the *major* response. It also suggests that there are some very serious *Christian* considerations that need urgent attention. One of these is that of motivation. *What precisely motivated these terrorist attacks?* I am suggesting here, as I have elsewhere, that there is a whole package of motivations, all of them related to each other. An important ingredient in the motivation package is strong Muslim opposition to secularism. That, I would suggest, is one that should find an echo in the Christian heart and lead to a degree of empathy. Many Christians, especially Reformed Christians, are similarly unhappy with that worldview.

However, there is a significant difference in the reaction of the Muslim world to secularism and that of Western Christians. We accept neither its philosophical underpinnings nor many of its results. Secularism has done severe damage to the souls of many Christians and is largely incapable of even understanding things spiritual and religious. However, it is not a foreign imposition for us. It developed in our own culture. It can even be argued historically that distortions of the Christian faith have called up the spirits of secularism from the depth. It

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subsequently became a challenge to Christian distortions and at certain fronts led to corrections in the Christian camp and to greater liberation for segments of the population who had suffered under Christian distortions.

That is not the experience of Islam. In the Muslim world, secularism is a foreign imposition that was imported by colonialism and is regarded as a tool of colonialism to destroy the very foundations of Muslim faith and culture. Unless faced squarely, it undermines Islam as it undermines Christianity. It reduces the entire worldview and way of life that Muslims are so proud of to a narrow religious affair restricted to the mosque and to the personal, again, much like the secular interpretation of Christianity. It for a time succeeded in reducing the grand edifice of their comprehensive religion to a dualistically reduced social force for which there was no longer room in the public square. Because Muslims regard it a foreign imposition consciously designed to undermine and destroy them, they, especially Islamists or Fundamentalists, hate it with a passion. Put that together with the insulting presence of Western military forces on holy Muslim soil to protect Western interests, and you have a cauldron of motivations and emotions that has gone beyond its boiling point.

If the above be the case, is it not imperative for Western Christians to understand that motivation? If we misgauge their motivation, we will surely go wrong in our response. We might, for example, concentrate on bombing terrorist strongholds as our *major* response. It would be a virtual guarantee for a worse mess, lead to a prolongation of the crisis and probably expand into the next world war. If, on the other hand, we understand the underlying motivation, then we can at least face it and respond appropriately. Previous experience has taught me to make clear that I do not advocate that perspective so much as explain it as a perspective held by most Muslims. We may disagree with that perspective, but we cannot wish it away.

Do Muslims have any basis for their convictions with respect to the West? Almost all North Americans would deny that the West aims to destroy Islam. They would argue that the American government doesn't have such intentions; corporations don't; churches don't; missions don't. But Muslims are sincerely convinced of it, so much so that anyone disputing that thesis will be met with a barrage of historical facts – and definitely some fiction as well! --- that she would have a hard time refuting. Look at the Crusades, they will counter, wave after wave. Look how Muslims were routed out of the Iberian Peninsula and other parts of Western Europe. Look how the West colonized the Muslim world and undermined their religion with the theory and practice of secularism. All Western forces cooperated in this effort – the political, the economic and the religious.

Of course, the West is not monolithic. There are many contradictory forces and philosophies swirling around in the West, many of them opposed to and keeping each other in check. None

of us need to be told that, but Muslims do not recognize that important fact and put us all in one basket that contains little but rotten apples. In our context it is therefore important to be *aware* of that perspective without necessarily agreeing with it. And again, of course Muslims have done the same thing to Christians. Look at all of North Africa and the former Asia Minor, not to speak of current Muslim persecution of and war on Christians in several countries. But none of that is part of the *Muslim* perspective that is my focus.

We would do well to closely ponder that Muslim view of Western intentions. Is it not true that Western churches have sent their missionaries, including yours truly, to evangelize Muslims? From the Christian point of view, that is a benign intention: It is our deepest desire to bring them to Christ and to salvation. It is our Great Commission. Yes, but Muslims regard our missionary efforts as a hostile attack that undermines the very fountains (**FOUNDATIONS?**) of their religion and cultures. At this juncture they are correct. They *are* under attack by us. We may not regard it as an attack, let alone hostile attack. We see our missionary approach as a benign way to spread the blessings of Abraham, but we can hardly deny Muslims their perspective on our endeavour. Indeed, they *are* under attack and have been for centuries.

The Muslim sense of being under attack is further strengthened by Western missionary and other Christian writings about Islam. Missionaries are sent by the churches but then they develop a missionary culture of their own. They have become lobby groups vying for Christian funds to support their endeavour. In this process they publish a lot of reports and stories about Muslims. Positive and affirmative stories about Islam would hardly encourage support from the constituency. So they write negatively about Islam and about Muslims. This has gone on for years and years, a barrage of negative literature, a concerted campaign to demonize Islam. Pick up just about any Christian missionary writing about Islam and you will likely find the above description to be true. While this may be less true of Ecumenicals and contemporary Roman Catholics, it is certainly true of Evangelicals, including Evangelicals of the Reformed tradition. If you want to check out the Reformed, pick up copies of *Missionary Monthly* or of the Reformed Ecumenical Council's *News Exchange* or, for that matter, *Christian Courier (CC)*. You will find the major tone to be consistently pejorative about Islam. Today I randomly read an issue of *CC* and found three anti-Muslim articles. I am not condemning this literature and have produced my own quota during my missionary years. I am merely trying to emphasize that whatever our goals are with such writings, Muslims cannot possibly regard them other than part of a campaign to destroy them.

Muslims come across this stuff. These publications lie on missionaries' coffee tables around the world. Their Muslim house servants pick them up and sometimes pass them on to their fellow Muslims. Muslim writers indicate familiarity with this kind of missionary literature. Of course, they regard this as hostile attacks on them that have gone on for centuries throughout the

Muslim world. How else can they interpret such stuff? Think about it! Put yourself in their shoes! How could they possibly interpret these benign intentions of our missionary enterprise in any other way?

There are more bricks to this Muslim construction of Western intentions. I am a senior and most Westerners of my generation have been brainwashed during the course of our education to interpret Western colonialism as a benign penetration of the so-called Third World, including the Muslim part. I remember the years right after World War II in The Netherlands. The Dutch were overjoyed at being liberated from Nazi occupation. And then, would you believe it, they promptly sent their soldiers to their colony of Indonesia that wanted the same thing the Dutch were celebrating, namely their freedom from foreign control. I was a young child, but old enough to recognize the terrible contradiction. That contradiction was camouflaged by ideological justifications that turned Dutch occupation of another country into almost a messianic mission to save the savages from their own folly and ignorance. The Dutch and other Western colonizers saw themselves as God's trustees over an infant people who did not know right from wrong. In the meantime, we built up our own economies from the colonial proceeds. If the effort also benefited the colonized people that was great, but that was a side effect, not the primary concern.

Colonization was accompanied in many countries by secularization. Secularism is defined by Muslims as a concerted effort to reduce the scope of their comprehensive religion into a narrow "spiritual" affair that is restricted to family and mosque, much like the secular definition of religion in the West. This secularism has acted as a virus or cancer or, as in the language of Deuteronomy, a poison that has eaten away at the foundations of Muslim society and greatly weakened the community. Revivalist Islam considers most of the so-called "moderates" as unfaithful secularized Muslims that have been infected by this virus and thus regards them as traitors to Islam. This is in some way a replay of Abraham Kuyper's battle against secularism amongst Christians of his day – without the terrorist response. (Some argue that the "Terrible Abraham" practiced verbal terrorism liberally!)

The current Muslim revival was largely sparked by a recognition of this virus and its damaging effects and they are determined to overcome it, squash it, root it out from amongst them and restore their religion to its more wholistic expression. Thus colonialism is seen not only as an economic affront but also as another aspect of the Western attack on their religious foundation.

The colonial era may be over, but it was succeeded by post-colonialism, which means economic control without the inconvenience of operating governments. Today we all, Westerners and Muslims alike, talk of globalization, which is merely a variety of the same thing as far as Muslims are concerned. It means the imposition of secular capitalistic economic structures and

methods that they consider both oppressive and non-Islamic. The oil economy is part of this picture, an economy that is marked by the presence of Western, especially American, non-Muslim forces on the holy ground of Islam. These forces are there to protect Western interests. They do this by shoring up alleged corrupt governments, such as that of Saudi Arabia, and by restraining potential “rogue” nations with threats of armed intervention from Western forces camping in the neighbourhood. Their presence is a terrible irritant and affront to revivalist Islam. Muslims ask what business do these unholy forces have in the heartland of Islam?

In addition to these Western attacks, Muslims have two tendencies that add fuel to the fire. One is their strong inclination towards extreme paranoia or persecution complex. They tend to see an enemy behind every tree that is just waiting in the wings to destroy them. The second is their very human inclination to judge others by their own standards. Since violence and destruction continues to mar their relationship with others, they rather easily impute their own motivation to others. They are blind to the fact that they accuse others of what they do themselves. It is a tendency they display routinely as my research of the Nigerian situation has demonstrated to a surprising extent. Now add these tendencies to what they see the West doing and you end up with a recipe for extreme anger and lust for revenge that could not possibly be bottled up indefinitely.

The question about what business the West has on Muslim soil is, I submit, a reasonable question even for us Western Christians. Well, we know the *business* that we have there: largely oil to support our wasteful use of energy. *Our question should be what **right** does the West have to be there* in this particular mode? Can we give any *Christian* justification for a presence that provokes so much hostility and that largely messes up any Christian witness we think we are presenting there? Why do we expect Muslims to tolerate in their countries what we reject in our own? Which Western people would tolerate the presence of foreign forces on their soil that are there solely to protect their foreign economic interests? Muslim investments in Western economies are growing. What if one day we had their armies at our doors announcing they have come to protect their economic interests? Have we forgotten the Golden Rule: Do unto others ....? Or have we become so secularized that we would restrict that rule to personal relations that exclude international politics and economics? Even the secular United Nations is aware of the potentially strong impact of this Rule. I have on the door to my office a poster replica of a mosaic by Norman Rockwell on a wall in the United Nations Headquarters in New York displaying that very Rule of our Lord in both verbal and artistic expression.

While I am fully aware of Muslim intolerance, persecution and discrimination against women and non-Muslims and of a host of other “no-no’s,” there is yet another teaching of our Lord that applies here. We are advised to take the beam out of own eyes before we work on the Muslim sliver. It is probably true that in this contact, few Christians recognize any beams in our

own Western eye, but, at best, a sliver. It is also probably true that most Christians readily spot beams in the Muslim eye. Comparing the Muslim beam to a sliver would seem to most Christians to be a gross understatement. But have we then not turned this teaching of our Lord upside down and nullified it? Is this yet another teaching that has lost its force and been narrowed down to personal relations in our secularized souls?

Regardless of whatever oppressive policies Islam may be following and without any attempt to justify them, it is incumbent upon us Christians to search our own behaviour at every level in this context. Have we demonstrated the Gospel to them or have we simply jumped on the secular bandwagons of Western economic and political policies without subjecting them to the searchlight of the Kingdom? Have we demonstrated *justice* in the Muslim world? To ask the question is to answer it.

Muslims are accusing the West as a whole of being bent on destroying them. Christians want to convert and save them, but Muslims see that as destruction. Westerners, including Christians, put various economic and military structures in place on Muslim soil to protect Western interests in oil especially. But can we really, before the Lord, justify imposing ourselves upon those nations and force, cajole or trick them into submissive cooperation? Can we not understand something of their outcries? Would we want them to treat us similarly?

I realize I am treading on dangerous ground. I have actually been accused of being “on the side of the Muslims.” What would that mean? Would it mean being anti-West? Am I approving of terrorism against the U.S.? Should I even be considered a traitor? It is my opinion that Christian objectivity and fairness demand that we apply the above principles that Christ has taught to this situation. They demand that we listen carefully to the Muslim point of view and accept what is true in it while we reject the false. After all, common grace and antithesis, truth and error cuddle in one bed as routinely as husband and wife. They are both operative in our souls at all times. We must always test the spirits and always reserve the right, no, stronger, exercise the obligation to be critical of both sides in a conflict. Our citizenship in the Kingdom of God prevents us from simply supporting the policies and practices of our own nations or people when they fall short of its standards. This obligation to be critical becomes more important as the seriousness of the conflict grows. I believe we all agree that this conflict is potentially about as serious as conflicts come. This article is an attempt to help us all fulfill that obligation. That is very different from taking sides or being a traitor.

Now, if my analysis of the Muslim motivation underlying the current crisis is correct, then we owe it to our governments, corporations, other relevant parties and to ourselves to develop a response that hits the central issues and solves the core problems. I am hesitant to deny the need for smoking out the terrorists and for at least some of the bombing. I *do* deny that this bombing hits the core of the issues. Christians should demand that our governments and

corporations sit down with Muslims to explore the issues honestly and courageously with a view to developing new relations and new respect for Islam and its people. They are not by nature an unreasonable people. For many centuries they far outshone the Christian West in tolerating other cultures and religions. Though, like us Westerners, they have their blind spots, they can do it. But they need to be respected and not coerced into subservience.

I am not sure our secular governments can muster the spirituality this search for new relationships with Islam demands. As I observed earlier, secularism is traditionally handicapped in understanding matters spiritual and religious. I believe that churches or constituencies that share a point of contact with Islam as central as the rejection of secularism, have a special obligation to help their governments towards the development of such new relations.

I am not ready to propose how we should go about this. I here and now challenge the Christian community to rise to this unique occasion. I call on the editor of *CC* to invite knowledgeable parties to embark on a serious discussion in its pages on this crucial issue, to exchange ideas with a view to encouraging readers to take up the cudgel in their own Christian community or its broader assemblies and/or their representatives in government. I summon the Association for Public Justice to take up the issue as an emergency. Ditto for the Christian Reformed denominational offices for social justice. There are a host of Christian organizations out there, denominational, ecumenical and independent (para-church), that need to do the same – and then share with everyone. Some are already doing so, but they don't share sufficiently. Probably a time limit of three to six months should be set for this exchange, for time does not allow us the luxury of running a mere debating club. This must lead to *action*. This is an emergency. May *CC* call the opening shot.