Islam and the West

Scriptural Quotes

Surely, some followers of the previous scriptures do believe in God, and in what was revealed to you, and in what was revealed to them. They reverence God, and they never trade away God’s revelations for a cheap price. These will receive their recompense from their Lord. God is the most efficient in reckoning. [Quran 3:199]

The heavens are telling the glory of God; they are a marvelous display of His craftsmanship. Day and night they keep on telling about God. Without a sound or word, silent in the skies, their message reaches out to all the world. The sun lives in the heavens where God placed it and moves out across the skies as radiant as a bridegroom going to his wedding, or as joyous as an athlete looking forward to a race! The sun crosses the heavens from end to end, and nothing can hide from its heat. God’s laws are perfect. They protect us, make us wise, and give us joy and light. God’s laws are pure, eternal, just. They are more desirable than gold. They are sweeter than honey dripping from a honeycomb. For they warn us away from harm and give success to those who obey them.

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Submitters Perspective

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Islam and the West

We must distinguish between systems of justice administered with integrity, and systems of justice as we may see them practiced which have been deformed for political reasons into something no longer Islamic. We should also distinguish Islam from the customs of some Islamic states.

Prince Charles

[Editor’s note: It is important to know the views of people in the West on Islam, especially the views of those who can make a difference in world politics. The following are excerpts from the speech of Prince Charles of Great Britain, the Prince of Wales, delivered at the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, on the occasion of his visit to the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, on 17th October, 1993. We found his speech quite interesting. We hope you do too.]

Ladies and gentlemen, it was suggested to me when I first began to consider the subject of this lecture, that I should take comfort from the Arab proverb, “In every head there is some wisdom.” I confess that I have few qualifications as a scholar to justify my presence here, in this theatre, where so many people much more learned than I have preached and generally advanced the sum of human knowledge...

The depressing fact is that, despite the advances in technology and mass communication of the second half of the 20th century, despite mass travel, the intermingling of races, the ever growing redness—so we believe—of the mysteries of our world, misunderstandings between Islam and the West continue. Indeed, they may be growing... Islam is all around us. And yet distrust, even fear, persists. In the post-Cold War world of the 1990’s, the prospects for peace should be greater than at any time in this century. In the Middle East, the remarkable and encouraging events of recent weeks have created new hope for an end to an issue which has divided the world and been so dramatic a source of violence and hatred. But the dangers have not disappeared. In the Muslim world, we are seeing the unique way of life of the Marsh Arabs of Southern Iraq, thousands of years old, being systematically devastated and destroyed... Elsewhere the violence and hatred are more intractable and deep-seated, as we go on seeing everyday to our horror in the wretched suffering of peoples across the world... in the former Soviet Republics. In Yugoslavia the terrible sufferings of the Bosnian Muslims, alongside that of other communities in that cruel war, help keep alive many of the fears and the prejudices which our two worlds retain of each other. Conflict, of course, comes about because of the misuse of power and the clash of ideals, not to mention the inflammatory activities of unscrupulous and bigoted leaders. But it also arises, tragically, from an inability to understand, and from the powerful emotions which out of misunderstanding lead to distrust and fear. Ladies and gentlemen, we must not slide into a new era of danger and division because governments and peoples, communities and religions, cannot live together in peace in a shrinking world.

The corollary of how we in the West see our history has so often been to regard Islam as a threat—in medieval times as a continued on the next page
Islam and the West, continued

... a military conqueror, and in more modern times as a source of intolerance, extremism and terrorism. But even now our common attitude to Islam suffers because the way we understand it has been hijacked by the extreme and the superficial. To many of us in the West, Islam is seen in terms of the tragic civil war in Lebanon, the killings and bombings perpetrated by extremist groups in the Middle East, and by what is commonly referred to as "Islamic fundamentalism." Our judgment of Islam has been grossly distorted by taking the extremes to be the norm. That, ladies and gentlemen, is a serious mistake. It is like judging the quality of life in Britain by the existence of murder and rape, child abuse and drug addiction. The extremes exist, and they must be dealt with. But when used as a basis to judge a society, they lead to distortion and unfairness.

For example, people in this country frequently argue that the Shari'a law of the Islamic world is cruel, barbaric and unjust. Our newspapers, above all, love to peddle those unthinking prejudices. The truth is, of course, different and always more complex. My own understanding is that extremes, like the cutting off of hands, are rarely practiced. The guiding principle and spirit of Islamic law, taken straight from the Qur'an, should be those of equity and compassion. We need to study its actual application before we can make judgments. We must distinguish between systems of justice administered with integrity, and systems of justice as we may see them practiced which have been deformed by political reasons into something no longer Islamic. We must bear in mind the sharp debate taking place in the West, others have discarded it, others - particularly the younger generation - have more recently chosen to wear it. This is a personal state of mind which we must consider.

We should also distinguish Islam from the customs of some Islamic states. Another obvious Western prejudice is to judge the position of women in Islamic society by the extreme cases. Yet Islam is not a monolith and the picture is not simple. Remember, if you will, that Islamic countries like Turkey, Egypt and Syria gave women the vote as early as Europe did its women - and much earlier than in Switzerland! In those countries women have long enjoyed equal pay, and the opportunity to play a full working role in their societies. The rights of Muslim women to property and inheritance, to protection if divorced, and to the conducting of business, were rights prescribed by the Qur'an at a much earlier time (fourteen hundred years ago) even if they were not everywhere translated into practice. In Britain at least, some of these rights were not until my grandmother's generation! Benazir Bhutto and Iqama Kheda Zia became prime ministers in their own traditional societies when Britain had for the first time ever in its history elected a female prime minister. That, I think, does not disprove the medieval society, Women are not automatically second-class citizens simply because they live in Islamic countries. We cannot judge the position of women in Islam from what we take as the most conspicuous.

But the West gradually lost this integrated vision of the world with Copernicus and Descartes and the coming of the scientific revolution. For example, the veiling of women is not universal across the Islamic world. Indeed, I was intrigued to learn that the custom of wearing the veil once so widespread in Byzantine and Sassanian traditions, nothing to the Prophet of Islam. Some Muslim women never adopt the habit of wearing it, others have discarded it, others - particularly the younger generation - have more recently chosen to wear it. This is a personal state of mind which we must consider.