

Book Review

**Zafar Ishaq Ansari & John L. Esposito, (Eds.),
Muslims and the West's Encounter and Dialogue,
Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad
Centre for Muslim Christian Understanding,
Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA,
2001, 353 pages, Price Rs. 300.00**

The book under review *Muslims and the West* is a collection of twelve papers that were presented in a seminar held at Islamabad in 1997, under the auspices of International Islamic University, Islamabad and Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University Washington DC. These Papers go a long way in understanding the complex relationship of the Muslim and the West spanning over fourteen centuries. In the process, an attempt has been made to explore the Western perception of Muslims and Muslims perception of the West. This understanding is a necessary step towards building bridges of understanding and friendship across the two civilizations.

In their introductory note, the editors hold that if the two civilizations could develop mutual understanding, respect and goodwill, and the magnanimity to let others live according to their light, human beings in the present stage of technical development, could actualize the enormous possibilities that seem to be within their grasp. By a judicious and wise use of human resources and available technical prowess, they could build a peaceful, happier and more harmonious world, a world wherein a variety of civilizations will not simply coexist, but will flourish and immensely enrich the other. Conversely, if goodwill, sanity and wisdom fail to prevail, people certainly would run the risk of

untold misery, much more senseless bloodshed, and appalling mass destruction.

The learned editors are convinced that those who tend to prophesy a "Clash of Civilization" have no solid arguments for such a prophesy. They tend to claim inevitability for such a doom without any solid reasoning. The editors feel that whatever happens in the future will depend primarily on the vision, magnanimity, wisdom and far-sightedness that the leaders of the two civilizations bring to bear upon the problems confronting all humanity. Were they to succumb to chauvinism, disregarding its effects on the rest of humanity, the results would certainly be horrendous. On the other hand, if Muslims and the West could learn the obvious lesson dictated by common sense and pragmatic prudence, both these civilizations would pool their resource to build a much better world.

Ismail Ibrahim Nawwab in his paper: *Muslims and the West in History* maintains that both the East and the West could meet and coexist; so can the South and the North, Muslims and Christians, as well as people of other faiths could live peacefully and cooperate for the benefit of humankind and the enrichment of all in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious world. As such, call of the hour is that in an age in which revelation is treated as an aberration, it is incumbent on Muslims and Christians to work together. They must join hands to serve God and man in a world which is generally characterised by "sick hurry and divided aims". The challenges of modern times, provide abundant areas for cooperation between the West and the Muslims.

Next, Abdul Raheem Kidwai, carries out an in-depth study on *Perceptions of Islam and Muslims in English Literature*. He holds that while discussing the Western perception of Muslims, literary writings stand out as a rich source material, which serves as a mirror to the popular perceptions and misperceptions. Furthermore, literary writings both reflect and reinforce and occasionally rectify these perceptions. The author here makes an attempt to study the image of Islam and Muslims with pointed illustrations from English literature. He holds that *Literary Orientalism* in the *Romantic Period* represents a significant advance in both the range and quality of attention and use. It is neither tethered to religious

and theological concerns as in earlier periods, nor does it betray paucity of authentic information as in the pre-Romantic period. Far from being merely exotic, it often reflects a genuine interest in the Islamic world, which is articulated creatively and imaginatively. Writers of this period appear on sure ground about their knowledge of Islam. Muslims, partly owing to the large body of relevant literature and partly because of greater and easier first hand access to the Islamic lands. In a multi-faith, pluralist world of ours, we stand in need of a better understanding, fostered by knowledge and nurtured by the spirit of tolerance which can put an end to misperception about one another.

While discussing Western perception of Islam and the Muslims, Hussain Mutalib reveals that the gulf that divides the Western world and the Muslim World continues unabated today despite sincere efforts made from both sides to bridge the gap. By and large, Islam and its adherents continue to be the subject of ridicule, scorn and demonisation by many Westerners. The result is the moulding of a mindset coloured by mutual suspicion and strains in the Muslim-West relationship. This prevailing situation is at variance with the new emerging world reality, as humanity has recently crossed the threshold of a new millennium, characterised by a more integrated and inter-dependent world.

In her paper, "Modernity, Islam and the West" Tamara Sonn, convincingly brings out that there is a pronounced discontent in the Western world with the current state of things: excessive emphasis on material goods, on consumption, on power. This discontent is evident in a renewed emphasis on spirituality. People in the West do yearn for clear articulation of goals and the author believes that at this period of time, the Muslims could make a great contribution to the modern world. Muslims now have the opportunity to make an extremely positive contribution in the form of a forthright, confident articulation of Islamic ideals of progress. They embrace religious and intellectual freedom, and also promote the value of progress. Once the West recognises that Muslims are not anti-rationalist or theoretic, and once Muslims accept that the West is not anti-religious or atheistic. Muslims and Christians could engage in a very productive dialogue on both the values and pitfall of technological development.

In the next essay on “Islam and the West in the Emerging World Order”, Muzzaffar Iqbal, brings out that the growing concern for security and peace has already brought an element of sane reflection in the equation between Islam and the West, both in the Muslim World, as well as in the West. Several initiatives on both sides have started to produce an environment which may give birth to a mature relationship, between Muslims and the West.

Viewed in this context, what is needed is a new, large scale effort in the science of the Qur’an (*ulam-al-Qur’an*) — an effort which will help Western readers of the Qur’an to gain from the Divine Book. Such an effort shall take into consideration the prevailing conditions in the West, the intellectual make up of the perceptive readers and their social and moral conditions. Likewise, meaningful avenues should be opened for access to the life and practice of the noble Messenger.

To conclude common denominator of these papers indicates that there is an urgent need for the establishment of research-oriented institutions, both in the West and in the Muslim World. Such institutions will produce a generation of scholars who will be able to address issues most likely to cause a clash in the next century, between Muslims and the West — and help to avert it.

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