

Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 30

What's the problem? – Seven views of 'Islam' and 'the West'

1. Religion

The problem is religion in general, which is merely ignorance, superstition and wishful thinking. The sooner human beings stop being religious the safer the world will be.

2. Islam

The problem is a particular religion: Islam. It's backward, barbaric and intolerant and supports the oppression of women. Islam is stuck in the Middle Ages. It needs a reformation, based on science and modern thinking.

3. The hijacking of Islam

The problem is Islamism, namely an interpretation of Islam that has its intellectual roots in organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood founded in Egypt after the first World War and subsequently developed by Sayyid Qutb in Egypt and Maulana Maududi in Pakistan. Alternative phrases or words instead of Islamism include political, militant or radical Islam; Islamic activism; Qutbism; jihadism; extremism; and fundamentalism. Islamism is a political ideology of hate.

4. West Asia/Middle East

The problem lies in the specific history of West Asia, particularly the history of Arab nations. Key events and factors of the last 100 years include the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 for the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, the Balfour Declaration and in due course the creation of the state of Israel, processes of decolonization and globalization, tensions and conflicts within and between Arab countries and between Arab countries and Iran, the Sunni/Shi'a rift, and the emergence of oil-rich economies.

5. The West

The problem is 'the West'. From the Crusades to colonization, and from moral and military support for Israel to the recent invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, Western powers have oppressed Muslim countries and cultures, and have developed forms of anti-Muslim hostility, Islamophobia and orientalism in order to justify their own behaviour. This has provoked, understandably, much bitterness and anti-western hostility in return.

6. Alienation

The problem lies in the alienation of young people of Muslim heritage born and educated in European countries. They are marginalized and excluded by processes of religious and racist discrimination and some turn to an ideology of nihilism and terrorism, intermixed with Islamism (see above), as a rhetoric of self-justification.

7. Conflicts of material interest

The problem is not in the first instance to do with differences of culture, religion, ideology or civilization. Rather, it is to do with conflicts of material interest. Globally, the key conflicts are around power, influence, territory and resources, particularly oil. Within urban areas in Europe they are around employment, housing, health and education. Such conflicts become 'religionized' or 'culturalized' – each side celebrates and idealizes its own traditions and cultural heritage, including religion, and denigrates the traditions of the other.

Source: Derived and developed from an article by Timothy Garton Ash, The Guardian, 15 September 2005.