

## **Intercultural Encounters: Perceptions and Stereotypes**

### **The Western World Meets Islam**

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**Abstract:** The world today seems more globalized than ever. Communication easily reaches people from the entire world. Transportation evolved and connects remote places from our planet. The world is dynamic and the key-words of this picture are contact, interaction and diversity. In this new framework, intercultural communication plays an essential part because people are confronted with situation they often don't know how to handle. This paper presents the most common perceptions and stereotypes that the Western world holds in relation to the Islamic culture and civilization. Despite the fact that diversity is a universal aspect of international relations and of nowadays life, stereotypes are usually used to address the *Other*, to lighten the Unknown. The paper also highlights several characteristic issues related to Islam in order to create the proper framework for analysis.

**Keywords:** the Other; globalization; stereotypes; Islamic culture

## **1. Introduction**

### **What is Islam?**

Islam is the religion established by Mohammed, one of the three largest monotheistic religions alongside Christianity and Judaism. In the Arabic language *Islam* means obedience and devotion to God (Allah) but this word is also used to designate the Muslim world - a world that shares Islamic faith and Islamic civilization. Islam is grounded on the belief that there is only one almighty God who created the world and it differentiates itself from other religions through its' strict monotheism, as it is believed that Allah cannot have sons or daughters.

The Holy Book of Islam is the Quran which is not only a moral learning, an establishment of faith, a religious code but also a juridical one, as the Quran brings under regulation the entire religious, political, civil and penal life. Whenever the Quran does not include rules and provisions, the Islamic rigors are fulfilled through

*Sunna*, which represents the tradition and contains a set of compulsory rules. (Dobrescu, 2003, p. 332) The Quran represents the written revelation that comes directly from above and Sunna is the oral revelation, the second doctrinaire and disciplinary source of Islam. (Lammens, 2003, p. 49, p.79) Another important element is Sharia, viewed more than a simple legislation, the ideal Law and Rule of behavior, revealed to people by God. (Brusanowski, 2005, p. 72)

Islamic civilization is extremely complex, being a synthesis of ancient imperial civilizations from the Middle and Near East. *“A result of a long and complex historical process, Islamic civilization is characterized by the great diversity of its historical roots, above which lies, as a unifying veil, a religious view that is strictly unitary.”* (Florescu, 1989, p. 313)

In *State and Religion in the Islamic Middle East*, Paul Brusanowski thoroughly presents the development of Islamic civilization: *“Eschatology and Christian theology, Neo-Platonism, Hellenistic philosophy, they all have become a part of Islamic theology and mysticism. Judaic and Christian Scriptures, Judaic rituals and their juridical vision have been absorbed in the Islamic law. Hellenistic sciences continued to be fervently studied, major creations being translated from Greek into Arabic (...). This recovery of the past was made almost unconsciously. The converts brought with them in Islam their education, culture and political views. From a historical perspective, the islamisation of the Near East did not imply changes of institutional structures, did not bring novelties in the production process, did not introduce new types of human community. Islam took over everything found in the East, maintained the old shapes but adopted a new vocabulary. But the Islamic civilization creation process didn't represent a passive assimilation of ancient cultural traditions. This assimilation took place indubitable in an Islamic way.”* (Brusanowski, 2005, pp. 61-62)

The Arabian Peninsula, a true bridge between Africa and Asia, but geographically belonging to Asia, is the stage of important events that shaped the life of mankind. In the city of Mecca, from the west of Arabia, a person named Mohammed said he is God's new prophet. Twelve years later, in 622, Mohammed leaves Mecca and finds a refuge in Medina. This event, known as Hegira, or Mohammed's flight from Mecca to Medina is an important date in the creation of Islam and the beginning of Arabic and Islamic chronology. In 630, Mohammed conquers Mecca and thus he practically becomes the ruler of the Peninsula. The rapidity of Arabic conquest is usually explained in military and religious terms, the fervency of Muslim faith being considered one of the main causes of Arabic success at the

beginning of their expansion. The roots of this fervency can be traced in the Muslim universality. The final purpose of every Muslim was to spread the true belief and after its' adoption an eternal peace would spread in the entire universe. Thus, islamisation was considered a prerequisite for the instauration of the ultimate peace.<sup>1</sup>

From before the death of Mohammed there were established *the five pillars of Islam*: the confession of faith stating that there is no other God except Allah and Mohammed is his messenger; the daily ritual five prayers; the fasting during Ramadan; pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime; charitable giving of almost 2,5% from the entire wealth, contribution destined for poor people, orphans, travelers and for those converted to Islamic faith. (Brusanowski, 2005, pp. 38-39)

### **Confessions of Islam**

Islam is a universal religion, which means that all its' teachings are destined to be applied by all people, regardless the time and place. A relevant distinction for Islamic faith is made between Sunni and Shiites Muslims. These divisions in the Islamic faith have important consequences upon organization and institutions although some claim that western observers have often exaggerated these distinctions or they have misunderstood their consequences.

From the number of Muslim population, around 85% belong to Sunni branch. Sunni Islam is formed from the majority of Muslim Turks, some Indo-European people, for example the Afghans, Arabic people such as Egyptians, Jordanians, Saudis, Syrians, Palestinians, a part of Iraqis, etc. Compared to the institutionalized structures of Christianity, Sunni Islam does not have a strict theological organization. There are of course mosques in the Muslim world but these are not part of a hierarchy and those who conducts the prayers and sermons are often not part of the clergy. Sunni Muslim practice a moderate form of Islamic interpretation. (Massoulié, 2003, p. 41)

The second Islamic branch is represented by the Shiites, a confession that was born from the political problem of Prophet's succession. The Shiites represent around 15% of the Muslim population and is specific for Iran, southern Iraq, southern Lebanon, 10% of the Saudis, etc. Unlike in the Sunni Islam, the Shiites' clergy has

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.revista22.ro/html/index.php?nr=2006-02-22&art=2481>, no. 833, Ecaterina LUNG, "Casa Islamului" și "Casa războiului" / *The House of Islam and the House of War*

an important role in interpreting the doctrine and respecting it by the community. The Shiites have a pronounced hierarchical structure, somehow compared to the structure of the Catholic church with respect to the fact that authority is exerted from the highest position downwards. Like Christians, Shiites find solace in the eschatology of salvation, waiting for the Hidden Imam, who will appear at the end of time to restore the rule of justice. Although much less numerous than the Sunni, Shiites are more literary in the interpretation and application of the Qur'an, more militant and fanatical than the Sunnis. 90% of Muslims from Iran are Shiites and they are led by some of the most powerful Shiite Ayatollahs throughout the Muslim world, among which was Khomeini. (Warner, Wenner, 2002, pp. 6-7)

Relations between Europe, often associated with Christianity and the Islamic world have been frequently antagonistic and unfriendly. This eventually created an obstacle that hindered the smooth acceptance of Muslim immigrants by the states in which they settled.<sup>1</sup> Edward Said highlights several issues that emerged from the encounter of Islam with the Western world: "Islam was in many ways a real challenge for the Western world. It was uncomfortably close to Christianity from a geographical and cultural point of view. It used Judeo-Christian traditions, creatively borrowed from Christianity, could praise its' incomparable military and political success. And this was not all. Islamic lands are near the biblical ones and even overlap some of them." (Said, 2001, p. 85)

From a geopolitical perspective, there are two essential factors that give the Islamic world a significant importance: the geographic position and the existence of oil, as strategic weapon. To these we can also add a third important element which is represented by the population. Demographic growth is the main geopolitical vector that gives significance to the Islamic world. Muslim population grows, while the population of neighboring regions and other parts of the world stagnates or even decreases, which leads to very important changes in today's world population ratios in favor of Muslim population. (Dobrescu, 2003, pp. 346-347)

### **Western Perceptions towards Islam**

Object of intense debate, especially in recent decades, Islam is part of contemporary reality. Source of concern for some, redoubtable mystery for others,

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn M. WARNER, Manfred W. WENNER, *Organizing Islam for Politics in Western Europe*, Harvard WCFA Project on Religion, Political Economy and Society, Working Paper Number 17, 2002, pp. 6-7.

Islam represents a certain type of challenge to Western thought, which, in relation to the orientalist erudition, thought for over a century that Islamic phenomenon had been decoded in all its dimensions. Both omnipresent and unknown, obsessive but kept away, Islam continues to be regarded with ambiguity. Conventional representations of Islam, based mostly on stereotypes than on real knowledge, begin to demonstrate their lack of consistency. There is too often a tendency to see the current effervescence of the Islamic world as a potential threat to peace and economic security of modern nations. (Mérad, 2003, p. 9, p. 11)

Perception of Islamic space is confusing and mainly negative, Islam world being considered conservative, attached to traditional values, less responsive to contemporary development, crossed by various fundamentalist orientations and movements that resort to violence. Indeed, the reality from the Islamic world has a few such features, but not to the extent that they are the only elements associated with Islamic space. However, the most common perception of this world is schematic, impoverished and distorted. (Dobrescu, 2003, p. 330)

Thus, the most common stereotypes are:

*“Arabs” and “Muslims” are the same people*

Arabs are those who speak Arabic as native language and identify themselves as Arabs. Muslims are those who practice the Islamic religion. Many Arabs are Muslims but not all Muslims are Arabs. Over a billion people worldwide are Muslims but less than 15% of all Muslims are Arabs. Most Muslims live outside the Middle East, in places like Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, India and Pakistan. The confusion of these terms can be induced by the fact that Arabic is the primary language of Islamic faith, just as Latin was for Catholicism until recent times. Thus, it is assumed that all Muslims know at least some key words and phrases in Arabic.

*Islam is fundamentally different from Christianity and Judaism*

Muslims, Christians and Jews worship the same God. All three religions are monotheistic and they have many common doctrines, texts and beliefs. Muslims respect the same prophets as Jews and Christians, including Abraham, Noah and Moses. Jews and Christians are protected in the Quran as Peoples of the Book, because Islam believes that the Torah and New Testament are God's revelations, although they have been affected by human transmission process. An example of different interpretations is that Muslims do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

This acceptance would contradict Islamic belief in the uniqueness of God's divinity.

*Islam is oppressive to women*

Islam has given women new rights, including the one to choose their marriage partner, the right to education and inheritance. However, Muslim societies may interpret differently these rights. In most countries in the Middle East, the law allows women to vote, work outside the home and even run for election, but not all countries are as liberal in their practices.

*Middle East is a large desert with many camels ... populated by men with turbans and long white robes ... women dressed in black with faces covered ... rich Sheikhs... and terrorists.*

Middle East and the Islamic world have diverse societies. More Muslims live in the plains than in the desert. Clothing and habits of men and women in different countries vary greatly and depend on variables such as social class, education, political structure, urban and rural areas or individual preferences. In the Middle East there are people who have become rich because of oil but most people in the region are either poor or belong to the middle class. Terrorist acts are performed only by some Muslims.

*Muslims are fanatic*

Some Muslims have a very strict interpretation of how Muslims should live but the Muslim world is characterized by enormous diversity.

*Islam is violent*

Most Muslims condemn violence and disagree with being considered violent due to the fact that most terrorists are Muslims. The term *jihad* is often understood as the holy war against unbelievers. For most Muslims, the most important sense of the term *jihad* is internal struggle to become a moral person. There is also the sense of fighting for social justice or for defending the Islamic community against external attacks.

**Where do these perceptions and stereotypes come from?**

Even before the Crusades, European visitors who came to the Middle East have often exaggerated the differences between themselves and Islamic communities, focusing on the “exotic” instead of highlighting the similarities. Insistence in creating and sustaining negative stereotypes was a justification for war, colonial

expansion and exploitation of native peoples and resources. This trend continues today.<sup>1</sup>

Europeans have not forgotten the Crusades - reprehensible events but which shaped the history of the West while being devastating for Muslims. Ever since the Crusades, the peoples of Western Christianity have created a stereotypical and distorted image on Islam, considering it an enemy. The myth of the so-called fanatical intolerance of Islam has become one of the innate ideas of the West. (Armstrong, 2002, p. 143)

### **Islam from the perspective of Orientalism**

A well-known work in the Western perception of Islam is the paper “Orientalism”, written by Edward Said in 1978, with subsequent recurrences from the author on the topic. This book is an attempt to show that current discussions about the Orient, Arabs and Islam are based on a fiction. Often Said's work was interpreted as a defense of “real” Islam. The author claims that he tried to show that any discussion about Islam is deficient, not only because there is made an unfounded assumption that an ideologically promoted generalization could cover all the richness and diversity of Islamic life, but also because one mistake continues to be repeated, that is the mistake of Orientalism to argue that the correct view of Islam would be x, y or z.

Edward Said argues that “East is not only adjacent to Europe, it is also the place of the biggest, richest, oldest colonies of Europe, the source of civilization and of its languages, its cultural competitor and one of the deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the East has helped in defining Europe or the West as the contrast of its own images, ideas, personalities, experiences. (...) Taking the late eighteenth century as a starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the institution dealing with the Orient, issuing judgments about it, authorizing views, describing it, handing it, clarifying it, governing it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style of domination, restructuration and authority over the Orient”. (Said, 2001, pp. 14-15)

Medieval Christian view of Islam, seen as a heresy and the Prophet Mohammed, considered an impostor, had a lasting impact on how Europeans see Islam today

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/questions/types/index.html>, Global connections – The Middle East, *Common Western perceptions about Islam and the Middle East*.

because this perception is a key factor in modern descriptions of Islam in some parts of the Western world. Although some Renaissance thinkers have viewed Islam as “irrational” and “superstitious”, they appreciated the philosophical and scientific acquisitions of Islamic civilization. This attitude towards Islam had a major role in creating representations of Islam in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and paved the way for the emergence of Orientalism, the official study of the Orient.<sup>1</sup>

From the late eighteenth century until today, modern Western responses to Islam were dominated by a type of thinking that might still be called “orientalist”. The ground of Orientalist thought is an imaginary geography that divides the world into two unequal parts, a larger and different one called the Orient and the other world, known as “our” world, called Western or West. Such divisions always occur when a society or culture relates to another one, different from it.

“Orientalists - from Renan to Goldziher, Macdonald, von Grunebaum, Gibb and Bernard Lewis - considered Islam as a cultural synthesis; in order to understand Islam in the best way it had to be reduced to «tent and tribe» (Renan).”(Said, 2001, p. 116) Gustave von Grunebaum expresses aversion towards Islam, saying it is “anti-human, incapable of development, self-knowledge or objectivity, being uncreative, unscientific and authoritarian.” (Said, 2001, p. 305) Lewis considers Islam as a “mass phenomenon, irrational, which leads Muslims by passion, instinct or reckless hate. Islam does not develop, nor Muslims. They are and should be looked at, based on their pure essence that happens to include a long hatred against Christians and Hebrew.” (Said, 2001, p. 326) From one perspective, the limits of Orientalism arise from contempt and dispossession of humanity of other culture, other people or other geographical region. Thus, “together with other people variously designated as degenerate, uncivilized and retarded, the Orientals were being looked at through a framework built of biological determinism and moral-political warning”. (Said, 2001, p. 217)

So far, since Islam has always been regarded as belonging to the Orient, it was often greeted with hostility and fear. There are, of course, many religious, political and psychological reasons for this, but these arguments derive from the perspective of the West, for which Islam is not only a formidable competitor but also a late challenge to Christianity. Edward Said states that he failed to find a period of time

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<sup>1</sup> <http://onislam.net/english/reading-islam/research-studies/islamic-thought/440235>, Ibrahim KALIN, *Western perceptions of Islam, Yesterday and today*



in European or American history after the Middle Ages in which Islam would not be analyzed outside the framework created by passion, prejudice and political interests. Said argues that Orientalism, like other social and humanistic sciences is influenced, biased and ideological.

The progressive aspects of modern society and industrialized economy have imposed a constant expanding. New markets were needed, and once home country markets were saturated other markets had to be sought elsewhere. Karen Armstrong argues that in the above context, western countries have started in various ways to colonize agrarian countries from outside modern Europe, in order to attract them in their commercial network. Colonies had to be transformed and modernized after the European model. These areas have experienced colonization as an aggressive, disturbing and strange process. Their modernization was inevitably superficial, because the process that required three centuries in Europe had to be made at full speed. Colonial crusade was less violent, but its impact was more devastating than the impact of medieval religious wars. The strong Muslim world was reduced to a subordinate block and Muslim society was seriously dismembered in the course of an accelerated modernization plan. (Armstrong, pp. 120-121, p. 144)

By the means of the French and British colonial occupation of the nineteenth century, the Orient could be studied, and this was an opportunity for the East to become more familiar and accessible. "There were certainly many journeys that led to discoveries, there were contacts through trade and war and there were two main elements in the relationship between East and West. One was the increase of European knowledge about the Orient, as a result of colonial expansion, as well as a general interest for what was strange and unusual; in addition, to systematic knowledge was added a considerable literary production. The other feature of the relations between the Orient and Europe was the fact that Europe was always in a position of strength." (Said, 2001, p. 51)

The nineteenth century was a wide period in the history of Islam and the West, the academic study of Islam knowing a true development. The new interest in Islam was clearly caused by political, economic and colonial circumstances. "Place of escape, away from the gray industrial cities and mercantile civilization ugliness, for some East European elites the Orient represented a wonderful space, a world of legends and light. (...) However, if the idea of exoticism could provide pleasurable sensations to Europeans, in Islamic countries their contact with Muslim realities often proved to be most disappointing." (Merad, p. 38)

The decades of sovereign control of the West transformed the Orient from a strange space into a colonial one. The Orient was perceived as a geographical, cultural, political, demographic, sociological and historical entity, with a destiny to which the West felt it was entitled to make decisions.

According to Edward Said, “the relationship between Occident and Orient was a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony. Orientalism is not a superficial European fantasy about the Orient, but a compound of theories and practices which made Orientalism, as a system of knowledge of the Orient, to become an accepted grid for filtering the East in the western consciousness.” (Said, 2001, p. 18)

Looking from the Muslim perspective, colonial expansions were perceived as new crusades against their territory. They trigger defensive reactions, but without much offensive power efficient in front of the Europeans. Mobilized in the fight against Europe in order to safeguard their faith and freedom, Muslim nations found themselves engaged in a process of socio-cultural change, a process full of tensions between generations, social media and intellectual classes, between the partisans of modernism and defenders of traditional values. This debate will dominate the Muslim thinking throughout the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. (Merad, p. 20)

Karen Armstrong emphasizes how the Islamic world felt the colonial process. Modernity was accompanied not by autonomy, but by the loss of independence and national autonomy. Instead of innovating, developing countries could modernize only by imitating the West. The Islamic world was convulsed by the colonization. Rather than among the leaders of world civilization, the Islamic world was reduced to a block subordinated to European powers. Armstrong argues that all this has had a corrosive effect. Western nations are often stunned to find the hostility and bitterness that Muslims feel towards Western culture. But under the circumstances presented above, the Muslim reaction can be seen as neither inexplicable nor extravagant. In all colonized areas, Muslims felt from the start the impact of the modernizing attack. (Armstrong, p. 122)

Regarding the relationship between Islam and the West, the Orientalists' efforts to represent Islam have contributed very little to improve the mystics of Islam inherited from pre-modern era.

The modern Orientalist structuring of Islam nevertheless represented a substantial improvement of previous descriptions of Islam, seen as sensual, despotic,

backward, underdeveloped, tribal, promiscuous, irrational and mysterious. Some of these concepts, however, proved too persistent, being found even today. While Orientalism remains an important chapter in the history of Islam and the West, new approaches to Islam, ranging from dialogue and critical understanding to confrontation and rejection continues to occur in various forms.

In the second part of the twentieth century emphasis was placed exclusively on what was known as political, militant and fundamentalist Islam. The association of Islam in the minds of many Europeans with political and military confrontation had had the effect of reducing Islam to a subset of the Middle East conflict. Many people from the West turn to Islam as a way of understanding the causes of conflict in the Middle East and this approach, constantly perpetuated in Western media reinforces the image of Islam as a distant and alien phenomenon, as a violent and militant faith and as a monolithic world inclined to extremism.<sup>1</sup>

Since the end of World War II, the United States took positions of domination and hegemony, thus occupying the central position previously held by Britain and France. By this substitution of one imperial system to another a tremendous revolution took place in electronic journalism techniques available and media and academic interest towards Islam grew. Together these two phenomena have “tamed” almost all the Islamic world, Islam became a subject familiar to every consumer of news in the West, a subject of the deepest saturations of Western cultural and economic history. Regarding the U.S. views, one could slightly exaggerate and say that Muslims and Arabs are essentially seen as oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very few of the details of the density of people, the passion of Arab-Muslim life has come to be acknowledged by those whose profession is to report on the Islamic world.

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