

Western Barriers to Islam and How to Meet Them

Those who devour usury will not stand except as stands one whom the Evil One by his touch has driven to madness. That is because they say: "Trade is like usury," but Allah has permitted trade and forbidden usury. Those who after receiving direction from their Lord, desist, shall be pardoned for the past; their case is for Allah (to judge); but those who repeat (the offence) are Companions of the Fire: They will abide therein (forever). (Qur'an, Suratul-Baqara, 2:275).

1. A Profile of Secularism

It is often rather a simple matter to get Westerners to admit the unicity of God. But this rarely leads to their embracing Islam as a way of life. This study will focus on the trouble spots which prevent people from moving consistently from belief to practice. Among these will be the status of women, interest, dress, the use of alcohol, music, art, the confusing of culture and religion, traditional and historical fear of Islam, and prejudice. Each of these present different challenges and require different ways of confronting them, although they have their roots in the same problem.

The preponderance of difficulties we are now approaching have their source in Western secularism. If one is able to convince a believing Christian that the Bible is actually more supportive of Islam than it is of Christianity, there is every likelihood that the other barriers to embracing Islam will be negligible. The secular person may well be willing to admit the unicity of God in defiance of Christian belief, but such defiance is still a far cry from embracing Islamic practice. Although the specific barrier touched upon by the individual may require a specific response, it is well to keep in mind that the basic problem is identical in every case, and that is the problem of secularism. It is not specifically the "freedom" for women to dress skimpily in public, the fear that the financial establishment will fail without interest, or addiction to alcohol which truly prevents a commitment to an Islamic life-style. The true barrier is secularism.

Secularism is basically a social psychology that has probably been intentionally developed in the West. Its roots are in the dissatisfaction of the ruling elite in Europe in their failure to increase wealth and of the religious elite in their failure to control the belief and practice of the populace. Contrary to the folklore, medieval kings in Europe were not fabulously wealthy nor was the church successful in eradicating heresy. The process of change includes many factors, such as the rise of the modern state and financial establishment as well as the Protestant Reformation. Protestantism still remains a crucial factor in fostering secularism, despite the overt conflict in aims. The function of secularism is and will continue to be the enhancement of a financial and religious elite.

In the long run, it would seem that secularism could best be overcome by engaging it in a dialectical relationship, whereby Islamic financial interests would become so overwhelming as to determine the character of international finance on one hand, and on the other, Islamic beliefs and practices might penetrate the religious establishment over a period of time to the extent of changing its character as well. Aside from the fact that the Muslim world has not pushed its advantage in either sector, such an approach would be self-defeating. Muslim history has clearly shown to what extent Islam is corruptible, and there is every likelihood that should Islam gain control of Rome Muslims in Rome would do as the Romans do. This is not to say that such strategies should be neglected. Rather the opposite is the case.

The financial and religious sectors in the West have manipulated the minds of the masses in their own interests, creating a secular society with a common and unified religion, a society that through marketing consumerism maintains the highest possible increase of wealth for the elite. Any strategy for gaining control of the financial and religious dictatorship of the West must take the brain-washing of the masses into account. Victory over secularism requires the reversal of that brain-washing process.

The secular mind has been formed on a hierarchical democracy, in which there is competition to rise in the hierarchy without any change in the mind-set itself. The mind-set of secularism is quite simply that freedom and happiness are the most desirable things to be pursued in life, and they are attainable only by increasing the amount of leisure time at one's disposal and one's buying power. The failure to experience either freedom or happiness is explained on the premise that one has not yet achieved enough of either leisure or buying power. Justice is seen as a by-product, which arises when there is a sufficiently high level of freedom and happiness.

The Islamic approach seems to be very much the opposite. Justice is the most desirable thing to be pursued in life, and it is attainable to the degree that shari'ah or divine law is carried out in society. The failure to experience justice is explained on the premise that there has been at some point a failure in carrying out shari'ah. Freedom and happiness are seen to be by-products, which appear when there is a sufficiently high level of justice.

There are three areas in which an individual can make a difference. The first is to act in favour of Islamic finances by encouraging Islamic banking and speaking out for the use of Muslim wealth to foster Islamic ideals. The second is to insinuate wherever possible Islamic beliefs and practices into Western

institutions. The third is to meet secularized individuals with the invitation to Islam.

Some of the modes of secularism are mentioned below, but it must be remembered that others exist as well, and that all of them are basically the same thing, the product of mind manipulation which needs to be reversed. The reversal process entails the realization of the corresponding Islamic value and a strategy of activity to bridge over from the secular mentality to the Islamic one. The process thus uses the secular mode itself as an opportunity for presenting Islamic values. They are not listed in a logical order below, nor are they categorized. The reality is that most of them will have to be met in every individual in the order in which they naturally arise.

Modes of Secularism

Secular Mode	Bridging activity	Corresponding Islamic Value
Loss of distinction between the sexes	Right information on biology and Islamic law.	Equality between the sexes
Interest	Fostering of Islamic banking. Development of new strategies.	Islamic banking
Commercial dress fashions	Discussion of principles of modesty and economy. Positive strategies such as self- or hand-production of clothing.	Islamic dress
Alcoholic beverages	Information on the evils of alcohol. Development of a taste for alternative drinks.	Non-fermented beverages
Non-Islamic Music	Information on the harmful effects of rock and popular music. Development of a taste for Qur'anic recitation and other aural arts.	Islamic principles in regard to music
Non-Islamic art	Information on the connection between visual arts and criminal behaviour. Development of a taste for calligraphy and other visual arts.	Islamic principles in regard to art
Prejudices based on marketing consumerism	Challenging advertisement thinking with rationality.	Independent thinking and personal choice
Traditional fear of Islam	Right historical information on the influence of Islam. Direct contact with Muslims and Muslim productions.	Recognition of Islam as the primary civilizing influence in the world
Religious relativism as a cultural phenomenon	Discussion of the principle of differences in values. Fostering the development of faith.	Islam as the final and true revealed faith

In the matter of relations between the sexes, feelings run high against Islam. The general understanding is that Islam is backward, patriarchal, and suppresses women. The truth is that the conditions in some ostensibly Muslim countries to some extent confirm this prejudice. The first way of meeting this issue is to note that such conditions are the result of the ignorance and poor economy caused by colonial and neo-colonial policy. It is no use to cause trouble somewhere else in the world and then lay all the blame on those who suffer from the trouble.

The second thing to point out is that historically-speaking, Islam as a social movement began as a movement to improve the condition of women, who were oppressed by Judaism and Christianity, religions that are still far inferior to Islam in their laws relating to women. If the status of women has improved in some sectors in the West in the last century or so, in areas such as inheritance and rights of

ownership, this is largely the result of new ideas coming into Europe from Islamic civilization and fomenting through the Renaissance and Enlightenment. So the second thing is to get the history clear.

The third point to get across is what Islamic law actually is, a system which recognizes the real biological differences between men and women on one hand, and attempts to equalize the unbalance in the best possible ways. This only works, however, when people adhere to Islamic law, rather than admiring Western ways of exploiting the weaker.

In the matter of interest or *riba*, Muslims have generally failed. They merely give in to Western banking malpractice. The matter of interest at this point can only serve as an area of discussion demonstrating the social and economic justice inherent in Islamic law. Little can be done by the individual but lament the fact that even where it is ostensibly put into practice, Islamic banking tends to conform to Western pressures. The fact that Islamic law does foster such social and economic justice, however, may be attractive to some secular people.

In the matter of dress, the secular person can be approached through the fact that fashion and design are important means of economic exploitation. This can be an opening bridge for the introduction of Islamic principles of modesty.

The evils of alcohol are so well known that a repetition of them is generally not very effective in reaching secular people who drink. Islamic principles of abstinence can form a point of contact with secular people who happen to oppose the use of alcoholic beverages. A point which is more rarely noted is that alcohol is one of the means of social control, and refusing to use it is a means of attaining individual independence. Secular people interested in personal freedom sometimes respond favourably to this argument.

Rock and popular music are also important means of thought control. Dissent in the West is generally disbursed and rendered innocuous through the use of rock or folk-rock music. The drug-like effect of rock and popular music is well-documented by Western scientists, and used quite knowledgeably by music producers. The consumer tends to deny it, however, and pretends to listen to music solely because of personal likes and tastes. This attitude is exactly the same as that of a heroine addict who claims to use heroine because he likes it. Music addiction is one of the greatest deterrents to the propagation of Islam. The only effective way of dealing with it is the repetition of the idea that music is an addiction. The secular person can break free of it only after having accepted that realization, one which is amply supported by a great deal of scientific research readily available.

As with music, Islamic principles vary. All Muslims reject rock and popular music, since these so obviously arouse excitement. Some Muslims reject music altogether. The argument is many centuries old, and can hardly be settled here. In the same way, some Muslims reject all art except calligraphy and geometric design. Others accept inanimate portrayal, others animate portrayal of all except the human figure or the human face. Finally, at the liberal extreme there are those who basically reject only the

portrayal of God and His prophets (as) and art with tendencies to arouse excitement through pornographic themes. This final stance is of course the easiest to get across to a secular person, and appeal can be made to logic in this matter.

The three final slots in the table refer to stages of prejudice in general, rather than to specifics. The first point that can make a secular person susceptible to Islam is to get across the realization that people in the world have become more and more dependent on prejudices created by advertizing than on their own thinking and personal choice. People tend to think they are making a personal choice in one or another matter, but are in fact acting in function of marketing influence.

A discussion of this phenomenon, when successful, opens the way for the secular person to think about Islam as a rational alternative, a choice which may affirm independent thinking. Secular people, although most generally the slaves of marketing, recognize the irrationality of Christianity. They project this on Islam. When they can be brought to understand that Islam differs essentially from Christianity precisely in the area of rationality, interest can be awakened. One way of emphasizing this is by saying that Islam is not a religion, but a way of life. In rejecting Christianity, the secular person has rejected religion. They are open, however, to a way of life.

Secular people are generally plagued by irrational fears of Islam generated by the Crusades at the earliest point and transmitted through folklore, and confirmed by contemporary media. Between the two lie the so-called Reconquista, the Renaissance, and the Ottoman invasion of eastern Europe. These historical factors still have ramifications in the modern psyche, and serve to complicate the attitude towards Islam. These irrational fears can be met in several ways. The first is correct information about history. The second is balancing information about Muslims today. The first can be attained by providing books and articles by Muslims authors. The second is best attained through peaceful, friendly, and direct contact with Muslims.

Religious relativism is generally seen as a tolerant trend. In fact, it is really a way in which secular people categorize all religious traditions as outmoded. They are cultural remnants that should only serve the purpose of museum objects and events interesting to tourists. This can be met by pointing out that religious traditions differ in the effectiveness of their principles of economic and social justice. Most secular people have an ostensible interest in these matters. Hedonism usually has a veneer or cloak, and by plucking at the sleeve of that cloak one may sometimes elicit a response. However, once one has made the point that Islam has better answers to contemporary issues than other religions, including secular trends, there is still the gap of faith to be met. Islam is a revealed faith and requires belief in the revelation as revelation. We can do much to foster a receptive attitude in those around us, but only God can create faith. Da'wa is an invitation, and we are responsible for extending it in as attractive manner as possible, but it is not, like missionizing, a form of compulsion.

2. Post-secularism: New Age Spirituality

Just as in Christianity, not everything in New Age spirituality is bad from an Islamic point of view. A number of practices and bits of information fostered in the New Age movement are consonant with not only Islam, but with just being a human being. However, the central doctrines of the movement are inimical with Islam.

The effect of religious relativism has been the proliferation of other types of spirituality than the Christian ones. Of course, bankrupt Christianity has left a spiritual void, and this has been filled by an interest in oriental religions, primitive religions, and pseudo-spiritualities based on them. All of the Western interests in these other spiritualities are based on secularism, that is, on the idea that personal well-being is the core of any spirituality. There has been a shift away from the traditional Christian concern with salvation or future well-being toward spirituality or present well-being. Given the morbidity of Christian soteriology or the doctrine of salvation, the trend was predictable. It has already been noted that the proliferation of sects in Christianity almost never questioned Christian soteriology. It remained for the New Age spirituality to do so.

It should be clearly understood that New Age spirituality, or the morbid concern for health and well-being as a spiritual exercise and function, is the direct result of this misplaced concern in Christianity, namely the focus on salvation. As a reactionary trend in dialectical relationship with Christianity it is susceptible to all of the criticism that might be directed towards the original Christian doctrine. It is first of all morbid and self-centred. It is furthermore selfish and raises the individual out of his or her proper place in the family into a competitive position vis-a-vis society as a whole. New Age spirituality is merely the old Christianity couched in a more immediate form and more susceptible to marketing consumerism. All of the many sectarian movements of New Age thought, whether based on traditional Oriental religions, traditional primitive religions, or on something developed in the West, can be reduced to this one bare reality. They speak of individual health and well-being to a populace which, through secularism, has grown tired of thinking about future salvation.

The second common feature of New Age thought is the belief in reincarnation. It is clear that the doctrine of emanations, so often presented by the great names in Islamic philosophy, is susceptible to interpretations reminiscent of reincarnation, or the rebirth of the same soul in a new body. The New Age concept of reincarnation is rather developed on the basis of Hindu karma. The word karma has come to have a somewhat fluid meaning, and the whole configuration of belief differs greatly from that of India. First of all, karma is taken as the law of cause and effect, which gives it a rational coating. Without any rational justification, however, and without any proof, karma is taken to imply reincarnation.

New Age thought specifically uses karma and reincarnation for several experiences. The first of these is in social relations. When people meet who either like each other or desire further contact for some motive, they use reincarnation as a justification, saying that they were associated in a former life. The

second most common use of reincarnation is the attempt to explain behaviour and events in such a way as to relieve the individual of immediate responsibility. The event or behaviour is seen as the result of an action or a choice in a past life. The implication is that nothing can be done to change matters. The third most common use of reincarnation is the enhancement of a dull life with a colourful past. Those who believe in reincarnation in the West have always and invariably been more interesting, or at least more famous, people ages ago than they are now.

Reincarnation and karma are also reactions to the Christian doctrine of salvation. There is a reversal from future salvation to past salvation. The past salvation is precisely what might be expected from the secular mentality: salvation by being rich and famous, and thus happy, in the past. The configuration is again susceptible to the same criticism as the original Christian doctrine, that is, an attempt to escape the responsibility of obeying divine law in the present. The West is curiously willing to believe that God has a desire to enslave them by giving advice on how to behave. Rarely does a Westerner come to the conclusion that God's law might have as its purpose the best possible way of living together as families in society, that is, the greatest possible freedom and happiness for everyone.

3. The Sources of Secularism and New Age Spirituality

An understanding of the underlying development of secularism and new age spirituality can be helpful in meeting these phenomena. The historical development of Western mentality shows a clear progression with elements of stability and change. Once these elements have been identified, strategies for triggering change on the foundation of the stable aspects of Western mentality can be envisioned.

Western mentality has a basis of heathen polytheism. All of the European religious systems before the conquest by Christianity were founded on the concept of a pantheon of various gods and goddesses with different functions. These were seen to control the fate of humankind, but demanded worship and various types of sacrifice for propitiation and in order to induce them to act favourably towards human beings. The Nordic gods are still reflected in the names of the days of the week in all of the Nordic languages. The Romance languages preserve the names of the planets, also perceived as gods and goddesses, in the names of the days of the week in the Romance languages. In Western languages people refer daily to the ancient European gods. This is more than a mere linguistic remnant. It is a single piece of evidence for a whole configuration of pagan thought that forms the underlying layer of European mentality.

Christianity was a small sect among many cults competing with each other in the Roman empire in the first centuries of the Christian era. But for a particular historical event, Christianity would have disappeared with hardly a trace. Christianity became the vehicle for the emperor Constantine's attempts to consolidate his power. He made Christianity the State religion, the purpose of which was to enhance imperial power. In so doing he changed the face and character of Christianity beyond recognition, so that today it has practically nothing to do with the actual teaching of Jesus (AS) and his original followers.

There were two matters that needed to be reconciled: these were the stubborn religious traditions of the pagan population and the agenda of the imperial court. These two factors are the seedbeds of modern secularism and new age spirituality.

In the fourth and fifth centuries Christianity laid aside its original teachings and incorporated enough pagan tradition to satisfy the populace and enough imperial aspects to make it useful to the emperor. Polytheism entered Christianity in the form of the Trinity and in the form of saints, who were camouflaged lower deities. The popular Roman cults of personal salvation contributed the idea of a blood sacrifice for sin. The monarchical concept of the church was a stroke of genius, as this above all provided a power hierarchy for imperial use. Thus the primitive Christian doctrines of the unique “fatherhood” of the one true God, forgiveness of sins by free divine grace to all who forgave those who sinned against them, and the total disestablishment of religion, were replaced by teachings serving a completely different agenda.

The doctrine of the Trinity and salvation by a human, blood sacrifice provided a means for the affirming of Church power and thus of imperial power. The Trinity satisfied the polytheistic demands of the populace. But its theological formulation was ingenious from the imperial point of view. Quite simply, anyone who can be led to believe that three and one are essentially the same thing, can be led to believe anything. Anyone who can be led to believe anything, can be controlled. As for the matter of salvation by blood sacrifice, the church became the sole vehicle of personal salvation, without which the soul was eternally damned in hell.

The “bloodless” sacrifice of the Eucharist was doled out by the priests to those who submitted to church and thus imperial authority. To the minds of the people, this bloodless sacrifice actually became the blood and body of the crucified Christ, through the magical machinations of the priestly liturgy. Upon taking part in this “cannibalistic” feast, the individual received the grace of salvation. This essentially remains the Christian doctrine and practice today. Upon a foundation of pagan polytheism we find a layer of superstitious magic and imperial control.

Western civilization is replete with many other aspects with a similar origin and development. Baptism is a good example. It has multiple pagan origins. Being “washed in the blood of the lamb” refers to the Roman cult into which one was initiated by being placed under a grating over which an animal was slaughtered, allowing the blood to flow over the body of the person below. Similarly, the practice of sprinkling water on the heads of babies comes from the pagan practice of placing the child under a bull and having the bull’s sperm fall on the head, supposedly giving the child the strength of the bull. In order for the populace to accept Christianity as the State religion, it was necessary to incorporate functional equivalents of such practices. Mothers insisted on them, and had the church not provided them, they would have been carried on outside the church. By accepting them, the church consolidated its power over the populace. Western Christianity contains the seeds of secularism and pagan-based spirituality. They are inevitable.

4. Specific Strategies for Meeting Western Mentality

We have uncovered the underlying, basic features which have produced secularism and New Age mentality. These are a lower, primitive layer of polytheism, a second layer of Christianized superstition, and an upper layer of imperial control. Whatever the pretence of rationality and individual freedom, basically, the Westerner has a magical concept of the world and believes the must be controlled.

The Muslim missionaries in the Balkans built on this foundation and the result was the only stable and permanent Muslim communities in Europe. Their strategy worked on the basis of superstition and military control. The Sufi practitioners used sleight of hand tricks to awe the superstitious Christian population and thus convinced them of the superiority of Islam by miracle-working. They reinforced this by military control. These were the two things that Europeans could understand and they worked.

On the other side of Europe Islam failed to preserve the flower of European civilization, Andalusia, because of its dependence on other means of presenting Islam. In Muslim Spain the emphasis was on reason and culture. There was no European Dark Age, merely because Paris and London were agricultural market villages. There were centres of civilization at the time, but all of them were in Muslim Spain. Reason and culture were ploughed under and the Christianization of Andalusia five hundred years ago turned the cultural and intellectual centre of Europe into a ghetto from which it has never recovered.

The conclusion is that the most effective way to reach Westerners remains trickery and miracle-working along with a show of power. These are the very methods presently used in the West. Marketing advertisement is an appeal to trickery that by-passes the reasoning processes. The threat of military power continues to be the only way of controlling the Balkans even today.

Obviously there is a self-defeating element in such an approach. There is another aspect of history, and that is the fact that Medieval Islam contributed culture, science and philosophy to the West. These continue to have an influence, and if constantly applied have the potential of spreading Islamic values. The challenge is to maintain these elements of Islamic influence in one's contact with secular individuals and, insofar as one can, to influence matters more broadly.

These influences have continued for over a thousand years. Muslims may and can retrieve the pre-colonial values of Islamic civilization through education, the arts, and sciences. Globalized civilization is of such a low and superficial character that it is unable to compete with the vitality of what has been proven through centuries of success to be better. A bold penetration of the academic world on one hand, and the world of entertainment on the other, with Islamic education, science, and arts would be irresistible. The best strategy in dealing with secularized Westerners is to develop these areas in one's personal life and aggressively share them.

Image:

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