

Causes of Islamophobia – 2

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 18 February 2022

يُرِيدُونَ لِيُطْفِئُوا نُورَ اللَّهِ بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ وَاللَّهُ مُنِيرٌ نُورِهِ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ الْكَافِرُونَ ﴿٨١﴾ هُوَ الَّذِي أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُ
بِالْهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ الْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُ عَلَى الدِّينِ كُلِّهِ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ الْمُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

“They desire to put out the light of Allah with their mouths, but Allah will perfect His light, though the disbelievers may be averse. He it is Who has sent His Messenger with the guidance and the Religion of Truth that He may make it prevail over all religions, though those who set up partners (with Allah) are averse.” — ch. 61, v. 8–9.

Last week I read the above verses and explained their connection with Islamophobia, and how the light, guidance and truth of Islam will spread despite the efforts to blow it out. I quoted two non-Muslim Western scholars of Islam who pointed out that the misconceptions and allegations against Islam which were put about in Europe a thousand years ago, at a time of ignorance and bigotry, are still being repeated in our modern enlightened times of knowledge and education. Turning back to the historical sequence, it was some 800 to 1000 years ago that Christian European countries were aroused by the passion that they must go to conquer the lands in the Middle East where their sacred places were located and where their fellow Christians were living under Muslim rule. For this purpose they launched the crusades. They raised armies in England, France, Italy and other European countries and went to the present-day Syria, Palestine, and Israel and repeatedly tried to conquer them. In order to incite their own people to join these military expeditions, they presented before them a most hideous and distorted picture of Islam, the Holy Prophet Muhammad and the Muslims, to create hatred towards them.

There were different misrepresentations of Islam, and some of these allegations were actually in conflict with one another. It was said that Muslims worship Muhammad, but also that Muslims worship the sun. It was believed that according to

Islam women have no souls. A common story was that the Holy Prophet had trained a dove or pigeon to come to his ear, in which he kept a grain of corn for the bird, and when the bird came to his ear the Holy Prophet would pretend that he was bringing revelation to him. But why was such a story made up? It was because they had read in the Gospels that Jesus saw the Holy Spirit as a dove descending upon him and along with the dove a voice came to Jesus from heaven. This, of course, was in a vision. When Christians heard that the Holy Prophet Muhammad claimed to receive revelation, they assumed that he must have claimed that a dove was descending upon him with the word of God. On that baseless assumption, they constructed a completely imaginary story that the Holy Prophet, in order to show people that a dove was bringing him a message, trained a bird to come to his ear by attracting it with a grain of corn and then he claimed that it was whispering revelation into his ear! Another false story was constructed that Muhammad was an idol-worshipper. But there was an opposite false story as well. They realised that the Quran contained some teachings similar to those of Jesus and that these were largely in its early revelation at Makkah. So a story was made up that Muhammad originally started out as a Christian preacher. Then he got into disagreements with the established Christian religious leaders and, becoming jealous of them, he split off from them to start his own false religion. In fact, in the early days of Islam, when Christians outside Arabia first heard of Islam, they thought that it was another Christian sect, a misguided one.

This is the kind of image of Islam and Muslims that those nations of Western Europe had before them who sent their armies into the Middle East to establish Christian rule over their holy places in the area which now consists of Israel, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon etc. These crusades were ultimately a failure. However, some of the crusader soldiers, through contact with the local Muslims, became impressed with the religion of Islam. But even their showing of friendliness and tolerance towards Islam was strongly condemned by the Christian church. In one of the periods of the crusades, they encountered the forces of the man known in the West as Saladin, and in Arabic as Salah-ud-Din Ayyubi. He was a Kurd, born in what is now Iraq and lived from 1137 to 1193, more than 800 years ago. The crusaders were

very impressed with, not only his fighting ability as soldier and general, but with his character, wisdom, justice, kindness and generosity towards the enemy. As a result, he became a hero figure in the West. Francis Robinson, from whose book I quoted in my last *Khutba*, calls him “the great hero of medieval chivalry”. “Chivalry” is to maintain an honourable standard of conduct in fighting in battle, to be brave and courageous in fighting, but also adhere to moral values and be fair and just to the enemy and protect the weak.

Because of his noble qualities, Saladin achieved a great reputation in Western Europe, despite the great hostility towards Islam. There is a famous poem by the Italian Christian poet and philosopher Dante about life after death. He imagines, from a Christian point of view, what sort of people will be in hell, in heaven and a place in between the two for people who are in between being hellish and heavenly. The poem is called *The Divine Comedy* and was written about 700 years ago. In this poem, Saladin is mentioned as one of the “virtuous non-Christians” who are not sent to hell like other non-Christians. There was a famous British novelist and playwright, Sir Walter Scott (d. 1832), who wrote a novel set in the crusades in Palestine called *The Talisman*. He wrote in the introduction to the novel that the English king who went to fight in one of the crusades was like a cruel and violent ruler, which is how we (Europeans) think of Muslim sultans to be, and Saladin was like a gentleman, wise and liberal in his views, which is how we think of modern Europeans to be. In this novel, published 200 years ago in Edinburgh, he portrays the Muslims under Saladin as superior in culture and civilisation to the crusaders whom he portrays as greedy, corrupt and unprincipled. I remember doing the crusades in history at school in this country, the UK, in the early 1960s. Saladin was presented as a hero of great qualities to be admired, even though his adversary was Richard I of England, known as Richard the Lionheart. It is also reported that, apart from fighting battles against the Christians, when Saladin met them on a friendly basis he told them about the teachings of Islam.

The point I am making is that this shows that if Muslims present a good example of moral behaviour, they can win the hearts of their most staunch enemies, as did Saladin in his contact with the Europeans. We should also remember that this was a

time, 800 to a 1000 years ago, when Muslim civilization was at its height, the best in the world, and Western nations were much behind Muslims in worldly development and knowledge. Therefore, although the Christians of Europe were deeply biased against Islam, they still used to take advantage of the knowledge developed by the Muslims, and could not help being impressed and over-awed by them.

However, after about the year 1500, in other words about 500 years ago, this situation started to change and to become the other way round. In European countries, progress started being made in scientific knowledge and this led to all kinds of technological inventions being made. Along with that, European nations began to explore the world and establish trading centres in Asia and Africa, including the Indian subcontinent. At exactly the same time, the decline of Muslims started. The development of knowledge in their countries came to a stop and they lost the qualities and skills of statecraft and government, and how to govern countries efficiently. By the 19th century (the 1800s) Muslim countries were either directly under the rule of one European power or another, or they were so weak that they relied on the support of some European power or other.

When Europeans saw the dominance of their countries in every field of life, they considered it to be a proof of the truth of their religion and the validity of their values and civilisation. And seeing the decline of the Muslims, they declared Islam to be the cause of the failure of the Muslims. Their opinion about Islam now was that this religion may have been of some good many centuries ago, but in the new age of knowledge and enlightenment Islam was an obstacle in the path of human progress and human civilization.

Along with the spread of European rule in the world, Christian missionaries also went all over the world and attempted to convert Muslims to Christianity. The situation now became that the West was addressing the Muslims themselves. At the time of the crusades they were addressing the Christian public and inflaming them against Islam in order to incite them to take part in the wars against Muslim rule in the Middle East. The Christian public could be told anything against Islam, no matter how

baseless and ridiculous and non-sensical, and I have already mentioned some of these misrepresentations. But now it was the Muslims who were being addressed. Therefore, what was required by the West was a criticism of Islam which at least had some basis, so that it might have an effect upon the Muslims, and not be rejected as complete nonsense.

So in this period, Christians in Europe published literature such as English translations of the Quran and biographies of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, but in these publications they presented their own distorted views about Islam. These views they tried to justify from Islamic sources. Islam was presented by them as a religion of ignorance, savagery and violence, whose founder, the Holy Prophet, was following his own worldly and material desires. Unfortunately, these critics found much material in the books written by the Muslims themselves, and in certain wrong notions held by Muslims, which they could use against Islam.

Now I have reached the time of about a hundred years ago from today in tracing the history of Islamophobia and I will *inshallah* continue this forward in the next *khutba*.

May Allah enable us to continue the work of removing misconceptions about Islam until its light shines all over the world, ameen.

بَارِكْ اللَّهُ لَنَا وَكُمُ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعْنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-