

## Islam: Common Myths Deconstructed

By Polly Mann

The excellent 200-page book, “Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire” by Deepa Kumar (Haymarket Books 2012) could be described as a succinct primer for those of us who have given little thought as to why there is such mistrust of Middle Easterners among Americans. This fear was exacerbated by the Twin Trade Towers bombing of 9/11 and subsequently, the word “terrorist” became connected with Middle Easterners in the minds of many Americans. This book brings together past history and current events as it examines the prevalent myths about Islam that have produced such fear in this country. A summary of the myths and the reality follow:

Islam is a monolithic belief. A common misperception is that all Middle Easterners are Arabs and all Arabs are adherents of Islam; people also think there are no variations in the way the religion is practiced. Kumar makes a comparison of Christianity with Islam. As there are Baptists, Methodists, Seventh Day Adventists and scores of groups professing Christianity and Orthodox and Fundamentalist Jews so there are different varieties of Islam of which there are two main categories: Sunni and Shi'a'. The Sufi Islam practiced in India is quite different from the Shi'a Islam practiced in Pakistan. They could be compared to Catholic and Protestant Christians.

Islam is a sexist religion. As the British in the 1800's denounced sexism in Islam, they worked to deny British women the right to vote. Discussion of the rights of women continue in Islamic society as in Christian and Judaic society. Some scholars argue that Islam is not inherently misogynistic and point to the egalitarian passages in the Koran that suggest equality between men and women. Equality for women is a tenet of most religions today—the fact that equality has not yet been fully achieved is a condition of all.

The “Muslim Mind” is incapable of reason and rationality. There are many excellent books and articles, listed in Kumar’s footnotes, that tear to shreds the concept of biologically defined races and the spurious connection between biology and intellectual capacity. The European Renaissance could not have occurred without the contributions of Muslim thinkers and scientists.

Islam is an inherently violent religion. This virulent myth is strong today, helped, of course, by 9/11. Author Amitabh Pal, Managing Editor of The Progressive magazine explored this myth in his book, “Islam” Means Peace: Understanding the Muslim Principle of Nonviolence Today with examples of non-violence from the Koran. The bloody history of early Christianity with attention given to the Crusades is cited as a correlative of Islamic violence. The reader is reminded that after the Sultan Saladin retook Jerusalem from the Crusaders, he forbade acts of violence against them.

Muslims are incapable of democracy and self rule. This is the false basis for much of Western policy with regard to the Middle East. Again and again Western nations have interfered in the internal affairs of Middle Eastern nations looking to avail themselves of their natural resources, such as oil and minerals, while claiming to be "bringing democracy."

Today the worldwide Occupy movement is reminding people about the humanity we all share and how the greedy capitalist system is, in its essence, violent and how we can work together to bring about a peaceful world. When we are aware of the things that divide us such as Islamophobia we are more capable of making that dream a reality.

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