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The Muslim Stereotype

By Nicholas D. Kristof

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Brunei

Whatever happens in Iraq, we may be inching closer to a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West.

There’s a fatigue in the West with an Arab world that sometimes seems to put its creative juices mostly into building better bombs. Even open-minded people in the West sometimes feel a sense of resignation that maybe the bigots are right: maybe Islam just is intrinsically backward, misogynistic and violent.

After I wrote recently about reform elements in Islam, I received a long note from a 24-year-old Chicagoan, Paul Williams, who ventured what many people feel: “I went to school in Macalester College and the whole time there I wrote paper after paper defending Islam,” he told me. Now, he says, after reading the Koran cover to cover and living in Turkey, he has lapsed into political incorrectness: “The more I’m here the more I’m beginning to think that there’s just something wrong with Islam.”

That’s a common view, shaped partly by the way we in the news business focus on violence in the Islamic world. So let me step up and say that I find the common American stereotypes of Islam profoundly warped.

Those stereotypes are largely derived from the less than 20 percent of Muslims who are Arabs, with Persians and Pashtuns thrown in as well. But the great majority of the world’s Muslims live not in the Middle East but here in Asia, where religion has mostly been milder.

At the moment I’m in Brunei, a Muslim country nestled in Southeast Asia. At the University of Brunei, women outnumber men. Women here drive, fill senior offices in government and the private sector, serve as ambassadors and are pilots for the national airline. “Young women have equal opportunities now — it’s up to your capability,” said Lisa Ibrahim, president of the Young Entrepreneurs Association of Brunei.

Brunei has gold-domed mosques in its skyline, and the sultan has two wives. But Brunei is also home to churches and Hindu temples serving a multiethnic society. Young people flirt together in the cafes, and non-Muslims are allowed to drink alcohol.

Anwar Ibrahim, the former Malaysian deputy prime minister, says he reminds Americans that the most populous Muslim country (Indonesia) is a democracy whose elections run more smoothly than Florida’s.

Yes, Islamists are a threat in Asia, and many imams are more scandalized by female flesh than by honor killings or illiteracy. Indonesia has tried the editor of the local edition of Playboy magazine, and a state in Malaysia has threatened to fine women who wear miniskirts. But Indonesia has had a woman as president, while Bangladesh has had two female prime ministers and has more girls in high school than boys.

“We tend to be more tolerant,” Yusof Halim, a prominent lawyer in Brunei, said of Asian Muslims. He then confided: “My honest opinion is that Arabs are male chauvinists.”

Meanwhile, many Muslims are as disenchanted with us as we are with them. They complain about hypocritical Americans who parrot slogans about human rights but brutalize Muslims at Guantánamo and supply the weaponry that kills Muslim children in Gaza and Lebanon.

The Koran and Bible alike have passages that make 21st-century readers flinch; most Christians just ignore sections on slavery or admonitions to kill a disobedient child. Likewise, some Muslims are reinterpreting Koranic passages on polygamy and amputations, saying they were restricted to particular circumstances that no longer apply.

Frankly, I don't see that any religion's influence is intrinsically peaceful or violent. Christianity inspired both Mother Teresa and pogroms. Hinduism nurtured Gandhi and also the pioneers of suicide bombings.

These days, ferocious anti-Semitism thrives in some Muslim countries, but in the Dreyfus affair a century ago Muslims sided with a Jew persecuted by anti-Semitic Christians. And the biggest sectarian slaughter in Europe in modern times involved Christians massacring Muslims at Srebrenica.

The plain fact is that some Muslim societies do have a real problem with violence, with the subjugation of women, with tolerance. But the mosaic of Islam is vast and contains many more hopeful glimpses of the future.

There is a historic dichotomy between desert Islam — the austere fundamentalism of countries like Saudi Arabia — and riverine or coastal Islam, more outward-looking, flexible and tolerant. Desert Muslims grab the headlines, but my bet is that in the struggle for the soul of Islam, maritime Muslims have the edge.

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