

Show Us More of the Other America

A moderate Muslim's prayer for American faith and family values

By **Mustafa Akyol**

“Why do you hate us?” Since the horrendous events of 9/11, Americans have been posing that question to Muslims across the globe. The first answer from someone like me, who is repulsed by terrorists who kill in the name of Islam, is that most of us *do not* hate you. Yet it must be acknowledged that radical Muslim rage is real in many countries.

This rage is often irrational and ill founded. There is, however, one crucial source of anti-Americanism that is built on a genuine threat. Many Muslims are put off by the moral decline that seems to have pervaded American culture during the second half of the twentieth century. They worry that it will be exported to their own children and societies.

In truth, American moral values are in much better shape than a glance at U.S. television or other indicators might have one believe. Crime, divorce, welfare dependency, illegitimacy, abortion, drug use, and many other ills have actually fallen significantly from their peaks after 1960s- and '70s-style liberation swept U.S. culture. Still, many Americans agree that moral decline is a serious risk in all the modern democracies, and most would trace the virus ultimately to a view asserting that material life is all there is to existence. Philosophical materialism puts self-interest before all else, and denies the existence of higher callings from God. This easily leads to pleasure-seeking, selfishness, and hedonism, and the consequences are horrifying to many devout Muslims around the world. Through American popular culture such as Hollywood movies, MTV, or pornography, they encounter a culture in which God and religious principles seem to be disrespected, neglected, even attacked or ridiculed.

In his recent book, *Why the Rest Hates the West*, historian Meic Pearse notes that many people around the globe see Western societies as being ones that “derogate religion, exalt triviality (sports, entertainment, fashion), endorse sexual shamelessness, deprecate family, and discard honor.” Pearse argues that these tendencies do indeed have bad results: “social atomization; personal irresponsibility; dehumanizing impersonality; and other



©Frank Carroll/MPTV.net

wounds to traditional families, communities, and conceptions of the person.”

“The al-Qaeda hijackers did not target the Vatican, the capital of Western Christianity,” notes writer David Kelley, but rather the World Trade Center, “a temple of modernity.” He points out that “Hamas’s suicide bombers usually attack Israeli pizza parlors, hotels, and nightclubs, not synagogues.” Kelley (who is himself an atheist) concludes that “Islamist hatred of the West is not directed at Christianity as a rival religion but at modernism as an alternative to religion as such.”

But of course, the West is not monolithic. Materialism is just one side of the West—on the other side, Judeo-Christianity stands firm. This state of affairs is evident only vaguely in Europe, but crystal clear in America. Americans possess one of the most religious societies in the world, and in fact the world’s most determined battle against materialism—on cultural, philosophical, and scientific grounds—is going on right now in America.

Muslims who recognize this fact make a distinction between “righteous Westerners” and other ones. For example, take a look at these lines from an article titled “The Final Jihad,” published on a popular Muslim Web site:

Western secular materialism takes us from our prayers, takes us from our Islamic culture...gives us a society of crime, violence, drug abuse, alcoholism, prostitution, pornography, homosexuality, exploitation of people and resources, and reduces life to a meaningless exercise in futility. [But] we must know who and what is the enemy. It is

.....
Mustafa Akyol has lectured at several universities in the U.S. and U.K., and now directs the Intercultural Dialogue Platform of Istanbul in Turkey, which encourages interfaith cooperation.

**The U.S. must do a better job
of portraying the principles
of decency that
undergird its society.**

important to realize that...many good people in Western nations trying to live right lives.... These people are not our enemy; they also are victims of Western secular materialism.

Most Muslims, however, fail to appreciate the distinction drawn above, and don't know anything about the "culture war" going on in American society. They see America only through its materialist pop culture. Distaste for materialism thus translates into a distaste for America.

This distaste derives not only from culture but also from ideas. When "Western ideas" are mentioned, many Muslims think not of Jefferson, C. S. Lewis, Lincoln, or Burke, but rather of Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, and Carl Sagan. The behavior of some Westernized local elites in Muslim countries make the situation even worse. In my country of Turkey, one popular stereotype of the Westernized Turk is of the soulless, skirt- and money-chasing man drinking whiskey while swearing at Islam. Although a caricature, it carries enough truth to further a bad image of the West.

These negative images, however, can be reversed. Many Muslims are inclined to appreciate the tradition of "family values" in America. During my childhood, in the early 1980s, the most popular TV series among conservative Turkish Muslim families was "Little House on the Prairie," which portrayed the life of a very devout American family. People were saying that such ethics were what made America strong. Today, Turks complain about the "corrupt American culture" streaming into their houses through television and the Internet. They would love to see the America of "Little House" again.

It would provide an antidote to Islamic radicalism and its inherent anti-Americanism if more Muslims realized that today's Hollywood portrayals don't accurately reflect the moral lives of most Americans. The masterminds of Islamic radicalism work hard to mask the religiosity and decency of average Americans. They insist that America is totally materialistic and that even its religious practices are superficial and insincere. Sayyid Qutb, the godfather of Islamic radicalism, alleged that even churches in America were tools for profitmaking and publicity seeking. He insisted that America is not Christian or Jewish at all, but *jahiliye*—a term used to define the pre-Islamic, barbarian, pagan Arabia. Although this is a bigoted and often intentional misrepresentation, it feeds anti-American feeling.

Note that Osama bin Laden defines Americans as "crusaders" (lustful plunderers) rather than "Christians." The Koran, after all, declares that Christians are "nearest among men in love to the Muslims, because amongst them are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant." To attack the U.S., radicals have to de-Christianize it. And this is exactly what they do—with a big assist from the entertainment and news media of the United States itself.

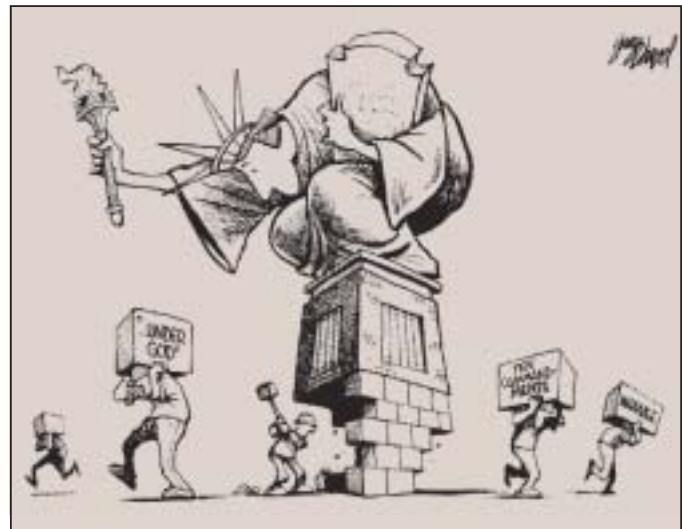
Obviously, that is a distortion of the truth. America stands

out in the Western world as "a nation under God," particularly compared to "Old Europe." The aggressive secularism of Europe is one reason why European Muslims are especially radicalized. (Another spur is the lesser opportunities for upward mobility in Europe as compared to America.) As a Muslim, I feel at

home in America when I see people saying grace at the table, praising the Lord, filling houses of worship, and handling currency inscribed "In God We Trust." When I'm in Europe, on the other hand, with its empty cathedrals, widespread atheism, and joyless cynicism, I feel alienated.

One can reasonably ask why, then, radical Islamists target the U.S. more than Europe. The answer comes from the image of a monolithic West. For the average Middle Eastern Muslim, there is no difference between Americans and Europeans in terms of secularism—he thinks they are both Godless—but America is more powerful, more effective, more omnipresent. The U.S. is viewed as the citadel of Western civilization (the civilization that has turned its back to God), and therefore the logical place to attack.

To erase this false image, America must help Muslims see that it is indeed a nation under God. The culture it exports should celebrate more than materialism, disbelief, selfishness, and hedonism. America must do a better job of portraying the principles of decency that undergird its society. Otherwise it will be despised by devout Muslims throughout the world, and radicals



will channel contempt into violence.

Of course, avoiding radical Islamist rage is only one reason for Americans to resist empty materialism. A deeper reason is because materialism is a mistaken philosophy. If they will save themselves from its disappointments, Americans will enjoy many benefits—including a better chance to win the hearts and minds of the Muslim world, and avert a clash of civilizations.

