

# Saudis sponsor conference in Bonn to assess Islam's true contribution

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

“What contribution can Islam make to modern civilization and to peaceful development of the community of nations?” The question itself is not only pertinent but is an open challenge to those who would aver that ours is a period and a society characterized not by development or peace, but of a “clash of civilizations.” The question was posed on Jan. 21-22 in Bonn, still the functioning capital of Germany, as the theme of an international symposium organized by the Islamic Council in Germany, on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of its founding.

The Islamic Council, an umbrella organization for the 2.5 million Muslims in Germany, received for the initiative the generous support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, whose ambassador in Bonn, His Excellency Abbas Gazzawi, hosted the gala press conference, symposium, and dinner. Gracing the proceedings with his presence was the Saudi Minister for Religious Affairs Prof. Dr. Abdallah Al-Turky who, together with three scholars from the renowned Islamic center of learning in Cairo, the University of Al Azhar, served as a reference point for the political and religious debate that unfolded.

The issue presented by Minister Al-Turky at the Jan. 20 press conference at the Bonn Press Club constituted a direct challenge to the media world: Will you, the representatives of the press, portray Islam as it really is, or will you swim with the stream, conjuring up images of Islam the enemy, fundamentalist, violent, fanatical, intolerant, and bent on world domination? Not many in the Bonn press corps demonstrated an ability to face the challenge, but rather manifested the problem, by asking questions which ranged from the right of Muslim girls to wear kerchiefs in France to the right of women in Saudi Arabia to drive cars. One hapless press man from SAT-1 complained that he did not know to whom he should turn to find answers to his questions; who indeed was the ultimate authority for interpretations of Islam?

During the symposium held the following day in the Bonner Maritim Hotel, the press, along with about 400 guests from leading institutions in Germany, including many Muslim organizations and diplomatic representatives, was treated to a series of useful lectures on Islam. There were two conflicting views: one, the image of Islam as presented by the media and the tools of mass education; and the other, the image that Islam gives of itself.

## The enemy image of Islam

The image presented of Islam by non-Muslims is that of the nauseating cliché we see repeated in printed media and television: as Dr. Irmgard Pinn from the Rhine-Westphal Technical High School in Aachen described how with a number of examples from *Stern*, *Spiegel*, and *Tango* magazines, as well as from daily newspapers, Muslims are routinely portrayed as terrorists belonging to a worldwide conspiracy dedicated to wiping out Christianity by the force of arms. Muslim women are depicted as enigmatic creatures hiding that secret something behind the veil (“What is she hiding behind that veil?”). The only “good Muslims” portrayed in the German press are those Turkish guest worker families who, as portrayed in a feature in *Spiegel*, have a “German” kitchen, speak only German at home with their children, drink beer and enjoy their piece of pork.

Substantially the same, though presented in an academically somewhat more cautious form, is the image of Islam mediated to German schoolchildren through their textbooks, as Prof. Udo Tworuschka of the University of Jena presented. Researchers working on a project with Professor Falaturi from Cologne studied the image of Islam presented by textbooks for religion classes of the Protestant church and the Catholic Church, as well as for history classes in the German school system overall. The archetype which emerges from these texts, he said, is that of a religion, Islam, which is both fanatical and fatalistic. Mohammed is presented usually as a poor orphan who after meeting a rich widow and marrying her, made a career by founding a new religion. Although, clearly, the speaker said, in a class on religion, the church, whether Protestant or Catholic, has every right to emphasize the instruction of that faith and not another, still, it is important to present the principles of other religions in such a way as to encourage understanding, not hate, to point up the similarities, not the differences, between the two faiths. In the presentation of Islamic history, Dr. Tworuschka showed, the situation is still worse: The success story of poor illiterate Mohammed who by marrying the rich widow makes it, is accompanied by broad historical summaries of seven centuries of Islamic history which make no distinction among dynasties, for example the Abbasids and Omayyads, or among sects, such as the Shia and Sunni. This is not only the case in Germany; Dr. Tworuschka's research group worked

in numerous European countries to examine the "Islam image" presented there, and came up with strikingly similar results.

In reality, as scholars from Al Azhar and Saudi Arabia were able to show, Islam is something quite different. It is not only a religion speaking to humanity as a whole, ready to give its values to the West and to assimilate from the West, or from other cultures, as Saudi Religious Affairs Minister Al-Turky emphasized, but Islam is also a religion devoted to culture, to the development of science, the diffusion of knowledge and the development of education—a fact underlined by the announcement that the Saudi Kingdom was establishing an Islamic Academy in Bonn, analogous to those in Washington and London, to provide instruction for 700 students from kindergarten through high school.

### Islam as it is

The true historical record leaves no doubt that Islamic civilization contributed crucial advances, as Dr. Jamal Badawi of Canada underlined. These advances, as the scholars from Egypt's prestigious Al Azhar emphasized, derived from Islam's concentration on science; the Quran opened with the injunction to Mohammed from God, to "read, recite!" and numerous passages (Suras) differentiate between those people who have knowledge and those who do not. The believer is encouraged to seek knowledge, as a form of worship of God, to spread knowledge, to educate, as Dr. Farid Qurashi, director of the International Islamic Relief Organization, stressed.

What, then, does Islam want in Europe? According to Murad Hoffman, former German ambassador to Algeria and Morocco, who after converting to Islam, has become a popular author and engaging speaker on the subject, gave a very direct answer to this question. Europe, he said, which has both contributed to Islamic culture and benefitted from it, has in the recent period allowed itself to "become practically pagan." Since, in Hoffmann's view, the Christian institutions have not succeeded in staving off this neo-pagan assault, then Christianity will not be capable of sparking a spiritual renewal in Europe. This, he sees as the task of Islam. Islam, he said, wants to offer to each individual, *qua* individual, an answer to his spiritual needs. Anyone, he said, who speaks of the fear of an aggressive Islam invading Europe, is probably part of a deliberate manipulation operation.

### The search for knowledge

One feature was conspicuously absent in the otherwise useful and interesting symposium in Bonn. Although everyone, regardless of political affiliation or sympathies, agreed that the "mass media" have done a job on Islam, and that the populations of Europe had been bombarded with psychological warfare methods, yet no one asked the crucial questions which could lead to defining concrete answers to problems.

First and foremost, who has propagated the notion that Islam and Christianity (and Confucianism, and Buddhism, etc.) should inevitably clash? This idea, typical of the geopolitical method of playing one nation, ethnic group, religion against another, was hatched by the British, way back in the heyday of their colonial splendor. Who, recently, has propagated the myths of Islamic fundamentalism and the worldwide conspiracy of militant Islam to take over the world? The British.

It is interesting to point out that a perceptive (Hindu) scholar, G.H. Jansen, in his book on *Militant Islam*, has shown that the leading "scholars," "experts," and otherwise "quotable sources" on "Islamic fundamentalism" are all western scholars, mostly British. In other words, those who are perpetrating the myths of "Islamic fundamentalism"—be they Bernard Lewis or Samuel Huntington—are spokesmen of a faction which is institutionally committed to promoting ethnic/religious conflict.

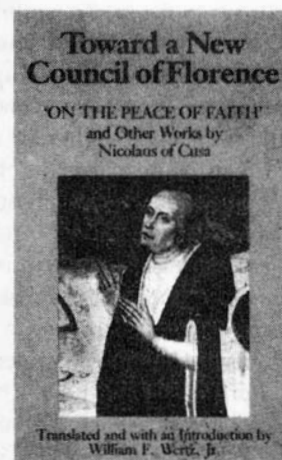
It is only by naming the names that Islamic scholars will be able to shift the misperceptions current in public opinion. This is the lesson to be learnt not only by the scholars gathered in Bonn, but also the members of the Organization of Islamic Conference who met days later in Jakarta, Indonesia to map out a worldwide strategy for reshaping the public's view of Islam.

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