

# ISLAM IN THE MODERN WORLD

## Interview with Wahid Razi

Wahid Razi is an Afghan poet, writer and scholar. PETER WILLIAMSON met him at his house in Sydney, as the bombs fell on Afghanistan, Wahid is philosophical about the plight of his country. His recent doctoral thesis titled “The Islamic World and its Search for Identity in Modern Times” has given him insight into the nature of the relations between Islam and the West. He talks about Islam, Afghanistan, terrorism and the West.

### How do you understand the current conflict in Afghanistan?

I would describe the current conflict between Afghanistan and the United States as a conflict between two worlds. One world is quite powerful and can impose its power on the other. One world is struggling to gain power and to be recognised equally as a partner. This is not to justify all Islamic movements, but is simply an attempt to understand that. The majority of Muslims are illiterate, and the majority of the Muslim world is suffering from poverty. They see themselves as victims of western politics, especially when it comes to wrong leadership and the problem of puppet leaders. It's a social question because in Islamic countries liberalism or Muslim liberals were not successful in implementing deep economic and social reforms.

There is corruption of the upper class, and a small elite enjoy prosperous and fashionable lifestyles while the majority of Muslims are suffering. Islam, like any other religion, has been used by different players as a catalyst to justify the status quo or to attack the status quo.

In the Islamic world, Islamic Marxists used Islam to justify their attacks on capitalism while capitalists used Islam to justify their attacks on fundamentalists. Meanwhile, fundamentalists used Islam to justify their attacks on liberals and nationalist forces.

I have to emphasise, that not every Islamic movement is fundamentalist. There was an Islamic modernist movement of the 19th and early 20th century, and a form of Islamic socialism, especially during the 1950s and 60s. Now we have very strict Islamic movements which have politicised Islam to justify their goals.

### Can one follow Islam and accept terror?

No, I personally do not think so. You won't find any reference in the Koran that justifies the use of violence, but extremists have interpreted the Koran to justify their means. However, you should not allow anyone to oppress you, and this is one of the core values in Islam. To me, these are beautiful values, and I praise any philosophy that preaches

positive resistance to its believers. Islam is a religion of resistance. For Islam, people fighting for all their freedom, against imperialism or exploitation have the right to defend their land and themselves with any means that they find.

But the question is whether acts of terrorism committed by a state are acceptable? Since 1991 over one million Iraqis have died as a result of actions taken by the West. Who are the victims of terrorism? The people of Iraq. It is hypocritical to define terrorism in one part of the world differently from that in another part of the world.

### How do Afghans in Australia feel about their recent history and the war now underway?

The Afghan people, and Muslims generally, are sick and tired of these tyrannical regimes. It is the people of Iraq, the Kurds, and the Iranians, who have suffered most at the hands of Saddam. Afghan people have suffered most at the hands of the Taliban. The people have mixed feelings about the current situation. They are not

sure what position they should take in relation to what is happening globally and what's happening in Australia. Globally, they expect an era in which they will see the rise of tyrannical regimes which will shut them up in

justify that.

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## **In relation to the Tampa crisis, one commentator went as far as to say that these refugees should be barbecued and given to the sharks.**

the name of getting rid of Islamic fundamentalism. Also, the totalitarian Islamic regimes will be expected to use the situation to oppose any form of social change.

Muslims feel very uncomfortable where they are minorities in the countries in which they are living, and suddenly they are introduced as terrorists. My daughter was nearly attacked last night in a bus. Someone saw an Arabic word on something she was wearing. The person broke a bottle of beer and tried to attack her. Muslims are becoming victims of hatred. There are second generation Muslims who are born here, in Australia, but even they are being labeled as foreigners and told to go back home.

### **To what extent does prejudice stem from ignorance about Islam and the peoples who practice the Islamic religion?**

Unfortunately, people get their knowledge through the media, and unfortunately in the last few months, a number of humanitarian issues have been used for political advantage. The Tampa crisis, and now the tragedy of September the 11th. Who is highlighted as the cause of the current crisis? All the problems of modern civilisation? Of course, it is Arabs, the Middle East and Islam. Somehow then, many Australians see Muslims as their enemies. They don't recognise that the majority of Muslims condemn any form of violence against human beings. It is needless to say that what happened to the United States, to those innocent human beings, is horrifying. No human being could

of Afghan people are victims of the Taliban regime, how can you not sympathise with the Afghan boat people? The majority of boat people are Hazaras who, racially and religiously, are a minority group in Afghanistan. Acts of genocide and massacres were committed against the Hazara people. When they flee to Pakistan, they don't feel safe there, because of the support for the Taliban in Pakistan. Pakistan created the Taliban themselves. So they do everything to rescue themselves, and get to more desirable western countries. I do not understand how western democracies condemn the atrocities of a fascist killing machine such as the dictatorship of the Taliban, and cannot give comfort to these people and some space to rest.

### **You seem to be suggesting that by backing authoritarian regimes in Islamic countries, the West provided the fertile ground for the spread of Islamic fundamentalism.**

Yes. By creating this unequal social and political environment in Islamic countries, the West gives opportunities to misuse religion to justify their political goals. But equally, I must emphasise that a lot of the Islamic movements, that are being labeled as fundamentalists, never promoted any form of violence against any government, West or East, but there is no democratic environment in which these groups can promote their ideologies, and to great degree they remain underground political forces.

They wish to challenge these

totalitarian regimes, but it is often the support of the Western world that makes it possible for these regimes to stay there and commit crimes against their own citizens. An example of this is the Iranian people who wanted to get rid of the Shah; they actually kicked him out and a very liberal form of government came to power after World War II. And what happened? A CIA coup actually brought him back again, and he committed a lot of horrible crimes against his nation. You can talk about Iraq - a similar case - with Saddam Hussein. He started to be labeled as a terrorist when he lost his loyalty to the USA.

### **What is the way forward from here, to reverse this history of discrimination and suspicion?**

At the beginning of this crisis we heard the rhetoric that there was no difference between Osama bin Laden and the Taliban who harboured him. Now we hear talk of a compromise, or an attempt to do deals with moderates in the Taliban and with the Northern Alliance, maintaining some other moderate faces and getting rid of extremists. They are totally confused about what kind of regime would be installed in Afghanistan. The non-Taliban political parties are not as clean as some might wish them to be. They themselves have had a hand in a lot of crimes; and they themselves have committed atrocities.

The Afghan king and his family, reigned for 40 years and still Afghanistan was one of the most underdeveloped societies in the world. This king who enjoyed a style of life which would be a dream for anyone, even in the western world, who didn't care what happened to the nation, would be coming back. What Afghanistan needs is not some form of magic, but education. I sometimes feel sorry for the Taliban militias as well, because they were really the bastard product of the Afghan war during the Soviet era. Groups of Afghan orphans, or Pashtun orphans, were taken by force to Pakistani madrassas and given a

very, very sick interpretation of the world and of Islam, and then the CIA, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia trained them to go back to Afghanistan. They were the victims of dirty politics.

Overall, what Afghanistan needs, is some degree of social justice, no matter who can secure this social justice, people need hospitals and people need schools, people need education. More than 99 percent of Afghanistan's educated labour force leaves Afghanistan. It is a nation without even one percent of educated people. Even the Taliban could think more clearly if they had the education.

In traditional Afghan culture there is no way Afghan people could accept the mistreatment of women. But the Taliban never had any roots with their own culture. It is a force that combines the fanatics of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, and a small number of Afghans. In fact, the way I see it is that the entire Afghan nation was hijacked by a force which was initially supported by the United States, provided with financial support by Saudi Arabia, and provided with military support by Pakistan.

Now there is a great degree of confusion in the western world, what we should do now. It is obvious what they should do now - they should have a broader consultation, they should take the guns and ammunition and everything from the people. Afghans have fought enough.

This is not an easy task, and really, I have to emphasise that it is an issue of poverty and illiteracy, and an issue of insecurity. For more than a quarter of a century, Afghanistan has been at war. Those people have seen nothing but guns and killing.

### **In a way, what we are seeing is a quintessential lesson of what is 25 years of war can do to a country?**

Exactly. Exactly. And corrupt politics, and a lack of commitment to human well-being. The warnings of

the Taliban were there from the early days of their coming to power. The Taliban forces are also destructive for the Islamic world.

### **How does it feel to be an Afghan living in Sydney right now?**

It's quite a depressing situation. You come from a land whose people have been victims of international politics for a quarter of a century.

There is a high level of uncertainty about what will happen in the future. Day after day we get news that the Americans are using the most horrible weapons, that they had never used elsewhere. Afghanistan is a kind of laboratory for these new weapons and the victims are ordinary Afghans.

On a personal level, this family's life has been paralysed since they started bombing Afghanistan. You know what is happening, and you can't do anything about it, those

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people are denied the most basic essentials of life. Muslims have been pointed out as terrorists - either they have committed terrorist acts or they are capable of it. You feel you have been isolated and the target of systematic hatred

We had a personal friend whom we have known since 1981, when we first arrived in this land; we called her Mum. When the issue of the boat people arose, she actually rang to tell us how sorry she was to have been associated with us and asked why we were doing this. She said how bad she felt that she had been a friend of this family, and how threatened she felt about the thousands of Afghans coming like locusts to this land.

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Afghans coming here can't be terrorists. They are youths who are the victims of trauma. They are young and energetic and could make a contribution to Australia. This is what is missing from the argument about the refugees.

### **Do you feel that people are turning more to their religion as a result of the stigmatisation and isolation of Muslims?**

It is a fact, that in times of crisis people become more religious. And this has happened a number of times in the history of Islam. In 1258, when the Islamic civilisation was under attack from Genghis Khan and the Muslims lost their empire, suddenly a very negative and religious expression dominated the Muslim world. Muslims actually decided to stop their interaction with non-Muslims and that was quite costly for Muslims.

They interpreted their defeat at

the hands of the Mongols as a sign of God's punishment and the social psychological impact of that was to avoid any philosophical interaction with the non-Islamic world. Even though the Islamic world did not stop dominating the rest of the world, in military terms, from the 13th century onwards - from the 14th and 15th century onwards was the power of the Ottoman Empire - from an intellectual point of view the defeat at the hands of the Mongols was very costly for Islam.

For five centuries, Islam had had a very fruitful interaction with the pagan world and embraced other philosophies such as those of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates. Such a big defeat brought a lot of negative feelings with it, and Muslims interpreted that as a sign of God's

disapproval.

A similar thing happened in the 18th century, when the penetration of Western countries began to dominate and invaded Islamic countries, one after another. The immediate response of that was the emergence of the Wahabi movement which was critical of Sufism and identified Sufism as a source of problems by allowing foreign influence to come into the Islamic world. The message of the Wahabi movement was that the only salvation for us would be to go back to the values of the date of the prophet Mohammed. This was the origin of Islamic fundamentalist movements.

Again, now, there is a revival of Islamic feelings. Pakistan is a good example; since its establishment in 1948 it was a very Islamic state, but since September the 11th the growth of Islamic feeling has escalated a lot.

But I can assure you that Islam will not create a problem for the rest of the world. People are always very critical of Islam, and my immediate response is to ask what kind of Islam are you talking about, and which part of the Islamic world are you talking about? There has never been only one form of interpretation of Islam at any particular time. There are a lot of variations and interpretations, even of particular verses of the Koran, or the sayings of the prophet Mohammed.

I wonder what there is in Islam that could create fear for non-Muslims. The essentials of Islam are a kind of humanism. First of all, Islam is a continuation of the same tradition that gave rise to Judaism and Christianity. The core of Islam is not much different from Christianity.

The basis of Islam is established on five facts; that there is just one god and Mohammed is his prophet, that you pray regularly to God, that you fast, that you pay a portion of your wealth on a regular basis to the poor and the needy, and that at some stage of your life you should go

and visit Mecca. And more than that, there are a lot of magnificent and beautiful values in Islam. Islam is a religion that emphasises social justice.

I don't really think that these issues are about Islam and Christianity. Muslim issues are really the issues of ordinary life. Muslims react in this way because they are suffering inequality. It is very obvious that if you change their social and economic conditions, their understanding and expression of Islam will be very different.

### **How can the damage to Islam-Western relations be undone?**

I don't know if I have an answer to this question. The damage has been done, and Muslims have been isolated and identified as enemies of the West, enemies of civilisation. Historically, Islam has never had a good image within Western civilisation. No matter which era of time you're talking about, the image of Islam has always been a mixture of fantasy and fiction rather than facts and reality. Islam has always been portrayed as a fake copy of Christianity.

In medieval times, when a woman wanted to scare her child, she would call "Mohammed, come get this boy". There never was any understanding as to how a religion from a nomadic people could spread across so much of the world in such a short time. There must have been something there that made it so attractive to believers. Apart from a few people who made attempts to understand Islam, others saw it as a symbol of lust and barbarism. Nonetheless, in the 19th century, some Western scholars attempted to introduce Islam through studies of its poetry and literature, such as the work of Omar Khayyam and Sadi and Ofez, and the influence of Sufism.

For some timethen, the image of Islam in Western culture was softened to a degree. The Iranian revolution was a turning point again,

for people to say "they are bloodthirsty they are killers", and then the Gulf war set us back further, and now again, we hear the argument that this civilisation cannot accept modern times.

Can we undo the damage? I think that life is hope, Muslims and Christians are committed to certain common values. Men should live in a more peaceful environment, in an environment where we can influence each other, and intelligently interact with each other. You can't expect the masses to create understanding and compromise between people. That should come from the intelligentsia.

Christian clergy and Christian leaders could play a crucial role by calming down their believers, and saying that there is not much difference between Christianity and Islam. And even if there is a lot of difference between us, there is no reason why we should be killing and hating each other. No one would be a winner in such a war - that is the real ugliness of the situation.

I always argued that war would never solve the problem; in any war you are actually planting the seed of the next war. Even a regime as horrible as the Taliban could be defeated by ways other than war. There was and is an opportunity for dialogue. If you lose this belief in mankind, then you have lost belief in human civilisation. War is not going to solve any problems. No doubt of that.

One of our great human qualities is that people can influence each other by talking to each other. You can make a paradise out of hell, by talking and by exchange of ideas, if you are committed to make a paradise. ■