

President Bush speaks during the rededication ceremony where he announced the appointment of a US envoy to the OIC



China More Popular than the US in the Muslim World But Will US Courting Work?

A recent poll from the Pew Global Attitudes Project shows US popularity in the Muslim world to be lower than that of China. US popularity is particularly low in countries like Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt and Jordan, which is particularly geo-politically strategic, given the US's various campaigns in the Middle East.

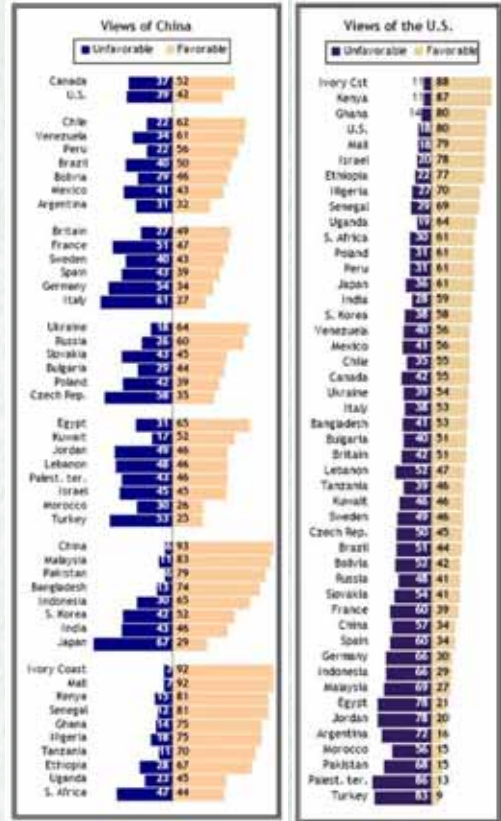
A case in point is Turkey, which in recent decades has been a valuable strategic ally of the United States. Turkey played an important role in the Cold War and joined the Allied coalition in the Gulf War. Turkey also maintains NATO's largest standing army. However, the US-Turkey relationship has lost the strength and warmth of the past. The Turkish parliament was particularly opposed to the war in Iraq and

Muslims in:	Favorable %	Unfavorable %	DK %
Middle East			
Kuwait	43	48	9
Lebanon	33	66	1
Shia	7	92	1
Sunnii	52	47	1
Egypt	22	77	1
Jordan	20	78	2
Morocco	15	56	29
Palest. ter.	13	86	1
Turkey	9	83	8
Asia			
Bangladesh	51	43	6
Indonesia	27	68	5
Pakistan	15	69	16
Malaysia	9	88	2
Africa			
Mali	78	19	2
Senegal	69	29	3
Nigeria	49	47	4
Ethiopia	48	49	2
Tanzania	41	45	13

Based on Muslim respondents.

Here, it can be noted that it is the Israeli-Palestinian debacle that elicits the strongest anti-American sentiment, due to the clear fact that the US gives incredible financial and diplomatic support to the state of Israel, without which the continued military occupation of Palestine would not be possible. Israel receives roughly one-third of all US foreign aid. In 2005 alone over \$2.22 billion went to military aid and \$360 million was given in civilian economic aid. By contrast, the Palestinians receive a total of approximately \$1 billion in aid per year from all international donors. Among truly even-handed media, as well as Muslim and Arab media, such one-sided support from the US to Israel is strongly emphasized. In addition to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, other issues such as the Iraq war, the Lebanon war, Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib in secret sites all continue to take a toll on the US's image in the region.

world. Now in the name of the war against terror these countervailing interests still prevail. It can, however, be safely deduced at this stage that it will take much more than an OIC ambassador for the US to regain the trust and respect of the Muslim world. A clear revision of its foreign policy, particularly around the Israel-Palestinian conflict, will be a good start.



Editor-in-Chief
Hussein Solomon

Managing Editor
Isabel Potgieter

Editor
Bambanisa

Marketing and Communications
Immaculate Matsi

Contact Islamic Focus
Tel: +27 (0) 12- 420 2696
Fax: +27 (0) 12-420 3527
Email: cips@postino.up.ac.za
Web: www.cips.up.ac.za

The opinions expressed in Islamic Focus are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Centre for International Political Studies, the University of Pretoria or the Danida.

The Centre for International Political Studies (CIPS) is situated within the School for Social Sciences of the University of Pretoria (UP), and is unique in South Africa in that its constitutive units represent a richly diverse spectrum of academic, practical, research and teaching expertise. The head, members and research fellows of the units actively pursue and disseminate research aimed at capacity building by developing critical, informed human potential, skilled in dealing with the challenges arising from South Africa's position on the African continent in an increasingly globalizing world. In recent years the Centre has shifted its focus to providing not only academic knowledge, but also applied research to benefit policy makers and government agencies as well as the diplomatic community who are often tasked with assessing and acting upon international developments in a very short period of time.

Sponsored by Danida

voted to disallow the US military to launch the invasion of Iraq, a border country, from Turkish soil.

In response to this rapidly declining popularity, President Bush announced his decision to send a diplomat to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), an association of 56 Islamic states promoting Muslim solidarity. This is the first time in the organisation's history that it will have a US representative. Although the OIC welcomed President Bush's decision to create the post of special envoy as a move that will hopefully 'contribute to strengthening the dialogue between the US and the OIC', the question remains whether or not this overture will reverse anti-US sentiment in the Muslim world.

The biggest problem, however, seems to be the conflicting interests of the US in the Muslim world. This was particularly true during the Cold War when the US was worried about the Soviet Union making incursions into the Arab



The Not-So-Secret War Muslims and Drugs

By Masood Boomgaard

"We are in denial," says Mohamed Ameen Hassan speaking at the recently held Refocus and Upliftment Foundation (RAUF) fundraising event. "Parents today refuse to accept what is happening in our society...they are oblivious to what their sons and daughters are faced with." Although there are no official figures available at this time, Islamic organisations and social workers across the country are in agreement that drug abuse has reached epidemic proportions in the Muslim community in South Africa, and none treat this problem with more seriousness than the volunteers and counsellors at RAUF, who each day come face to face with what is arguably Muslim society's most immediate concern.

However, despite the severity of the drug issue facing youngsters in the community, the problem is met with the typical Muslim response; denial and dismissal despite the glaring reality of the situation. Recognising the need to take action and rising above the clouds of prevailing societal denial, RAUF was formed in Clare Estate, Durban, and for just under ten years has fought a struggle against an enemy that has eaten into the moral fabric of Muslim society and has caused severe economic strife for many. The RAUF objective at its inception was to provide drug rehabilitation and counselling services to meet the needs of Muslims.

RAUF favours a unique approach to drug rehabilitation. RAUF's counsellors have implemented 'spiritual cleansing' and 'reawakening programs' to tackle addiction in patients, according

to Qari Saad Kazi who has worked closely with the organisation. RAUF's current headquarters offers counselling services and currently houses 25 live-in rehabilitation patients, but according to officials the demand for drug rehabilitation services in the Muslim community outstrips that which RAUF can offer by far, and that's just in the Durban suburbs. In other areas like the former Indian township of Chatsworth, just outside Durban, the drug problem is quickly spiralling out of control.

Chatsworth has been losing a well-documented battle against a killer drug known as 'sugars' flooding its streets; a deadly concoction of low-grade heroin and rat poison. The suffering of Muslim teenagers in Chatsworth at the hands of 'sugars' is an issue that has been largely ignored and considered taboo, which is why RAUF was recently compelled to establish a satellite centre in Chatsworth to deal specifically with the needs of the Muslim community in Chatsworth. Whilst social workers have routinely lambasted the Imams and Ulema for their inability to meaningfully address the Muslim drug problem, there are indications that the winds of change are slowly blowing in and a united Muslim front against drugs may be on the horizon. RAUF's success in its rehabilitation programmes has been commended widely. However, does the organisation's plans to expand its centre and operations tell us that we're on the way to developing the capacity to eradicate the



drug problem in Muslim society or is it simply as case of killing the mosquito and doing nothing about the swamp?

"We can rehabilitate thousands of teenagers, but we will never end drug abuse in our community if we do not address the roots of the problem," says one social worker. "If we do not realise that by not offering our youngsters alternatives to street corners, if our mosques and moulans don't offer solutions, if we do not guide them through counselling and providing recreational opportunities, then we will just have thousands more coming through the doors of drug rehab centres to replace the ones who are leaving."

Identity and Power: It is Time to Speak Out

By Shabnam Mohamed

When a respected, knowledgeable, outspoken and motivated aalim has to ask a journalist to protect his identity for fear of recrimination or death threats, one has to wonder just what is going on in certain segments of the Muslim community. They may have forgotten the hadith that calls on Muslims to speak the truth, even if it is bitter to accept.

Asad* had just spoken to a congregation about issues that concerned the community, such as the treatment of wives and children and the obsession with multiple pilgrimages as opposed to serving the community. After his talk, he met with gentlemen who said: "Brilliant talk, we just hope that it isn't an Indian that is paying you or funding your organisation. If it is, he will be disappointed because he may be quite guilty."

On the rather controversial issue of fatawa, Asad says "What is very challenging is that one can buy fatawa that will say what you want it to say. Added to that is the reality that it is fairly simple to become a mufti, after having studied a set of books. How does an inexperienced mufti who does not have a wife or a house counsel the community on marital issues or matters of finances?" How can we justify the kinds of fatawa that have little or no consideration for the socio-economic conditions of Muslims? We insist that a man, whose family has lived in Umlazi, be buried in a Muslim graveyard at an average cost of R800.00. "A friend of mine was recently shot and killed. A fatawa was issued and the hearse would not take him to a non-Muslim graveyard. After much debate, the fatawa was reversed and the money was kindly provided for the burial," says Asad.

What message does this attitude and behaviour send to people who are considering becoming Muslims or who are already Muslims and have to live with the consequences of inconsiderate and inhumane fatawa?

This discussion led to the competitive area of zakaat, which is payable to fuqara and masakeen of their religion. "People collect millions as investment, whilst food and clothing are left to rot in warehouses rather than being given to an unknown and needy Muslim. A church would not ask a poor person what religion they belong to and when they became Christian! People are only concerned with a skeleton madressah education and not about what Islam really teaches us, such as empowerment as opposed to dependency. Development and progress are also the worship of Allah swt."

Asad maintains that whilst black aalims are being developed at ulooms in KZ-N, none of them are appointed to decision-making bodies except as mere window dressing. "You cannot even buy one book without permission." Asad further explained that not one of the office bearers or board members of Jamiat are black. "They have

a list of 300 aalims, yet if you tell them you want to sponsor academia or skills they refuse, saying that they only sponsor Islamic studies and ulooms. How many mosques, aside from Austerville, have a black imam? Why would we rather appoint a Pakistani or Indian Urdu-speaking imam, who has a limited understanding of the conditions of the people? Even in Ramadaan, it is very hard to find a black or 'lower status' Indian hafez."

It is obvious that there is a huge crisis of monopolised identity within the black community, because black Muslims are often treated as a commodity. Why is it that we resist transformation when Prophet Muhammad saw brought such dynamic changes to the world, for the betterment of all mankind? Asad says "Muslims need to realise that they are living in South Africa and Islam is not a religion that is racially insensitive and owned by Indians. I am treated as a traitor by the black community for belonging to what they see as an Indian religion. Their perceptions are well confirmed by the issues we face as a Muslim community. What have we really done for the AIDS orphan?"

*not his real name

A Franciscan Rendezvous with Islam, Judaism and Christianity in Africa

By Fr. Donal O'Mahony, o.f.m. Cap
International Director of the Damietta Peace Initiative.

The Damietta Peace Initiative

(For the advancement of PEACE IN AFRICA through the ethic and strategy of Non-Violence, Reconciliation and Care for the Environment in Africa - with special focus on Franciscan - Islam relations).

A Historical Note: Damietta is a city in Egypt. From this city the Damietta Peace Initiative takes its name. From Roman times the city of Damietta was an ancient port of entry to the Continent of Africa and all its wealth. In 1219, it was surrounded by Crusaders (5th Crusade) led by Jean de Brienne. A siege of fifteen months ensued in which out of 70,000 of the city's inhabitants only 3,000 survived. During the siege, Francis called on the Crusaders to withdraw. They refused to listen. Francis courageously crossed the desert sand and gained entry to the walled and besieged Muslim city. The Sultan of Damietta, Al-Malik-al-Kamil, embraced Francis. Over an extended time, they became firm friends. The city of Damietta is a fertile symbol for the Franciscan family relationship with Muslim communities.

Who is St. Francis of Assisi?

Within the Catholic pantheon, Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) was no ordinary saint. He chose the road rather than the monastery as his preferred place of ministry. He was a man who delighted in travelling beyond the bounds of the familiar and opening the minds and hearts of all who would listen. This founder of the Franciscan Order attempted to reach the Continent of Africa eight centuries ago. His purpose was to engage with Muslims, especially in Morocco. Although thwarted by ill health on that occasion, he later reached Syria during the Fifth Crusade, a time of great conflict between Islam and Christendom. Francis had a remarkable meeting with the sultan of Egypt, in which he attempted to bring to an end a major conflict in the city of Damietta through non-violent means. Thereafter, the special Franciscan-Muslim friendship was bonded. The Capuchin Franciscan Order was continuing this tradition when it founded, in South Africa, the Damietta Peace Initiative in 2005.

The challenge today

We are all responsible for developing a world where everyone can enjoy basic needs, freedoms and a proper dignity, befitting children of the one Creator - God. The danger of conflict among religious and ethnic interest groups, though sometimes masking other agendas, or interwoven in them, is proving a significant threat to global stability. Religious belief is an important question for foreign policy makers today.

In Africa, as in other parts of the world, there is need to offer a vision of a common humanity that looks beyond the barriers of caste and creed, race and gender and embrace religious pluralism. Differentiation is not only enriching but is necessary to make life surprising.

Whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jew, or indigenous, all are obliged to respect religious diversity and tolerance as the way forward in



Father Donal O'Mahony, Lorraine Thomas, Sister Lilian Curaming, Isabel Potgieter and Hussein Solomon

promoting personal and societal well-being, as well as international peace and its accompanying social and economic development.

In particular, it is important that the members of the three great religions of the Book - Islam, Judaism and Christianity - listen to each other's voices and acknowledge and respect each other's belief in God, whether that God be named Allah, blessing be upon Him, Yahweh, or the One God and Trinity of Persons.

The Damietta Peace Initiative

The Damietta Peace Initiative nurtures community-based groups known as Pan African Conciliation Teams (PACTs). These groups reflect all sectors of civil society in that they are composed of local people of mixed religion, ethnicity, gender and class. Courses are organised to ensure that non-violence and the dynamics of community organisation is understood and practiced. The 30,000 Franciscans present in 40 countries in Africa are the mid-wives, who help to give birth to PACTs.

This potential resource of geographically extensive, available, trained and committed capacity provides the backbone for the sustainability of the programme.

It is gratifying to know that the quest for peace is vividly present in nearly all religions. It is implicit in the literature and even the daily salutations of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, where the word Peace means much more than mere absence of conflict. Peace, Salaam, Shalom as used in the Bible and the Quran is intertwined with notions of care, love, well-being and justice. Traditional African beliefs cherish peace contained in the notion of Ubuntu, (a person is a person through others). Hinduism and Buddhism also have a strong peace base.

Survey on violence in Tanzania

Some informed people say there is a lack of public recognition of the danger of religious violence erupting in Africa. A recent survey in Tanzania concerning the crude reality of violence in the name of religion concluded that 59 percent of those surveyed have witnessed religious tensions

and 77,6 percent think that there will be religious conflict in the future (The collected data of this survey was analysed by means of SPSS - Wijzen and Mfumbusa, 2002 and published in Sedos, Nov/Dec 2004).

New codes of behaviour needed

If the danger of violence breaking out between religious interest groups is real, then it must rate high as a threat to African stability. Hope for the future may depend on a concerted endorsement of new codes of behaviour, at grass roots level, based on the strategy, ethics, and techniques of non-violence. No 'African Renaissance' can afford to ignore it.



St Francis of Assisi



Hijab and the Media Like a Moth to the Flame

By Shabnam Mohamed

Issues surrounding the topic of hijab have always fascinated people and the media are no exception. However, when journalists with limited knowledge attempt to slant what Muslim writers think about broad social control mechanisms, based on observations of culture, then that attempt aims at sensationalism at best and must be held accountable.



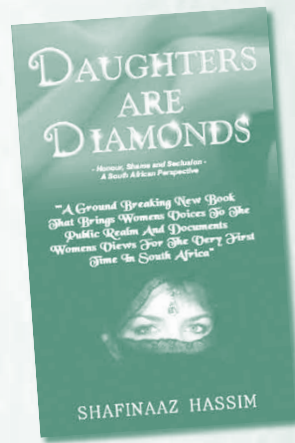
Shafinaaz Hassim is the author of *Daughters are Diamonds: Honour, Shame & Seclusion - A South African Perspective*. It is the fascinating culmination of a reworked MA thesis, which has received constructive and encouraging critique. Last month, *The Mercury* published a lifestyle piece (*Lifting the Veil*) by Omeshnie

Naidoo which, according to Hassim, "radically altered and misquoted my work using references outside of the scope of *Daughters*."

By fusing the research of Hassim with that of Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, the perception was created that Hassim finds hijab irrelevant. *Daughters* is not about the hijab, although Hassim maintains that Muslim women who choose to wear it do so as a matter of identification, modesty and pride. "While *Daughters* discusses the concept of hijab and the veil as part of the literature on understanding seclusion (as in separation of the realms of men and women), it is not a physical comment on what people might choose to wear," says Hassim.

Daughters is a careful exposition of the cultural expectations and stigmas that may affect women's autonomy, through status concerned social control mechanisms (such as the "women are diamonds" statement) that "have no place in a progressive religion." The study is based on the lives of six women who allowed Hassim to understand the complexities of their lives with sensitivity and respect.

The book advocates moving back to a reading of the Quran as a pure text that encourages both men and women to "enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil" in living a moral life, in keeping with that of Prophet



Muhammad saw. Hassim advocates that "Patriarchal readings of texts and prescribed behaviours in keeping with so-called 'honour-codes' prove deeply problematic in the ability of both male and female individuals to make informed decisions and live autonomously. *Daughters* interrogates the notion that it was pre-Islamic society that had no basis of individual rights, and that Islam brought about a Bill of Rights for Muslims, which ensures that the ideals of equality and morality are upheld.

The control mechanism called the 'family honour code', almost always confused with religious obligation and faith, is awarded to clans and rigidly guarded over generations. Hassim argues that those objectified at the weaker end of the social scale may conform by keeping strictly with that entrenched modesty code. The book investigates how, for the sake of family honour, "self-conscious emotions such as shame and guilt are employed in order to align people's behaviours beyond necessary moral tenets." The recent

horrific murder of Banaz Mahmoud makes Hassim's work even more relevant. "The social memory of these 'honour killings' that occur in far-removed countries might inform a psychological stigma that operates in the South African context."

While the article in question raised a fair number of eyebrows, the controversy has also served to ensure significant curiosity and engagement about Hassim's thesis, which analyses the structured origins of seclusion and the patriarchal Indian culture that fuel both sides of the coin of internalised female subordination and traditionalist male dominance. *Daughters* asks significant questions about how people may find ways "in which to live autonomously so that they might reach their fullest potential."

After an impassioned letter writer made a sweeping statement about *Daughters*, Hassim was clearly incensed. "In engaging with the media, one takes it for granted that a form of writer's ethic to convey in truth and goodwill the message of the writer in as exact a form as possible must exist. Defamatory writing is hardly a conscientious attempt at sound journalism. If our goal as South Africans is about fostering tolerance and understanding, then it is about time that blindsided mudslinging becomes a thing of the past."

OFF THE RECORD

With Mphutlane Wa Bofelo

Male Chauvinism Hides Behind Male-centric Readings of Scriptures



"O humankind! Reverence your guardian Lord
Who created you from a single soul
Created of like nature, his mate and from
them twain Scattered like seeds countless men
and women Reverence Allah through whom
Ye demand mutual (rights) And
reverence the wombs That bore you;
for Allah ever watches over you"

Recently a Durban-based Muslim organisation requested me to go through the evaluation forms filled in by participants at a Human Resource Development programme that it had organised for Islamic teachers and Imams/sheikhs, and to summarise the main points. I found it frightening that at least five participants raised the concern that one of the presenters of the session on HIV/AIDS was a woman. Some went on at length to defend the tendency to quarantine the Muslim woman in her household as something sanctioned by Islam. "The standing of women in front of men is totally haraam (forbidden). Don't do it again", "Shame on you, leaders!" wrote one of the participants.

This intrepid fear of the voice of a woman and the phobia towards the presence of the woman in the public space is grounded on a portrayal of woman as an appendage of man, an object of sex or a temptress who can only exist in both the private (domestic) and public spheres under the tutelage and surveillance of the male. This is entrenched and perpetuated by male-centric, patriarchal and chauvinistic readings of religious scriptures, which has seen the Biblical narrative of creation that postulates that Eve was made out of Adam's rib creeping into Islamic discourse. In his tafsir of the Quran, Yusuf Ali asserts that though the Biblical story of creation could be allegorical it need not be assumed in Qurannic teaching. Yusuf Ali further proposes that in the context of verse 1 of Surah Nisah (The Women, cited above), where "Nafsi Wahida" refers to single soul\ person, the particle "min" refers not to a portion or a source of something else but "a species", "a nature", "a similarity."

Simply put, the teaching of the Quran is that Allah originated humankind from a single non-

gendered being, which was then split into a pair - male and female - and from them twain was created multitudes of people. This is corroborated by various verses of the Quran that teaches that men and women as social and spiritual beings are equal beings and that they should take advantage of the differences in their biological\physiological make-up to complement each other rather than to find a reason for conflict. Hence the Quran refers to husband and wife as garments of each other, assigned with mutual responsibilities to see to each other's welfare and wellbeing. In short, the association made between the intellectual capacities, leadership potential and social and economic positioning of people in society and their sex has no foundation in Qurannic teaching.

But this has not stopped patriarchy from using this verse to advocate "the Adam-rib theory", which basically implies the superiority of a man to a woman. "The Adam rib syndrome" is responsible for justifying, entrenching and perpetuating social and cultural practices that seek to confine or perceive the woman as only valuable for the

Continued from page 4

function of bearing and rearing children and taking care of the needs of the man. This results in attempts to confine the woman to the kitchen and bedroom and deny her the right to participate in social, political and economic affairs of society. Until very recently in history, many nations refused women the right to vote and to own land and property. Presently, the woman continues to exist as a perpetual child of the male, with no control over her life and body, and no say on matters of reproduction. Various overt and covert forms of sex slavery persist. Advertising agencies, the media and corporate capital continue to treat the woman as an object of sex and a commercial item, and in many instances the institutions, public opinion and the media continue to be biased against women in cases of rape and abuse. The woman is unsafe at home, in the street, in the court of law, in the corporate boardrooms and at the factory floor and shop floor. This will continue for as long as we deny women the right to express and represent themselves as moral, social, political and spiritual beings. As Muslims we should be opening the space for women instead of taking the lead in closing it.

The scuttling of the voice of women from Muslim discourse and the banning of Muslim women from public life is inconsistent with the traditions of the prophet and his companions and the teachings

of the Quran. When the women companions of the prophet felt concerned that the Quran directly addresses itself to men and does not speak directly to women, even in verses where it spoke about women, they sent a woman representative to raise this concern with the prophet. Almighty Allah responded to the concern and voice of the women by thereafter using the phrase "Believing men and believing women" in all verses addressing the believers.

When a woman raised a voice of dissent to Umar ra, the caliph conceded, "Umar is wrong and the woman is right". He did not hide behind his office and/or gender to throttle the voice and perspective of someone. If there had been a shariah basis for banning women from attending Mosque, the caliph Umar ra - who personally preferred that women should pray at home - would not have taken the trouble to hide on the way to the Mosque and scare his wife in an effort to discourage her from attending jammah prayer. He would have simply passed and enforced a decree stopping women from attending prayer and imposed this on his wife as well.

There is nothing in history to suggest that Khadeeja ra, the first wife of the prophet saw, stopped being a businesswoman after becoming a Muslim, or that she traded only with women. As far as we know

there was no partition between men and women at the battlefields of Badr, Uhud and many other expeditions were many women companions of the prophet participated, some attaining martyrdom. Fatima ra, the prophet's daughter, took an active part in Muslim public life. None of the companions clamped down on her right with the excuse that the voice of a woman is her private part. Before the prophet Muhammed passed away, he is reported to have advised his companions and followers: "Learn half your faith from the red-cheek one. (The prophet affectionately referred to his wife, Ayesha ra as the red-cheek one).

Next to Abu Hurraira ra, Ayesha ra is perhaps the most cited person in the narration of the sayings, approvals and actions of the prophet. There is enough evidence that the companions of the prophet used to consult Ayesha ra to verify the authenticity of sayings, actions and approvals attributed to the prophet or to find an indication of how the prophet used to do certain things or what could have been his view or approach on specific issues. In simple terms, Ayesha ra was an authority on the traditions of the prophet and was largely consulted on issues of interpretation of the Quran and the traditions of Muhammed saw. What more proof do we want that the Quran and the Sunnah do not exclude or marginalise women from participating in public affairs?

Muslim Hip Hop and Muslim Poetry Slam Offers an Alternative Platform

By Mphahlele Wa Bofelo

In an interview with the Mail & Guardian, rapper, MC and poet, Tumi Molekane of Tumi & the Volume, asserted that he embraced Islam through hip hop music. This has been the experience of many youths in the world, South Africa included. References to the Quran, Islam and names of people like Malcolm X, Elijah Mohammed and Louis Farrakhan in rap songs lead youths to engage in their own research into Islam, and some of them end up embracing Islam. But once they are Muslims, most of them find themselves in a situation where there is a blanket condemnation of music and a cynical, pessimistic attitude towards the arts in Islam. Yet there is room in Islam for various forms of literary, artistic and cultural expressions as long as one conforms to the etiquettes of Islam.

Ben Foster's remarks, after experiencing a Muslim Poetry Slam featuring three Muslim women reciting poems about war, God and personal experiences, are instructive in highlighting the immense power of literary and artistic expression in countering Islamophobia and incorrect interpretations of Islam: "The last poet to speak went simply as 'Veiled Poet'. Although all of the women wore traditional Muslim clothing, Veiled Poet was the only one concealing her whole face

behind a veil. Her style was much more urban and distinctly American. She focused less on global issues and more on the misunderstanding of Muslims, especially women, in America. 'You Know Me' was one such poem. 'What? / Yes I am a Muslim woman / Yes I was born here / Yes that's a veil upon my face / Yes I can understand you' She radiated pride in her heritage through her veil, which was clearly empowering to her and not limiting. When all three poets had finished, my notions of what 'Muslim poetry' meant had been changed. I saw a people devoted to their faith and families, yet feeling alienated from a modern society whose values they challenge. Poetry is about expression and voice. These writers have clearly found a way to be free. It doesn't matter if their faces are covered; their pride is obvious."

In a world where the Islamic way of life and Muslim culture is often misunderstood and even feared, Muslims have the challenge of looking for Islamically acceptable means of literary and artistic expression to communicate a positive image of Islam and Muslims and to articulate a comprehensive, dynamic and contextual understanding of Islam. In the late nineties, some American Muslims seized

the opportunity presented by the increasing popularity of slam poetry and hip hop, and developed Muslim hip hop and Muslim slam poetry as mediums of expressing the voice of Muslims. Muslim hip hop simply means Muslims who use hip hop music to convey an Islamic message. Here hip hop refers to the music genre and not to the mainstream culture that is filled with profanity, debauchery, hedonism, illicit sex, drugs and violence.

Since poetry is a brutally honest medium, the Muslim poetry slam sessions in America have provided an opportunity for non-Muslims to understand Muslim culture through the eyes and voices of Muslims. Listening to the writings of Muslims, Americans discovered that they do not simply hear anger at a government they disagree with politically, but that they also hear the compassion and humanity of Muslims. They also discover the universality of the Islamic message and the dynamism and diversity of interpretations of the Quran and practices of Islam.

In South Africa, the phenomenon of Muslim hip hop has not taken off and Muslim poetry slams are unheard. But on the positive side, Muslims who are into hip hop and slam poetry do so through broad secular platforms which open them up to a much broader audience. Yet many hip hop and slam poetry lovers and practitioners who embraced Islam through the influence of the music and statements of their African-American



Continued on page 6



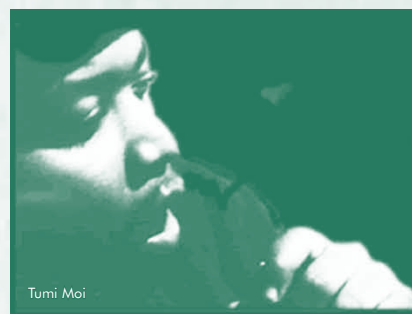
Continued from page 5

hip hop and slam poetry lovers and practitioners who embraced Islam through the influence of the music and statements of their African-American counterparts get frustrated when they become Muslim, as they are often told that they have to quit their artistic careers and change their dress style to Kurtas, amamas, burkas and nikabs. The result is that some of these people opt out of Islam, while many of the mainstream and underground rappers, MCs and slam poets who are Muslims barely move in Islamic circles, and most of them do not articulate an Islamic voice in their works. Their talents and services are not tapped into by the community.

The view held by some of the most influential and established theological bodies that music is not permissible in Islam, results in a general distaste for and scepticism towards extramural and entertainment activities. Yet there is a significant number of Muslims involved in the broader slam

poetry and hip hop movement in major cities of South Africa. In Kwazulu-Natal, the group, Wahid fuses its nasheeds with rapping and beat-boxing by Nazeer Jamal aka brother Nazjam. One of the most seasoned, original and vibrant voices in the underground hip hop circle in Durban are Raheem, a practising Muslim. The writer is a two-time winner of Poetry Africa's Slamjam and one-time KZN Slam Poetry Champion of Champions. Emerging spoken word artists setting the Durban scene alight include Umar Zondo and Hamza Moleleki—whose poetry is filled with social commentary and Islamic register, and Fatima Ngobeni and Batool Mokgwetsi who have dazzled many with riveting recitals.

Cape Town, the Mecca of South African hip hop, has a significant number of hip hop activists who are Muslims and so does Johannesburg and Tshwane. The advantage for South Africa is that the level of Islamophobia is relatively low; the legal-



Tumi Moi

constitutional framework is conducive to freedom of religion and freedom of expression and the societal environment is friendly. Muslim hip hop and Muslim poetry slams can be utilised to pass the message of Islam, glorify Allah, praise the Prophet Muhammed, provide a commentary and critique of the local and global socio-economic and political landscape, and to advocate against war, injustice, poverty, crime and disease. But a rigid and dogmatic expression of Islam that is averse to extramural and leisure activities stands in the way of this.

EDITORIAL

As Britain prepared to commemorate the second anniversary of the 7/7 attacks that killed 52 people it found itself on the brink of another nightmare, with a burning car driven into the doors of Glasgow airport and two car bombs that failed to detonate on London's West End.

What struck me were the differing reactions amongst British Muslims and South African Muslims. Speaking to Muslims from Cape Town and Johannesburg, the reaction that I received varied between two positions. The first was that Britain deserves what it is getting. It should not have been in Iraq in the first place. The second reaction was a dismissal that Muslims could be behind such attacks – that it is merely a fabrication so that the British government could take action against Muslims. Those who held this latter position also argued that no Muslim was involved in the 7/7 attacks. When I pointed out that two of the suicide bombers of 7/7 left video-taped testimonies to their involvement in the attacks, this too was brushed aside as mere fabrication.

British Muslims have responded differently to this recent atrocity. Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari, Secretary-General of the Muslim Council of Britain, made clear his condemnation of the attacks by stating that those who seek to deliberately kill or maim innocent civilians are the enemies of Islam and that no cause could possibly justify such barbarity. I support this view completely. I too was opposed to the war in Iraq, but targeting innocent civilians going about their daily business hardly seems an effective response in either strategic or moral

terms. In the United States, ordinary citizens demonstrated their disdain of the warmongers by giving the Democrats control of Congress. This is what happens in democracies; those whose policies we dislike we vote out of office.

Moreover, and unlike their South African counterparts who seem to be playing ostrich, British Muslims acknowledge that there are those who claim to be Muslim and are willing to engage in atrocities against innocent civilians. Daud Abdullah, the deputy leader of the Muslim Council of Britain stated, "We acknowledge that there is radicalisation taking place in our community." How wonderful it would be for me to hear this coming from one Muslim leader in South Africa! This acknowledgement is important, since it then allows one to take steps to prevent this radicalisation from spreading and contaminating other sectors of society. In Britain, a coalition of British Muslim groups started a campaign condemning the attempted bombings. The "Not in our Name" campaign by this Muslim Coalition began with advertisements in newspapers across Britain, saying that Islam forbids the killing of the innocent.

Unless we in South Africa wake up to the radicalisation underway in our own community we should not be surprised if, when the next bomb explodes, a South African Muslim is shown to be responsible. At that point we will all be complicit through our collective silence.

[Open Forum]

On Secular Turkey

I refer to your recent editorial on Turkey (Islamic Focus 8). You make it appear as if secularism is a good thing. As a Muslim, I cannot agree with you. I am aware that your newspaper and your Centre is part of the University of Pretoria. If you would permit me, then may I suggest that you host a conference on Secular States vs Islamic States? Ismail, Pietermaritzburg (via e-mail)

Editor Responds: Thank you Ismail for this suggestion. I agree with you that this is an important topic and one that necessitates greater attention. I am also open to the idea of a conference and this is something that we will look into. Having said this, I should perhaps inform you that whilst the Centre is hosted at the University of Pretoria, we get no funds from the University for our various activities. It is for this reason that we always need to secure a funder in order for us to have a conference, seminar, book launch or newspaper.

So as soon as I can secure funding for such a conference, we would be happy to host it.

The aim of Islamic Focus

Is it just me or are readers confused with this newspaper? Your June issue (Islamic Focus 8) is a case in point. The article on page 11 "In Defence of Secularism: Rising Political Unrest in Turkey" seems to be sympathetic to the demonstrators wanting secularism but your editorial in the same issue is defending the Turkish government. Where does Islamic Focus stand on this issue? Zaheera, Woodstock, Cape Town (via e-mail)

Editor Responds: Thank you Zaheera for this question. You are right that in any issue of Islamic Focus there may well be these contradictions. The newspaper does not seek to propagate any single line of thought, but rather seeks to provide a neutral forum where different perspectives can be debated. Whilst I as the editor may have a

particular view on something, that does not mean that my view is correct or that someone else cannot print an alternative view. We welcome differences and debate. So in answer to your question, Islamic Focus does not have a position with regards to secularism in Turkey. I have my own position with regards to the issue (and the fact that I am editor of the newspaper is immaterial), whereas the author of the article would have another position. I hope this answers your question.

Praise for Islamic Focus

I just want to say how much I enjoyed your lead article in the June issue on Muslim marriages in South Africa. It was a real eye-opener. Soraya, Port Elizabeth (via e-mail)

As an African asylum-seeker in your country, I just want to say how much I like your section on Africa in the newspaper.

Ebrahim, Atteridgeville, Pretoria (via e-mail)

continued on page 7

Continued from page 6

In my previous correspondence to you, I informed you that I would like to see more articles covering economic issues confronting Muslims. I have just seen your last issue (Islamic Focus 9) and in it you have two articles covering economics. Thank you for being responsive to your readership.

Fatima, Sandton (via e-mail)

Criticism

Your editorial in the July issue of Islamic Focus is dead-wrong. Palestinians did not just happen to split up between Hamas and Fatah, between Gaza and the West Bank. Rather this was engineered by the American CIA and the Israeli MOSSAD.

Ahmed, Newcastle (via e-mail)

I have just seen your last issue of the newspaper and find some articles very difficult to understand. Can you please write for the man and woman on the street?

Shaheeda, Fordsburg

Editor Responds: Thanks for this Shaheeda. It is a pity that you did not mention the specific issue of the newspaper and the particular articles which you found problematic. We at Islamic Focus take the issue of accessibility quite seriously – and if this is a problem we will seek to rectify the matter urgently. As Editor-in-Chief I take personal responsibility for any failings in the newspaper and as such I would urge you to make contact with me to discuss the matter and rectify it for future editions. My direct email address is hussein.solomon@up.ac.za and my direct phone number is 012 420 4339.

Is “Progressive Islam” Progressive?

As Salaam Wa Alaikum
Shabnam Mohammed’s response to the questions I raised in my letter printed in your July issue is based on the following false assumptions:

- It is not I that have missed the point but you. Nowhere in my response did I write that we

should not strive for the betterment of society. My point was that we must be accurate when quoting the hadith or the Quran for that matter. “When anyone, especially writers of Islamic books and newspapers quote the Quran\hadith or quote someone else quoting the Quran\ hadith, then they must verify the authenticity of it.” Apart from this being what Islam asks for, the wisdom of it is that by demanding references we would ensure that the exact message is relayed, and not one that has been tampered with.

- How can you assume that I did not take part in the march?
- How can you assume what my stance is on human right issues?

Your statement about the verse I quoted being “subject to the historic occasion” is contrary to the view of the highly educated commentators of the Holy Quran. The message of the Quran is relevant for all times.

To Lubna - You are not being fair by not wanting to take responsibility for what you write - whether the article is subjective or not. You cunningly use certain descriptive words to instill in the reader a like or a dislike for certain concepts. Eg: you used words such as ‘conservative’, ‘rigidity’, ‘enforcing dogma’, etc to describe orthodoxy. On the other hand you used words such as ‘progressive’, ‘intellectual’, ‘activism’, ‘dialogue’, ‘scholarly’, ‘academic’, ‘vibrant culture’, ‘think tanks’, etc to describe “Progressive Islam.” You make it sound as if an orthodox Muslim or a steadfast Muslim cannot think, cannot be a scholar and cannot use his/her intellect. The way you have written this article tells me that you are all for “Progressive Islam.” This style of writing is manipulative, cunning and devious and it goes against the very grain of Islam. Islamic literature should be based on the Quran and the hadith. If we quote anyone else, then their quotations and writings must be in conformity with the Quran and hadith - otherwise

it is un-Islamic.

The “Progressive Islam” you talk about has already had an impact on us, especially when it comes to women issues. Thirty years back there was not a mosque in Durban that had a women’s section, but today the campaigners of such rights (mainly journalists) are not satisfied that most mosques cater for women, but they now want the men and the women to be mixed in the mosque. They want the women to be Imams as well. Thirty years back Muslim women were not given extensive secular education, they dressed modestly and most did not work. We already have thirty years of experience with Lubna’s “modern progressive Islam” and we should be able to gauge whether things have improved or not. Consider the divorce rates, the number of cases of suicide, the respect for parents and elders, the numbers of children out of wedlock, HIV/AIDS, relationship between brothers etc. Is it getting worse in the Muslim community or is it getting better?

The ideas used by these so-called “progressive Muslims” to change Islam are not unique to Islam only. Look back into history and you would notice that other religions and even European countries have undergone such transformations. Right up to the 1950s European women dressed modestly and did not work and were not priests, etc. The changes started at about the time when Marilyn Monroe showed her thigh. Where we are heading with “Progressive Islam” is where the west is now, because they are a step ahead of us. If we continue with this “progressive ideology” then it would not be surprising to see “Muslim” women in future in the same situation that European women are today - perhaps even in a blue films. It would not be surprising to see hordes of “Muslim” men marching for “Homo” rights, etc.

**May Allah guide us all. Ameen.
Hassan Gaffoor
Overport (via fax)**

Islamic-Christian Dialogue Forum Held in Sudan

From 4-6 July 2007, Sudan’s Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration Commission held an Islamic-Christian Dialogue Forum as part of its awareness in community safety and conflict mitigation programme. The Forum aimed at bolstering the culture of dialogue between Muslims and Christians, entrenching the values of peaceful co-existence with the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, human rights protection and respect for religious freedom in the country. Over the three days, 19 papers were delivered that covered a wide variety of topics including the status of minorities, religious and peaceful co-existence in Sudan and the experiences of religious co-existence in seven countries, including South Africa.

The highlight of the forum was the signing of a charter for religious coexistence and cooperation in Sudan by senior Muslim and Christian clerics.

