

4-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Crossman, Britt (2008) "Intercultural Communication: Journey Into Islam," *Reason and Respect*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 16.
Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/rr/vol4/iss1/16>

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Intercultural Communication: *Journey Into Islam*

Akbar S. Ahmed. *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization*. The Brookings Institute, 2007.

In this day and age, with alliances between countries constantly being built only to be broken, with the waging of wars in dozens of nations, and most importantly with the spread of globalization, there has arisen a dire need for understanding and resolution across the globe and Akbar Ahmed provides just such a solution for the tensions between the United States and the Middle East in his book *Journey into Islam*. Ahmed's book, which is based upon his travels with students throughout the Islamic world, discusses how globalization affects the already precarious relationship between the east and the west. Throughout the book, Ahmed outlines the progression of tensions between the two regions, attempts to shatter some of the misconceptions they have of one another, and analyzes the current situation of globalization to warn of the dubious future that awaits both regions if understanding is not reached. The solution Ahmed sets forth at the end of the book is one that would, in essence, combine all three models of Islam: the Ajmer, Aligarh, and Deoband. By taking the positive aspects of each model—the belief in common humanity and acceptance from the Ajmer, commitment from the Deoband, and the "skill and dexterity to negotiate with governments, organizations, and political parties"(257) from the Aligarh, along with a strong dose of compassion—Ahmed suggests America and the Middle East might find their solution to conflict and misunderstanding.

As previously mentioned, *Journey into Islam* attempts to address many of the misconceptions and stereotypes the western world holds concerning the Islamic community, especially after September 11 when sweeping generalizations about Islamists skyrocketed. One such generalization is that all Islamists are terrorists in favor of violence who “respond only to force and thus need to be approached with firmness” (137). However, this stereotype just goes to show how little the western world knows about Islam, for if westerners took the time to study it they would know that much of the religion of Islam is based on peace and understanding, as Ahmed indicates when he writes that people must realize that “the finer distinction must be made between those who are actually guilty and those who happen to be part of their community” (262). Compassion and understanding can be seen in the people Ahmed and his team encounter along their journey, so much so that Ahmed himself is often surprised by how receptive Muslims are to westerners. His accounts of Muslim hospitality and kindness challenge the American stereotype that the Muslim world is inherently violent and show that much of what Americans perceive as aggression on the part of Muslims is, in fact, not an initiation of, but a response to American aggression and oppression. Putting forth this challenge, Ahmed helps the progression toward peace because when prejudices are extinguished the door is opened for communication.

Although never directly stated as one of the purposes of this book, Ahmed shows the importance of intercultural communication by shattering some of the misconceptions the west and Middle East have regarding one another. The elimination of stereotypes allows

people from different cultures to view one another more realistically because they gain an understanding of history and how various cultural groups came to be what they are today. This understanding, in turn, enables these differing groups to learn how to communicate with one another effectively and respectfully. Ahmed says it best when he writes:

Each of us needs to be much more sensitive to what is sacred or highly symbolic of a culture in other civilizations. Just as Muslims are—and will always be—sensitive to the abuse of their Prophet and holy book, so Americans are sensitive to any desecration of their flag, which they see as the very embodiment of their nationhood and identity.... With knowledge of other peoples and cultures, societies are less likely to see those others as disconnected from themselves. Once they recognize how closely dependent on each other they actually are, they will stop responding to provocation with more provocation. (265-266)

Ahmed's advice provides a way for the inevitability of globalization to take place in as harmless a way as possible. By respecting other cultures, as well as one's own, we can learn to integrate societies, depending upon one another without losing the defining aspects of different cultures.

Journey into Islam is informative and thought provoking no matter what one's race, religion, nationality, or political views—the intended target audience seems to be Americans. This being the case, and especially considering that the book focuses on Americans' lack of knowledge about the Muslim world, one would assume the history of Islam and the Muslim world would be explained in a reasonably clear manner to ensure a clear understanding of the information to come; however, whether or not such an explanation exists is questionable. Ahmed certainly includes many names and their connections to one another, but very few of these people are actually described and their importance and stories are lost in the sea of other less important names; he must keep in mind that names without stories or importance mean little or nothing to those who are not a part of the Islamic culture. Of course, it is unreasonable to expect a full debriefing on the history of Islam and the dynamics and politics of the Muslim world within the first four pages, but with such great emphasis placed upon the Prophet and his descendants throughout the entire book, Ahmed should tell the story of the Prophet much earlier in the book than he does. While Ahmed does try to explain relevant aspects of Islamic history, a previous knowledge of Islam would prove quite helpful to readers.

The majority of the text is historical or based on Ahmed's personal interviews with many prominent figures, as well as everyday Islamic citizens, and his first hand experience as a native of Pakistan. Throughout the book, Ahmed presents this research, information, and his opinions in an admirably fair manner. While he is critical of the United States, especially the government and its reaction and response to 9/11, his criticisms are not unjustified or made simply to make America look bad, but rather reveal American attitudes toward the Muslim world and explain why it has responded in the chosen manner. Just as he makes criticisms about the western world, Ahmed does not allow the Middle East to escape critique, stating: "Muslims need to recognize that the most effective 'weapons' for addressing their grievances are knowledge and reason, rather than

brute force” (264). Since he avoids taking a condescending, accusatory tone and presents his advice and criticisms as tactfully as he does, Ahmed is likely to find an audience receptive to his message.

While Ahmed proposes that compassion, humanity, and justice be the means of world cooperation, this solution is not easily achieved. It is doubtful that, if leaders of each country held these three qualities to the utmost standard and let them govern decisions and actions, the world would find itself in its current predicament, but is attainment of these qualities actually possible? It is hard to believe that people of the world, as a whole, will suddenly want to give up personal gain in order to uphold these standards; however, books such as Akbar Ahmed’s help to take societies one step closer to understanding and cooperation by making them realize that if the earth is ever to know peace, humans must first learn respect, compassion, humanity, and justice.

Britt Crossman, Communication ‘08