

Palestinian question: The hitch

By Ashok V Desai

If western media were so inclined, they could find much in Hinduism that is one or the other. There must be some reason why they do not use Hindus for diversion and provocation as they do Muslims?

THE Pew Research Centre, a Washington think-tank, is about six years old. It is chaired by Madeleine Albright, former Secretary of State under President Clinton, and John C Danforth, a former senator. It does opinion surveys across the world. Most of them are US-centred: recent ones, for instance, related to public opinion in the US on whether states should impose compulsory inoculation against cancer, and on how Hispanics in the US view the need to know English. The samples are generally small, and given the subjects on which the respondents often pronounce, cannot be random. The 2006 survey covered 14,030 people in 13 countries. They must consist of relatively literate people more or less exposed to the outside world. Despite this caveat, its recent survey of attitudes of and towards Muslims is of great interest.

Whilst the opinion is not overwhelming, it is remarkable in how many countries a majority think that the relations between Muslims and the West are bad. Roughly two-thirds of the people in major West European countries think so, as do Muslims living there. More than half of Americans think so, as do people in Muslim countries like Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and Indonesia. About the only

people disagreeing with this general impression of bad blood are Muslims in Spain.

Just what do western non-Muslims resent in Muslims? They commonly think that Muslims are arrogant, violent and fanatic. These negative views have solid majorities in most countries (including India); but they are less pronounced in the US, Britain and France. People in Muslim countries, on the other

hand, suspect westerners of being arrogant and violent, to which they add selfish. The unfavourable western view of Muslims is connected with a view of their religion. A majority of the British, Germans, Russians and Spaniards think that there is a conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society. In other words, the Christians who inhabit these countries think that

the attitudes and practices of Muslims disqualify them from living in western society. And surprisingly, a large number of people in Muslim countries share their view - 47 percent in Pakistan, 43 percent in Indonesia, and 28 percent in Egypt for instance. The idea that a liberal society corrupts Muslims is shared by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The connection between Islam and terrorism must surely vitiate many a western mind. But not every Muslim is a terrorist or supporter of terrorism. Solid majorities of people in

Turkey, Pakistan and Indonesia are against suicide bombings in any circumstances. The opposition is less pronounced in countries closer to Israel; it does not command a majority in Egypt and Jordan. Still, support for occasional suicide bombings has declined in most Muslim countries. Attitudes have much to do with close experience. In

Pakistan, whose president has been the

The reason for western opprobrium is Muslims everywhere think that Israel is unfair. Indians also used to think so we saw which side our bread was buttered. George W and Manmohan S are budding the Palestinians. So the cold war will continue until the Palest

target of suicide attacks, the proportion of people in its favour has fallen from 33 percent in 2002 to 14 percent now. In any case, anything between 41 and 65 percent of the people in Muslim countries simply do not believe that those who carried out 9/11 attacks were Arabs.

Generally, a large majority amongst non-Muslims in West European countries thinks that Muslims do not respect women. This impression must obviously be based on the well publicised woes of Muslim girls in west-

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ern countries who wanted to marry men they loved. But in general, the traditional Muslim view of a woman as being at the father's disposal before marriage and husband's after marriage, together with the Islamic institution of divorce on demand for men only, meet western disapproval.

The reciprocal view is not that common, but a majority of people in Egypt, Indonesia,

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Jordan and Pakistan think that westerners are not respectful of women. If one regards women as treasures to be carefully guarded by fathers and husbands, then I guess this view is understandable. But a majority of Muslims living in France, Spain and Germany think quite favourably of westerners' treatment of women.

What I found remarkable was that Pew bothered to ask Muslims and westerners about one another. No one seeks westerners' opinion about the Hindus, although stereotypes of widow burning, holy cow and female

infanticide are rife in the west. If traditional Hindus were asked about the west, they would be equally outspoken about its lewdness and selfishness. What have Muslims done which Hindus did not — or conversely, what did Hindus do to avoid the opprobrium invited by the Muslims?

A Hindu would be inclined to the view that his practices are not so objectionable as Muslim ones. Certainly, outside his own country, the Hindu practises his religion largely privately. And even where his temples are conspicuous, the practices surrounding them are not. Collective rites are less common and more circumspect amongst the Hindus.

But the strange and the bizarre are the staple of the media. If western media were so inclined, they could find much in Hinduism that is one or the other. There must be some reason why they do not use Hindus for diversion and provocation as they do Muslims?

To my mind, the reason lies in our political allegiances. When it was a Soviet client, India was no more objectionable in social terms. But western media abounded with negative stories about India. Today, warts could easily be found on India's face, but no one looks for them.

The reason is that we are now allies of the west. Not that Muslim nations are not; none of them, except Iran, dare cock a snook at the

US. They may not be as great friends of the West as India, but that is not because they do not want to. Musharraf would give an arm and a leg to get as close to Bush as Manmohan Singh; it is just that he is not allowed to. All allies get a good press in the West, and the western public believes its press.

What, then, is the Muslims' sin? It is that they cannot accept Israel's fate for the Palestinians: Israel would rather that Palestinians disappeared from this earth. If they would not, it would rather than neighbouring Arab countries took the Palestinians off its hands. Until either of those eventualities occurs, it would rather that the Palestinians accepted the hell that it has created for them. Muslims everywhere think that Israel's treatment of Palestinians is unfair. Indians also used to think so; but once the BJP came to power, we saw which side our bread was buttered on, and changed sides. Now George W and Manmohan S are buddies, and let the devil — or Israel — take the Palestinians.

So the cold war between Islam and Christianity will continue until the Palestinian question is resolved. And since we are talking of outlandish solutions, there are some that would appeal to Muslims. They would involve transplanting Israel somewhere else — in Atacama, Gobi, Sahara, New Mexico, Namibia, El Khali, Marwar, any desert. For while Israelis are terrible at getting on with their neighbours, they have a special affinity with flora. They will make any desert bloom. But next time, it would be important to ensure that the desert harbours no humans. COURTESY TELEGRAPH INDIA