

Avoiding a collision course

By Akhtar Mahmud Faruqui

IN the present atmosphere of mistrust between the Muslims and the West, it was heart-warming to see President Bush furnish fresh proof of characteristic American candour at the White House Rose Garden on May 6.

Standing beside King Abdullah II of Jordan, he uttered the magic words with unfeigned regret: "I told him I was sorry for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners, and the humiliation suffered by their families. I told him I was equally sorry that people who have been seeing those pictures didn't understand the true nature and heart of America. I assured him, Americans like me didn't appreciate what we saw, that it made us sick to our stomachs."

Many Muslims who understand the "true nature and heart of America" would readily concede the veracity of the president's claim. Despite serious misgivings about US foreign policy vis-a-vis Palestine, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and the WMD search in Iraq, Muslims do not regard the US as a country to despise though they identify the US media as the unquestionable villain in presenting Muslims in an unfavourable light. Besides the media, there are quite a few individuals who disparage Islam with unflinching zest. Remember Bill O'Reilly, Reverend Jerry Vines and Reverend Jerry Falwell who spoke against the Holy Quran, the Prophet (PBUH) and Islam. Misleading vitriol has certainly led quite a few Americans astray and explains a lot for the ghastly acts of prison abuse

and brown — and creeds — Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and atheists. And there appears no logical reason why people belonging to the three Abrahamic faiths and having so much in common should unnecessarily be at loggerheads.

Which brings us to the oft-debated question: are Islam and the West on a collision course? Professor Ralph Braibanti, an eminent scholar on the faculty of Duke University since 1953, makes the incisive point in his illuminating essay *Islam and the West: Common Cause or Clash?* An excerpt: "The ecumenical decree of Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Times) 1965 was a stunning repudiation of an attitude towards Islam regnant for more than half a millennium. It erased in a few poetical-ly elegant sentences the imagery in Dante's characterization of Mohammed...Its newly sensitive

understanding" with the Muslim world.

It must evolve a long-term strategy to interact with the Muslim nation, a strategy that should not be driven by interests of the corporate world or the multinationals, trading empires in their own right.

"The West needs to respond to the Muslim world firstly by listening to what Muslims are saying and secondly by trying to understand Islam. With some patience and understanding the general desire to assist the Muslim world will take shape. The West must send serious signals to the ordinary Muslim people — via the media, through seminars, conferences, meetings — that it does not consider Islam to be the enemy, however much it may disagree with certain aspects of Muslim behavior," says Dr Ahmed.

George Sarton's monumental work delineating the history of sciences testifies to the rich contribution of Muslims to various disciplines. Not surprisingly, many Western historians concede ungrudgingly that the roots of western civilization lie in the Islamic civilization.

What is more, in the United States today the seven million Muslims inhabiting the country have made their mark in various fields. Compared to an average American, Muslim Americans are better educated: 58 per cent Muslims are college graduates. They have a yearly income of \$50,000 and have made successful inroads in four fields: religion (there are more than 2,000 Islamic centres and mosques in the US), education, ethnic media and public advocacy.

The president's apology and description of prison abuse as an act of a few rather than the attitudinal pattern of the many in the US army is, indeed, reassuring. One hopes that, in due course of time, Washington will speak with the same degree of candour and fair-mindedness about other issues plaguing the world scene. Religions should not be a divisive force to blur one's vision and sense of objectivity.

stand the "true nature of heart of America" would readily concede the veracity of the president's claim. Despite serious misgivings about US foreign policy vis-a-vis Palestine, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and the WMD search in Iraq, Muslims do not regard the US as a country to despise though they identify the US media as the unquestionable villain in presenting Muslims in an unfavourable light. Besides the media, there are quite a few individuals who disparage Islam with unfailing zest. Remember Bill O'Reilly, Reverend Jerry Vines and Reverend Jerry Falwell who spoke against the Holy Quran, the Prophet (PBUH) and Islam. Misleading vitriol has certainly led quite a few Americans astray and explains a lot for the ghastly acts of prison abuse committed in the Abu Ghraib prison and in Afghanistan.

The president's apology and description of prison abuse as an act of a few rather than the attitudinal pattern of the many in the US army is indeed reassuring. One hopes that in due course of time Washington will speak with the same degree of candour and fair-mindedness about other issues plaguing the world scene — Kashmir, Palestine and Chechnya. Religions should not be a divisive force to blur one's vision and sense of objectivity.

In making this claim, one is reminded of one of the inspirational edicts of Thomas Jefferson. "We have solved, by fair experiment, the great and interesting question whether freedom of religion is compatible with order in government and obedience to the laws. And we have experienced the quiet as well as the comfort which results from leaving every one to profess freely and openly those principles of religion which are the inductions of his own reason and the serious convictions of his own inquiries." Current hard times, one hopes, would gradually pass away. The "winter of despair" should make way for a "spring of hope."

This optimism is well-founded. "The most astounding and gratifying revelation of my Islamic sojourn is the emergence of overwhelming evidence that a close kinship exists between Christianity and Islam, especially in primary literature," claims Paul Findley, Congressman for 22 years in his book *Silent No More*.

The entrancing country called the US has embraced men of all colours — white, black, yellow

The president's apology and description of prison abuse as an act of a few rather than the attitudinal pattern of the many in the US army is, indeed, reassuring. One hopes that, in due course of time, Washington will speak with the same degree of candour and fair-mindedness about other issues plaguing the world scene. Religions should not be a divisive force to blur one's vision and sense of objectivity.

appraisal of Islam eclipsed the somewhat less felicitous but more potentially powerful final sentence of paragraph 3: 'On behalf of all mankind, let them [Muslims and Christians] make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom [et pro omnibus hominibus justiciam socialem, bona moralia necnon pacem et libertatem communiter tueantur et promoveant]'. "This is clearly an exhortation to act. The errors of the past were to be forgotten, and points of agreement between the two religions were portrayed without animus or condescension," writes the erudite professor.

Viewed in this context, the visit of Pope John Paul to the Ommayad Mosque in Damascus on May 6, 2001, was an event of singular importance. The pontiff said it was time to open a new chapter in relations with the Muslims.

"For all the times that Muslims and Christians have offended one another, we need to seek forgiveness from the Almighty and to offer each other forgiveness. Better understanding will surely lead to a new way of presenting our two religions, not in opposition as has happened too often in the past, but in partnership for the good of the human family," he said.

The partnership or the "way forward", as well-known scholar Prof Akbar Ahmed calls it, is achievable by way of initiating a dialogue between the two civilizations — the West and the Muslim world. Conciliation, not confrontation, would yield tangible results. The West should be seized of the fact that it too is obliged to build "bridges of

work demarcating the history of sciences testifies to the rich contribution of Muslims to various disciplines. Not surprisingly, many Western historians concede ungrudgingly that the roots of western civilization lie in the Islamic civilization.

What is more, in the United States today the seven million Muslims inhabiting the country have made their mark in various fields. Compared to an average American, Muslim Americans are better educated: 58 per cent Muslims are college graduates. They have a yearly income of \$50,000 and have made successful inroads in four fields: religion (there are more than 2,000 Islamic centres and mosques in the US), education, ethnic media and public advocacy.

According to Paul Findley, Muslims have remarkable attainments in higher education. Ba-Yunus summarizes an unpublished study showing that employed Muslims in the 20 to 40 age group averaged three years of college — two years more than the national average. The middle and upper brackets with a median of \$39,700 strikingly high for a group that includes many recent immigrants.

US Muslims are prominent in engineering, business administration, medicine, finance, accounting, electronics, science and education, as well as retail establishments. Egyptian-born Ahmed Zewail, 53, a professor at the California Institute of Technology in Los Angeles, received the 1999 Nobel Prize in chemistry for his development of a high-speed camera that can monitor chemical reactions at one quadrillionth of a second and record the motion of atoms. Chief executive officers of major industries who are Muslims include Safi Qureshey of AST Computers, Ray Irani of Occidental Petroleum, and Farooq Kathwari of Ethen Allen Furniture Company. Among Muslim notables are six professors and internationally acclaimed political scientists.

Prior to September 11, Muslim Americans were on the march. They must recapture their momentum with renewed zest. There is a message for them in an observation of George Washington: "True friendship is a plant of slow growth, and must undergo and withstand the shocks of adversity before it is entitled to the appellation".

The author is editor of *Pakistan Link*, US