



BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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Seyyed Hossein Nasr

BILL MOYERS: I'm Bill Moyers. There are predictions that, by the year 2020, one quarter of the world's population will be Moslem. Islam is growing so fast that already there are more Muslims in America than Episcopalians, and soon Muslims will outnumber Jews here.

Understanding Islam is all the more imperative because hundreds of thousands of American troops are poised for war on Islam's holy ground. My guest in this broadcast is one of the world's leading Islamic scholars, and he says that with those troops in the Middle East we're all sitting on the edge of a precipice.

[voice-over] Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is a scholar of Islamic studies at George Washington University who has written extensively on Islamic science, philosophy and art. I first met him at a conference on the environment that occurred just after Iraq invaded Kuwait.

His response to a question from the audience prompted me to look him up for a longer conversation, to talk about what else the West ought to understand about the world of Islam.

First, here is his answer to that question at the conference.
Dr. SEYED HOSSEIN NASR. *[Middlebury College]* Of course, it is very tragic what Saddam Hussein did in attacking Kuwait. I start with that. But I also must give you a historical perspective. What he did was to hand the Middle East, on a silver platter actually, to the West for the next 50 years.

I think that there are several factors which have been totally ignored in the West. First of all, America should look at her own history. In the 19th century, America invaded Mexico and took over two pieces of real estate which are worth a lot more than Kuwait, that is, California and Texas, and integrated them together into a major country which became the world's greatest power in the 20th century.

The divisions of the Arab world, especially in the East, were done by a few bad geographers who spoke French and English with bad accents in 1917 and cut up the Middle East according to actually not natural lines of division, but according to the fight that the two major imperial powers of Europe were having at that time, and therefore established a disequilibrium which, in fact, is very, very painful and continues to be painful. And the dynamics of it will one day—will have to change the situation.

Now, the fact that the United States came in with such gusto to save little Kuwait, which in fact was a haven of stability and they had wonderful hospitals and schools and the best university and the best library in the Islamic world and all of those things—that's not the point—but came to save this little state with the excuses that have been given, actually, in this country for preserving the sovereignty of nations and this kind of thing, looks very, very dubious to Muslims throughout the world.

No one in Asia forgets what the West did when the Chinese invaded Tibet, first of all, in 1951. Everybody turned his head around

and tried to talk about rugby in England and baseball here, and who was concerned with Tibet? The claim of China upon Tibet is almost identical with the claim of Iraq over Kuwait. Exactly identical, both quasi-independent, occasionally claims historically that this was a province that was part of China, very, very similar. So this kind of moralistic rhetoric is much worse than the orders that were given by the Roman emperor to annex some province in the first century A.D. which was very blatant and open, the Pax Romana.

Now, if a Pax Americana is going to be established, I think what is important for America is to realize that it is going to have to pay a very, very high price, unfortunately, and the Moslem world, all the way from Indonesia and to the southern Philippines to Morocco, is going to be up in arms if a large number of even Iraqi soldiers are killed by American bombs. And worse than that, if not a person is killed but American soldiers sit on the land, sacred land of Arabia near Mecca and Medina, I believe they'll be sitting, actually, at the edge of a precipice and the next few weeks, I hope I'm completely wrong, I think that a 100,000-man army isn't going to just sit there and sweat flies for a long, long time. Something is going to happen, there's going to be an attack, and then God help us to pick up the pieces.

So I think that it's a very, very challenging episode that is occurring and I hope that we as human beings don't fail this test, otherwise we will have to pay very dearly for it.

MOYERS: You said in that speech at Middlebury College that we're sitting on the edge of a precipice, if there is war in the Middle East, or even if American troops just sit a long time on the sacred land of Arabia near Mecca and Medina there will be unbelievable convulsions in the Islamic world. Why is that so when Muslims are divided by what's happening there? There are Muslims who oppose Saddam Hussein, Muslims who support the United States, Muslims who oppose the United States. How can there be a convulsion in the Moslem world when so many Muslims are divided over what's happening there?

NASR: That's true, but a division is on one level, and their view as to what the sacred land of Arabia means is on another level. That is, whatever political position they take, whether they are pro one side or pro the other side, that exists. But all Muslims or nearly all Muslims believe the land of Arabia to be sacred.

MOYERS: Because?

NASR: Because that's where Islam was revealed, because the early sacred history of Islam is connected with that, because wherever you are in the world you pray toward the direction of Mecca. And Mecca and Medina, the two great centers, are considered by Muslims to be holy cities for them.

MOYERS: So what is the symbolism of American, western troops being just a few hundred miles from the holy city of Mecca?

NASR: Well, in the eyes of many Muslims it is a kind of final desecration of things Islamic, the final humiliation, that Muslims cannot defend even their own—the center of their own world.

MOYERS: But in this case it was a brother Moslem who created the

situation by his invasion of Kuwait.

NASR: That's why I said right now opinions are so divided. Right now opinions are so divided and one hopes that there will be a solution soon which would satisfy somehow, first of all, the cause of justice and truth, but also bring the different sides together. But if there is not a solution, this present division of views on the political level, I think, is gradually going to evolve towards a kind of voice in unison opposing the presence of non-Muslims in the land of Arabia.

MOYERS: Does it take on the aspects of what we hear in the West, you know, jihad, a holy war?

NASR: Well, this word is bandied about too much in the West, actually. The word jihad, first of all, does not mean holy war. It means exertion in the way of God, in the path of God. The very root of the word jihad means exertion. It has nothing to do with the word war. It has been translated as holy war as part and parcel of a kind of cultural and religious action and reaction between the Islamic world and the West, since in fact the first holy war was declared not by Muslims but by Christians—

MOYERS: Christians.

NASR:—and the Cluny monks, at the beginning of the Crusades. And so this idea of jihad was seen as being a holy war on behalf of Islam. I do not take that in its juridical and strictly religious meaning to be a very important issue at the present moment. In a more general sense of trying to do something to save the Islamic world from this presence, yes, if you'd like to call that jihad. But the idea that some morning somebody would declare a jihad and everybody would get on his horse with his sword in his hand and charge, that is not going to take place like that at all.

MOYERS: But when one mentions the idea of a violent revolution, so many westerners think instantly of Islam. Islam is a militant faith, they say. It fosters violent revolution. What do you think when you hear that kind of talk?

NASR: I've become extremely saddened by this, and this is really such a paradox, since the word Islam means peace, and when Muslims see each other they say, "*as-salam*, may peace be upon you," which the Prophet taught the Muslims to say.

The reason this is so is twofold. One of them is very deeply historical and theological and it's very difficult to go into in a short time, and that is that Christianity, from the very beginning, in a sense separated itself from the power of the world. That is, Christ himself said, "Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and give unto God what is God's." That's one form of religion, in which the religion poses an ideal for its members without really penetrating into the everyday life, political, economic and otherwise of society.

Another model is that of Islam, which is also shared by the prophets of Israel, the Hebrew prophets are also accepted by Muslims as prophets, like Abraham and Moses, and is also shared by other religions like Hinduism, in which the religion integrates the political, economic, social realm into its religious world view and in fact, there is no kingdom of Caesar's. That's one reason, therefore, that Christianity saw at the beginning the spirit of Islam as being related to aggression and political, military activity and the like.

Otherwise, if you take the history of Christianity and the history of Islam, you cannot say one side has carried out more wars than the other, they're about equal. I mean, they've killed each other, they've lived in peace with each other, they declared war and so forth and so on.

It's not that the Islamic world has a monopoly on wars and the Christian world has never had wars. This is totally absurd, of course.

MOYERS: The Crusades were a form of jihad, were they not?

NASR: Exactly. They were a form of jihad, that is, this original theological idea that Christ himself never entered the political realm, he kept himself aloof from politics—

MOYERS: In what Thomas Jefferson called the separation of church and state—

NASR:—church and state.

MOYERS:—that's a given in the United States.

NASR: Which in fact is not accepted in Islam.

MOYERS: Because?

NASR: Because, first of all, the word church, of course, doesn't exist in the Islamic context.

MOYERS: Okay.

NASR: But besides that, because of doctrine of unity, that Muslims believe that religion should embrace the whole of life. That does not mean that a particular religious scholar or particular religious authority should rule. That's another situation, that's another case to be discussed, whether this is correct or incorrect. But in the—during the history of Islam, most of the history of Islam, the rulers have not been among the scholars or religious authorities. They have been caliphs or sultans or emirs, kings, and so forth and so on, but they have had to protect the divine law. Actually, the key was always the protection of the divine law. And the divine law was not only for the religious realm, what you call in the West the religious realm, but it was for the whole of life. And therefore the political and the religious were always intermingled.

Now, the second reason why Islam appears to be militant is because of all the great civilizations that existed on the surface of the earth and which still survive, the Indian, the Chinese, the Japanese, the old civilizations of Africa, the Islamic and so forth, all of them suffered greatly as a result of the experience of the 18th and 19th centuries. By the time the West left after the colonial period, most of these civilizations had become very enfeebled. But among all of them, Islam still continues to assert its own identity, not only on the purely religious level, but as a whole civilization, independent of the West's sort of global agenda, you might say. And so this appears oftentimes to people in the West as being a challenge to the West's way of saying that our way is the only way, and all other civilizations, all other people must follow the same trajectory of history. And because Islam wants to do that, it appears to be very militant.

Actually, any other civilization which also tries to assert its own identity will appear to be militant. Remember the Buddhist monks who were burning themselves in Vietnam? Remember what is going on in Hindu India right now? What the Jewish people have done and

are asserted in order to try to assert their own identity and so forth and so on? This is not at all unique to Islam.

MOYERS: But do Muslims envision a world dominated by Islam?

NASR: No. The vast majority of Muslims believe that at the end of time when the Mahdi, the person who comes before the second coming of Christ — and according to Islamic ecclesiastical doctrines, comes — then the whole world is going to embrace Islam in the sense of submission to God. But they do not believe that they should conquer the whole world and make everybody Moslem. They want to be able to head the Islamic world itself.

MOYERS: But by the nature of its own theology, its own principle of unity, that everything is of the same world, there is no secular and there is no spiritual, they are all one, can Islam co-exist—

NASR: Yes.

MOYERS: —with a non-Moslem world?

NASR: Yes, because non-Moslem is not necessarily secular. The Koran asserts over and over again that there are many prophets sent before Islam, that there are other religions, and Islam always respected the other religions which lived within its realm.

MOYERS: But it's not history that so much informs the American imagination today as images on television of the students outside the embassy, of Khomeini shouting "Great Satan," or urging them to shout "Great Satan," of hostages being held in Lebanon, and all of that gets tied up in the American imagination with the image of Islam today. Would you agree to that?

NASR: It does get tied up, and this is very unfortunate, because if you have a part of the Islamic world where the Muslims are living peacefully with Christians, or with Hindus, or with Buddhists like in Malaysia, and they are going about their own business, that never gets on television, obviously, because television always brings images of conflict and of violence. And unfortunately for the name of Islam, so much of this is carried out in its name, precisely because Islam is so important in this society. I mean, today, you could not perhaps, in England, whose official religion is Anglicanism, or in the United States, where the separation of church and state, mobilize the people in the name of Christianity, but you could mobilize it in of nationalism, oil prices, economic situation, recession, all kinds of other things, or fighting for national interests in the Second World War or in Vietnam, or the Korean war, fighting against Communism, all of these things, that is possible. It is not possible to unite the American people in some international effort in the name of Christianity now.

MOYERS: So is Islam a religious or a political order?

NASR: Well, I think this very either-or dichotomy is itself taken from the Christian experience, and it should not be applied to another world where, in fact, such a dichotomy does not exist. This is not only true of Islam. Ask of Judaism, or Hinduism, two other religions which are very much alive in the world today, if you ask the same question, is Hinduism a religion or is it a social and political order? Well, on the one level you say, might so, it's not political because it's a democracy. But when you percolate down into the level of the villages and the whole structure of Hindu society, it's both, and the same with

Judaism.

MOYERS: Is democracy relevant to Islam?

NASR: Depends on how you define the word democracy. Again, as a purely western institution, because the truth of it is, is the idea and the institution, as a purely western institution, it could never sink its roots in the Islamic world in the same way that it has sunk its roots in the West. Even French democracy is not the same as American democracy. It would be much less so if you had Egyptian democracy, in that sense. But as meaning the reflection of the views of the people and the significance of what they say and they say what they feel, certainly it's very relevant to Islam.

MOYERS: I take Winston Churchill's definition as my working principle, that is, that democracy is the recognition of the occasional necessity of deferring to the opinion of other people. Pluralism, in a sense. Tolerance, in a sense. And one doesn't get through what we've been seeing the last few years from the world of Islam that there is much tolerance there, much understanding of pluralism in a world that is so fragmented that no one truth can prevail.

NASR: You see, pluralism is wonderful as long as you exist. When your own existence is threatened, the pluralism is put on the back burner, as the Americans say. It becomes secondary.

MOYERS: The question that comes to my mind is whether any separate civilization can exist in a modern world shrunk by technology and communications, in which the migratory habits of people are constant, we're all nomads today, everything is getting mixed up and intertangled. Can Islam hope to survive as an independent civilization?

NASR: This is a very good question, and the question is a race between whether this integration will take place faster or the whole of the modern world itself collapse from its own ineptitude and inner contradictions. It's a race between two different realities and it's very difficult to say which is going to win out. But there's no doubt that the Islamic world wants to be an independent entity, respecting the West and also other civilizations, Chinese, Japanese and others in the East or India, but not be absorbed and swallowed by any other civilization than its own principles and its own history and its own past and its own ethos.

MOYERS: But if you believe that you are following the Party of God, and that Allah is your commander, he is your cause, can you tolerate infidels, by the very nature of your theology?

NASR: Well, it depends, you see, on how this is interpreted. Within the Islamic world, as within the western world, where even today in America you have a whole spectrum between ultra-conservatives to extreme liberals in all issues, and everything in between — look at the question of abortion, for example, the question of the right to life and so forth and so on which is in the center of the American agenda right now — within the Islamic world also you have a whole spectrum.

Now, what does it mean to be the Party of God? There are those who say that all human beings are God's creatures, and if you are part of the Party of God you must also accept other ways of life, other human beings, the way they live, and respect them. And most of its history—in most of its history, Islam has been a very tolerant reli-

gion in the highest sense of the term, because Islam ruled over vast minorities for centuries, when it had the power to destroy them and it didn't. You must remember that the only place in the world where the Mass is still celebrated in the language of Christ is in the Islamic world, or that the head of the Greek Orthodox Church is still in Istanbul, or the most orthodox Jewish communities who have preserved thousands of years of Jewish tradition are the Yemeni or Persian or Moroccan or Egyptian Jews.

There are others in the Islamic world who are, in fact, fanatical, who are at the other end of the spectrum.

MOYERS: We call them Moslem fundamentalists, whether or not that's an appropriate term, that's the currency in this country now. What about them? They certainly seem to have no tolerance.

NASR: That encompasses, really, again, a spectrum of very different opinions. There are those who wish to Islamize society, that is, to undo the effect of the bringing of European laws, especially the question of law, because law in Islam is sacred, the *Shari'ah* is sacred in Islam, are going back to Islamic norms of dealing with your family, your neighbor, with society, with economic transactions and the like, and many of them are not opposed to western science and technology. They do not even understand its impact. It's mostly the social and human elements that they're dealing with. They want to do that in a moderate, gentle way by education, by sermon, by talk, and they will be no different from the bishop of New York trying to lead people to be better Christians, except to be a better Christian does not involve the laws of the city of New York. To be a better Moslem would involve the laws of the city of Cairo. That's the only difference.

There are other people who are wont to take a gun and kill people, or take a bomb and explode buildings and so forth. And many of the Islamic scholars believe that many of these actions are anti-Islamic, according to Islamic law, the killing of innocent people, and so forth and so on, and so there's a struggle going on within the Islamic world itself, not only between the so-called fundamentalists and traditional Muslims, who are the vast majority, who are never in fact talked about, but even within the fundamentalist camp, what is called fundamentalism, between those who are moderate, who want to, in fact, change society by participating in the processes of society, like in Pakistan and Egypt, and others who are extremists.

And by putting them all together, by giving this international global image of all Muslims being just bomb-throwing terrorists, this is doing a great disservice to the understanding between Islam and the West. And it simply is not true, it's against the truth. And the truth will finally triumph, that is, you cannot just evade the truth by couching it in convenient slogans or terms. That's not the reality of the situation.

MOYERS: Listening to you, I find myself remembering the article that a scholar named Bernard Lewis wrote recently in *The Atlantic* magazine, in which he said that there is in the world of Islam today such powerful rage and hatred toward the West in general and Americans in particular. I don't hear that in you. Obviously, you are a citizen of this country now, and you live in Washington, but what do you think about that thesis? Is there great rage and hatred toward

America in particular in the world of Islam?

NASR: First of all, sad that this article appeared in such a way as if it represented the Islamic point of view, instead of the view of a western scholar, in fact, a very good historian, of the Islamic world but who has his own very special point of view, which is not the Islamic point of view.

If you go back to the Islamic point of view, you will see, first of all, there is some rage, there is some anger, there is no doubt about that. And that anger is not unique to the Islamic world. It is also shared by many other peoples who experienced, in fact, the corrosive influence of long periods of colonial rule and the domination of a foreign cultural norm upon them. It's not unique to Islam, and to say so is false. But it's true that secularizing modernism which was able to gain power over nature and through military technology over the rest of the world for a long, long time and which therefore destroyed much of the Islamic civilization, yes, there is anger against that.

But also that is oftentimes combined with a sense of admiration by certain people, of personal friendship. Even those countries which express a great deal of anger towards the West, they are sending their students to study in western universities even now. The sense that there are things in the West which Muslims must learn, young Moslem students must learn. So the situation is not really black and white like that at all.

But the reality is that there is such a thing as the Islamic world. It exists. And since it exists, it has its own world view, and that world view is not identical with the world view of the West.

MOYERS: What would you most like, at this particular moment, for Americans to understand about your faith, about the world of Islam?

NASR: Well, first of all, that Islam is a religion that is based upon not only the faith in the one God and surrender to him, but also upon the peace that ensues from that. Without that, it's impossible to understand Islam. Secondly, that Islam wants to live at peace with the followers of other religions. But also, Islam wants to be able to live within its own house according to its own rules, according to its own traditions and according to its own culture. That is what is important to understand.

MOYERS: From New York, this has been a conversation with Seyed Hossein Nasr. I'm Bill Moyers.

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11/4/88 #140 **Noam Chomsky — Part II**

11/7/88 #141

Elaine Pagels — Part I (Historian of religion; her new book *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* examines how