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Islam and We

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Panel: Islam and We

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Ameena Hussein (Sri Lanka)

Islam and We

I am a Muslim who lives in a non-Muslim country, and not a day goes by that I don't give thanks for that fact. As a Muslim writing in Sri Lanka, I am fairly confident that even though the Sri Lankan Muslim community may have objections to what I write and how I write it, I am reasonably safe where the State is concerned. In a Muslim country however, I doubt that I would have the freedom to write about women, sex, minority issues and religion in the same style that I do. But then again that is debatable.

Why do we need to talk about Islam? Is it so that we can talk about the great religion that embodies a noble humane spirit? Is it to enlighten seekers of spirituality and direct them towards the great Sufi tradition of love? Is it to talk about their contribution to architecture or to discuss their admirably complicated legislature?

No! The only reason we want to talk about Islam today is to talk about fanaticism, jihad, terrorism and militant Islam.

Islam is going through a crisis. In my mind it is the only one of the three Western religions that has not gone through a long-term modern moderating reform movement. It in fact, despite belonging to the Judeo-Christian lineage, has more in common today with radical Hinduism, as in some parts of India, and militant Buddhism, as we have in Sri Lanka. However, except in Sri Lanka and India, you will rarely have discussions on *their* global impact. Islam needs to be talked about because it affects all of us in some way or another—it is claimed to be the fastest-growing religion in the world and the second-largest religion. Migrants, refugees and converts have taken it to almost every country on the planet. There are consequences.

As a Sri Lankan Muslim supposedly descended from Arab traders who married Sinhalese and Tamil women, as a Muslim whose descendants have lived in Sri Lanka for more than ten generations, I want to talk about the limitations of being a Muslim. I want to talk about apostasy. I want to talk about the spiritual inequality of non-Muslims in Islam, I want to talk about interpretation, I want to talk about re-birth. As a Muslim woman I want to talk about gender, inheritance, marriage, female circumcision, sexuality, and polygyny. I want to talk about freedom and free will, and equality.

But I have no space.

The great Muslim age of reason has vanished. Ijtihad, or independent thinking, was closed in the eleventh century A.D. during the Abbasid Dynasty, and ever since then Islam has stagnated and suffocated. The vibrancy of Islam that gave us trigonometry, algebra, calligraphy, and the Taj Mahal has been reduced to a narrow rigid violent religion that today gives us bombs, war and terrorism. But such a radical change does not happen by accident. It is not the fault of Islam alone.

I come from a country that was guilty of grave injustice towards its minorities, which created a twenty-five-year-old civil war. Likewise, I believe that the Western world has not been just towards Islam. In replacing the Cold War with the green peril, as I have heard Islam been described in some quarters, the Western world deliberately created an "other" to justify its existence and policies. Where there is no justice there will always be violence. In the words of Dr. George Malek, a United Methodist minister, "The Christian West has traditionally seen Islam through Dante's eye: *The Inferno*." Dante placed Prophet Muhammad in the eighth Hell, with the ninth Hell being reserved for Satan. And a terrible punishment was to be inflicted on the Prophet Muhammad rather than Satan. It was as if Islam was to be more feared than even Satan. In addition, Western history shows that Islam was not seen as a religion, but a life of licentiousness.

As a Muslim in Sri Lanka I find myself in the precarious position of the insider outside. As a believing Muslim who finds contradictions and inconsistencies in the religion, I am in that unenviable situation where if I critique the religion I am the friend of the anti-Muslim, and if I keep silent I am the enemy of myself. It is a dilemma I find myself in more and more.

The Muslim community in Sri Lanka has had a long history of persecution. Colonialism brought humiliation and racism under the Dutch, Portuguese and British—a trait that continues under the majority Sinhala government. In recent historical times the Muslims, as is commonly done to many minority communities worldwide, have been featured in a negative light. Songs, caricatures, myths and fears have been fed into the popular imagination to create a stereotype of a wheedling, greedy, lustful, shifty, lazy, closed, fertile, ignorant community. In modern times the Muslim community of Sri Lanka, finding themselves at the edge of a precarious debate between the Sinhala and Tamil community of Sri Lanka, have also reacted with predictable outcome. They have become *more* Muslim. That is, they have taken to wearing the hijab, become more insulated as a community, encourage education in Madrasahs or religious schools, and there is a perception of viewing themselves as being *not* from Sri Lanka rather than *of* it. With differences highlighted, the gap has grown considerably wider and thus it is no surprise that, with proposed peace talks between the LTTE and the Government of Sri Lanka, for the potential of the Muslim to be seen as the new bogey man.

Often the Muslim community of Sri Lanka views my writings as treacherous and ultra-critical. As my Muslim pharmacist once told me—I think you are a Muslim who doesn't like to be a Muslim. Thus any form of opinion, even mildly critical, is seen as being against the religion and community. The other ethnic communities, however, see me as the flag bearer of modern Sri Lankan Muslimness. I am acceptable to them. They understand me. I am, after all, saying what they would like to say but do not for reasons of political correctness. This leaves me as a writer in a dilemma. Believing that change is most effective when it comes from within, I am at the same time aware of the danger of being used or manipulated by the other communities. I confess there is a lot of self-censorship on my part.

It leaves me frustrated.

A writer has power. In the mid-nineteenth century the novelist Lytton wrote the proverb *the pen is mightier than the sword*. Today, being a Muslim writer can be a powerful and yet a

dangerous thing. Some writers have been banned, some imprisoned, others exiled and still others killed. I recently came across an organisation dedicated to writing about, presenting and promoting positive Islamic fiction. But should Muslim writers be dedicated to only white wash? What about the niggling doubts, the little bothersome details? Should we not write about them, debate them, discuss them? Is being a Muslim all about total acceptance? And more importantly, total acceptance of whose version?

Writers are the witnesses to their time and place. They are the voices of memory, the conscience of a people.

I end with the very first words of the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad: **Read in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher.** And therefore I write in the hope that I will be read.