

Introduction

*Mike Hardy, Fiyaz Mughal
and Sarah Markiewicz*

Islam is possibly the most controversial religion in Europe today. What we mean when we say ‘Islam’, however, is not always immediately clear. As the world’s second largest faith with over a billion members, Islam has multiple forms and is interpreted differently according to legal school, audience or point of view. In the eyes of some Western media, Islam continues to be portrayed as associated with violence, warfare, opposition to democracy and the oppression of women. Hypotheses that seek supporting evidence for this – such as that Islam is taking over the West and is incompatible with and intolerant of Western forms of government – are no rarity, despite the reality that their claims are largely unverifiable.

These portrayals alone are powerful and influential, but when they coincide with acts of extreme violence and terror, apparently ‘in the name of God’, they become manifest in the rise of visible division and hate crime. The graphic visuals of the murders at the Charlie Hebdo headquarters in Paris or on the streets of Woolwich in London, among too many other examples in the recent past, express and generate fears between and within communities, creating self-fulfilling cycles of prejudice. Islamophobia and its challenge to peaceful, cohesive communities is a painful manifestation.

While the West¹ is struggling to come to terms with Muslims² and their faith, Islam is facing its own disruptions. The perceived threat of Islamist-inspired terrorism is certainly very real; but just as real is the fact that most victims of the associated terrorist attacks are Muslims.

Sectarian tensions have been commonplace within Islam (and many other religions) from the earliest of times and this is currently an acute issue in many communities; the question of who is a Muslim – and who and what defines Islam – has never been more pressing.

Islam is thus facing pressure from all sides – internally, it is lacking unity and also struggling to define itself through localized environments in European countries while, externally, it is misunderstood and vilified by uninformed oversimplifications. This works through as a crisis of identity for Muslims in particular places where, in conducting their everyday lives in multicultural and multi-faith geographies, they meet with a wide range of challenges and contexts.

This volume focuses on Europe,³ itself neither stable nor monolithic, but a place where a growing sense of alienation has emerged in various communities, particularly among Muslims. Within the context of Europe's plural reality and the public discourse on diversity and inclusion there is still widespread misunderstanding of Muslims and Islam. The growth in mutual mistrust between Muslim communities and the wider European society is itself highly complex; not simply about misunderstanding beliefs but also involving a relatively low appreciation of the contribution of Islamic communities and cultures to the shaping of contemporary European civilization and society – both in the past and in the present. The alienation affects all parts of society and it risks, at best, indifference and prejudice and, at worst, subjection to violence, persecution and hate crime (Masood 2008).⁴

Much of the crisis facing Islam and Islam–West relations involves perceptions about Islam and its connections, real or not, with violent extremism on the one hand, and the association of the practice of 'true Islam' with membership of a particular school or confession on the other. It is not surprising, then, that there has been broad and growing recognition from religious and secular leaders and academics that something needs to change. In 2004, an initiative emerged from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in response to these concerns – as a 'counter attack to the accusations that Islam is a religion of violence and extremism, and as a means of correcting false impressions about Islam' (Nakhouda 2008). This initiative came in the form of a message from the King of Jordan, Abdullah II, and was addressed to

Muslims and the world at large. Its goal was to clarify 'the true nature of Islam and the nature of true Islam' (Ghazi 2006).

The Amman Message, as the initiative was called, began life as a press release during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. In the decade and more that followed, the Message has been expanded and developed, and assessed not only for its contemporary relevance, in general, but for its potential in addressing two fundamental global issues, in particular. These are, namely, the conflict among Muslims with regard to 'true Islam' and the often distorted impression that some non-Muslims have and propagate about Islam.

This is the backcloth for this collection of essays. It takes as its core challenge the task of communicating and promoting the Amman Message to European audiences, to look both at the debates around the development of the Message and the discussion of the 'true nature of Islam' in a European context. In so doing, it seeks to open discourse on the contemporary identity of Muslims in Europe and to explore the implications of the Amman Message, examining how and why it may be useful.

It is not our aim to contribute another book to the debate provoked by the narrative of Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' (Huntington 2002), but rather to make the audience aware of the potential of a specific initiative that offers a platform from which to discuss, reconcile and educate. It further intends to draw together the important work surrounding the Amman Message that has been undertaken over the last decade and relate this directly to the circumstances and violent events played out relentlessly in both European and other communities. This book represents the first published academic response to the Amman Message outside the Middle East. The authors are as varied as the intended audience of the Message: they are male and female scholars and practitioners from both the West (Europe, North America and Australia) and the Middle East, and include Muslims, Christians, practitioners of other faiths and those who claim no religious affiliation. The common denominator is the belief that the Amman Message represents one of the most significant dialogue initiatives of our times; a message that is accessible, timeless in its applicability, and which can be used on many levels; a message that, if better known and more effectively propagated, can make a powerful and positive contribution.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

This book has a broad intended audience. Written in the English language, it is primarily directed at an English-literate readership from Western and non-Western countries. The language is accessible, and the subject matter is topical.

The aim of the book is to inform and educate, to open the door to one of the most significant dialogue initiatives of the twenty-first century, and to encourage its continued use and application. Since intra-Islamic and Islam–West relations are social issues as well as security issues, awareness of the subject matter involved and of initiatives to alleviate these tensions has a broad scope. Moreover, the editors consider this work to be ideal as a text for use in a *tertiary context* on courses teaching interfaith, intra-faith and intercultural relations, peace studies, media studies, political science, cultural studies, Islamic sciences, theology and sociology.

The Amman Message and its ‘Three Points’ are global statements; hence, this volume will be of interest to international leaders, especially those living in contexts experiencing the repercussions of sectarian or Islam–West tensions. As a tool for *advising on policy*, it will be of interest to *governments* and *community organizations* alike and for all those concerned with countering violent extremism and the terrorism so pervasive in our societies. The Message, itself, is a powerful tool and very relevant for *religious leaders* in their work educating Muslims about the nature of their faith and their obligations towards Muslims of other denominations, as well as to non-Muslims. This book will be a strong support to this, as well as for non-Muslim religious leaders to grow understanding in their communities about Islam. As the Message has an interfaith dimension, the book will also be a tool for dialogue between different faith communities.

The *media* plays an important role in the dissemination of public knowledge about Islam and the editors see this volume as being an informative tool for media reporting, presenting a differentiated view of Islam from a number of different disciplines.

Finally, this volume is for the *common readership*. It is written in an accessible style, and is interdisciplinary, intersectional and topical. Anyone who is curious about understanding Islam and the current challenges facing it will find much of interest.