CHAPTER NINE

MAKING FRIENDS IN THE NON-WESTERN WORLD

Let’s take the criticisms of the Islamic world as a prototype for our problems with the non-Western world in general, though it is understood there are many cultures in the non-Western world and they are not all alike. For that matter, the dislike of some aspects of American culture in the Islamic world involves criticisms, whether they realize it or not, which we make about ourselves. It is not as if we are unaware that there are commercial interests who encourage, not family values or even basic rationality, but tearing them down and selling cheap thrills in their place. Meanwhile, while we are barely capable of keeping our moral house in order, many leaders are good at lecturing the underdeveloped world that their major problem is that they’re not just like us. A basic realization that universalistic values can nevertheless be achieved in more than one way may allow us to spread the message that, just like we expect other cultures to respect us, at least minimally, we fully intend to respect them.

In fact, many of the grievances of the Islamic world consist of remembering hypocrisies that we have so conveniently forgotten, and we can say the same thing about them. One of them of course is the way the US encouraged Afghan resistance to the Soviets to the last drop of Afghan blood, and when the Soviets left, leaving Afghanistan in shambles, we had absolutely no intention of helping them rebuild their country. That feeling of being seduced and abandoned would not have left us a great many friends there.

For that matter, our harping on the supposed militancy of Islam, which is of course a half-truth, seems to forget that poor people and societies are often more aggressive than rich ones. For hundreds and hundreds of years Western Europe was both economically and culturally imperialistic when it suited them. Just look at how nations in Western Europe colonized the Americas and a few hundred years later, after having to fight many, many anti-colonial wars, they tried again in Africa. Cultural and religious chauvinism is by no means an Islamic monopoly.
True, the West has evolved into much more anonymous, bureaucrati-
tized societies than many Islamic societies are comfortable with, and
so they hate what they do not understand. Many such societies are
comfortable with the greed of the wealthy on a more wealthy, albeit
feudal, scale, which results in oil sheiks having gigantic families of per-
haps 50 children, as in the case of the Bin Laden family of Saudi Arabia,
and see nothing wrong with it, but are uncomfortable with the wealthy
class of the West who also become rich beyond the dreams of avarice,
and create impersonal societies that in many ways treat people like
things in order to create all this wealth. So they see the slivers in our
eyes, and not the motes in their own.

In similar fashion, the German Nazis and Italian Fascists were jeal-
ous of the empires of Britain and France, not realizing that their impe-
rialisms would soon end, and of course overlooking the fact that their
own imperialisms were in no way justified, but were in fact much
worse. The Islamic radicals in their anger at maldistribution of income
in the Islamic world, and at the weakening of family morality and com-
community feelings there which they blame on the West for setting them a
bad example, don't realize we are struggling with the same problems,
though we think they have a fanaticism about it which we don't. As for
those among us who really don't care about family morality and com-
community feelings, it's only a few of us, not all, and heavily concentrated
among the very rich and the very poor; little details that too many in
the Islamic world, and in the non-Western world in general, don't seem
to get.

In fact the West and the Islamic world have, in terms of basic values,
more in common than differences. Of course we notice each other's
hypocrisies, which often blinds us to our underlying similarities, at
least in terms of ideals.

Then again, perhaps it wouldn't be so wise to show the oil sheiks too
much of our fleshpots. Their visits here may turn out like, for example
in this hypothetical conversation in one of our bookstores.

“Yes, I see the Bibles, the medical textbooks, but before I donate money
to your university, let me see the magazines your young people read.
What is this? 'How to Make Your Own Porn'?
“It's all right. That's a British magazine.”
“I was taught they had good taste.”
“Lately they’ve been concentrating on just tasting good.”
“And this kit, make you own goddess? I thought New Age people were
so spiritual. And I thought you people don’t worship idols?”