

AUK prof explores English thinker Johnson's attitude toward Islam

Prejudice against Islam stems from ignorance: Dr Nassir

By Valiya S. Sajjad
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KUWAIT CITY, March 24: Associate Professor of English at American University of Kuwait (AUK) Dr Ghazi Q. Nassir delivered a lecture on the topic 'Samuel Johnson's Attitude toward Islam' Monday.

The talk was based on his book of the same title and explored the unfavourable position taken by the noted English litterateur and thinker Samuel Johnson about Islam.

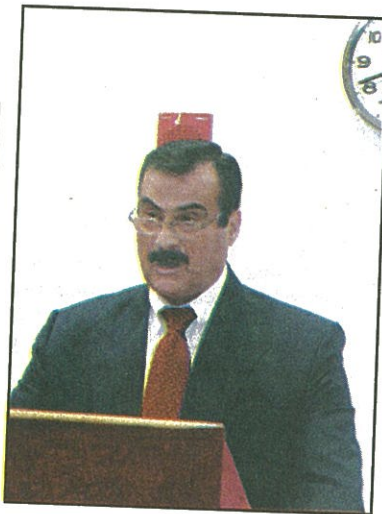
Giving a brief introduction to his book, Nassir said it is a product of the environment in which he was raised up, as well as the recent upheavals in the Middle East that have affected "my family and me," especially after 9/11.

Prejudice against ethnic and religious groups such as blacks, Jews, Latinos and other minorities is very common in the Western society even today, he added.

Despite the world becoming a global village and the free access to information, a division remains between the West and the Middle East. Nassir quoted an Arabic saying translated as "People are prejudiced against what they ignore," to underline his argument that the prejudice against Islam stems from ignorance.

Today, Islam is the fastest growing religion in the West, yet the Western world has little understanding of Islam and identifies it as the new menace.

Some of the common negative stereotypes about Islam are that it is funda-



Dr Ghazi Q. Nassir

mental, extremist and Muslims are terrorists. The mass media has played an important role in establishing these negative stereotypes, he emphasized.

Prejudice, Nassir noted, is a negative attitude. However, when these attitudes are translated into action, then it's no longer just prejudice, but bigotry. The unfair and unsound coverage of Islam in the Western media is an example of this bigotry.

Rationalizing the choice of Samuel Johnson for such a study, Nassir went into some biographical details of Johnson.

Samuel Johnson, born in 1709, was an English writer who made lasting contributions to English literature as a poet, essayist, moralist, literary critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer. He is also the subject of a most famous work of biographical art in literature.

Nassir gave special credit to Johnson's output as lexicographer, A Dictionary of the English Language, which took 9 years to write, and was published in 1755. It had a far-reaching effect on Modern English and has been described as "one of the greatest single achievements of scholarship." This work brought Johnson popularity and success. Until the completion of the Oxford English Dictionary 150 years later, Johnson's was viewed as the pre-eminent British dictionary.

Johnson had claimed that he could finish the dictionary in three years. In comparison, the Académie Française had forty scholars spending forty years to complete their dictionary, which prompted Johnson to claim, "This is the proportion. Let me see: forty times forty is sixteen hundred. As three to sixteen hundred, so is the proportion of an Englishman to a Frenchman."

In Samuel Johnson's works, the negative attitudes and national sentiments against Islam, Muslims and their culture are reflective of his times.

Though Samuel Johnson is recorded to have said that Christianity and Islam are two curiosities, little did he manifest in his writings attempts to understand

the latter. His opinions about Islam stems from prejudice and hatred, rather than from curiosity and an honest investigation.

The author notes that Samuel Johnson's admiration and commitment to his own faith as the one and only true faith could have never enabled him to study or understand another faith from a position of neutrality.

Perfection

Christianity, Johnson wrote, is the highest perfection of humanity. "Only one religion, Christianity, can be the true religion, and has very strong evidences of being a true religion."

One of Johnson's criticisms against Islam was that it lacks originality. He wrote that the concept of charity in Islam, "no doubt, has been taken from the Christian faith."

Johnson's comments about Turkey are an area where his negative attitudes about Islam are most explicitly stated. When one of his contemporaries was on a mission to go to Turkey to convert Muslims to Christianity, Johnson applauded the effort saying "Yes, sir it is the duty of Christians to convert the ignorant infidels to the true faith."

The choice of words, "ignorant infidels" underlines the deep-seated prejudice.

Johnson warned another friend, who was going to the Muslim world, to beware of the vices and not allow the corruption of the "Mohammedans to seduce him."

Johnson's negative attitude concerning the Prophet (PBUH) was explicit. He defined Islam as Mohammedanism.

The speaker referred to a statement of Edward Said, who explored the Christian understanding of this term. Christians think Mohammed is the basis of Islam as Christ is the basis of Christianity, and hence the word Mohammedanism for Islam.

In one of his periodicals, Johnson pointed out "The nation of Mohammed cannot be a source of human civilization and culture." Johnson liked to give all credit for human civilization to the common people of England.

On the subject of Johnson's writings, the author noted that his writings about Islam only reflected the popular notions current in his tradition during those times, when fear and hostility informed opinions rather than any objective study.

Fiction

One of Johnson's popular literary works was a play called Irene, "which gives away Johnson's prejudice against Islam more explicitly than his other works of fiction."

The main source for Johnson's Irene was Richard Knolles' *Generall Historie of the Turkes*. In Knolles' work, the Sultan Mahomet conquers Constantinople in 1453 and captures a Greek Christian named Irene. He decides to take her as his mistress, and while pursuing her romantically he ignores his duties as a monarch. Soon, the kingdom is falling apart from neglect

and the subjects begin to riot, so Mahomet kills Irene to prove his dedication to his people. Johnson alters the story to emphasize the theme of Irene's temptation. Mahomet offers Irene the choice to either convert to Islam or die.

Irene is torn between her wish to live and her faith. She succumbs to the Sultan's designs and converts to his faith. However, she gets caught up unintentionally in a plot against the Sultan. The plot comes to light and she gets executed. The Sultan realizes her innocence later and feels guilty.

The play presents the conflict between Greeks and Turks as the conflict between Islam and the Western civilization, and the superiority of the latter. The Muslim faith is projected as a militant order headed to crumble from within due to a lack of originality and truth.

Johnson saw the Muslims as murderers and bandits, and as God's scourge for Christian decadence.

In the play, Johnson uses many negative terms to describe Muslims such as "savages and monsters." The Muslims are portrayed as being driven by a fanatical zeal to destroy the church and put the crescent over the cross.

Dr Ghazi Q. Nassir is currently working on his third book, *Perceptions and representations of Islam and Muslims in British Literature*, which has been accepted by the Edwin Mellen Press. He has a PhD from Florida State University in 1989, and MA from Marshall University in 1982.