



The Influence of Islam on Social Conditions Alexander Russell Webb (1893)

Alexander Russell Webb is one of the first white Americans known to have converted to Islam. He was reared as a Presbyterian, but as an adult he became attracted to multiple "Oriental religions." He participated in a US branch of the Theosophical Society, which had been co-founded by a white American convert to Buddhism, and he traded overseas correspondence with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the Muslim founder of the Ahmadiyya movement in British-ruled Punjab. In the late 1880s, Webb moved to the Philippines, then a Spanish possession, to serve as US consul; during that term of service, he corresponded with modernist Muslims in India (not Ahmadiyya) and came to identify decisively as Muslim himself. After touring India to raise financial support from Muslims there, Webb returned to the United States and founded an Islamic mission, promoting the religion to US audiences through books and periodicals.

In 1893, the same year he launched his mission, Webb lectured at the World's Parliament of Religions, a pioneering multifaith gathering held in Chicago to showcase religions from around the world. Webb was not the only speaker who lectured on Islam, but he was the only Muslim to do so.

It would be neither just nor truthful to assert that every man who lives in an American city, town, or village is a Christian and represents in his acts and words the natural effects of Christian teachings. Nor is it fair to judge the Islamic system in a similar manner, and yet I regret to say that it is quite generally done in Europe and in America. There are in Asia today many thousands of people who call themselves Mussulmans and yet who have a no more truthful conception of the character and teachings of Mohammed than they have of the habits of the Man in the Moon. If one or a dozen of these should commit an act of brutal intolerance or fanaticism, would it be just to say that it was due to the meritable tendencies of their religion? [...]

If a Mohammedan Turk, Egyptian, Syrian, or African commits a crime, the newspaper reports do not tell us that it was committed by a Turk, an Egyptian, a Syrian, or an African, but by a Mohammedan. If an Irishman, an Italian, a Spaniard, or a German commits a crime in the United States, we do not say that it was committed by a Catholic, a Methodist, or a Baptist, nor even a Christian; we designate the man by his nationality. [...] But just as soon as a native of the East is arrested for a crime or misdemeanor, he is registered as a representative of the religion his parents followed or which he has adopted.

We should only judge the inherent tendencies of a religious system by observing carefully, and without prejudice, its general effects upon the character and habits of those who are intelligent enough to understand its basic principles and who publicly profess to teach or follow it. [...] In forming our estimate of a religion, we should also [...] consider the racial and climatic influences that surround its followers, as well as their national habits and customs. [...]

Another of the most potent reasons for the unfavorable opinion of Islam and its professed followers which prevails in America and Europe today is the disposition of the people of the West to judge the people of the East by our Western standard of civilization. We of the West believe that our wonderful progress in the arts and sciences, and the perfection of those means by which our physical comfort and pleasure are secured, gives us just cause to feel superior to those

who do not bask in the sunshine of our 19th-century civilization. In a general way, and with some few exceptions perhaps, we consider our social system admirable; and when we find that many Mohammedans, Buddhists, Hindus, and other Eastern people do not join with us in this opinion, we console ourselves with the belief that it is because they are heathens and incapable of recognizing and appreciating a good thing when they see it. It would undoubtedly surprise some of my hearers to know what many of the more intelligent Mussulmans and Hindus of India think of this civilization of ours, of which we are so proud. [...]

There are a number of objections to Islam raised by Western people which I would like to reply to [...]. The chief objection, and the first one generally made, is polygamy. It is quite generally believed that polygamy and the purdah, or exclusion of females, is a part of the Islamic system. This is not true. There is only one verse in the Koran which can possibly be distorted into an excuse for polygamy, and that is practically a prohibition of it. [...] I never met but two Mussulmans in my life who had more than one wife. There is nothing in the sayings of the Prophet, nor in the Koran, warranting or permitting the purdah. During the life of the Prophet and the early caliphates, the Arabian women went abroad freely and, what is more, were honored, respected, and fully protected in the exercise of their rights and privileges.

Islam has been called "the religion of the sword," and there are thousands of good people in America and Europe who really believe that Mohammed went into battle with the sword in one hand and the Koran in the other. This is rather a singular charge for Christian writers to make; but they do make it, and very inconsistently and unjustly too. The truth is that the Prophet never encouraged nor consented to the propagation of Islam by force, and the Koran plainly forbids it. [...] Our Prophet himself was as thoroughly non-aggressive and peace-loving as the typical Shaker, and [...] he urged his followers to avoid, as far as possible, violent collisions with the unbelievers and not to fight unless it was necessary to protect their lives. [...]

It has been charged that slavery is a part of the Islamic system—in the face of the fact that Mohammed discouraged it and the Koran forbids it, making the liberation of a slave one of the most meritorious acts a person can perform. But in weighing the evidence bearing upon this subject, we should never lose sight of the social and political conditions prevalent in Arabia at the time the Prophet lived and the Koran was compiled.

It has also been said that Mohammed and the Koran denied a soul to woman and ranked her with the animals. The Koran places her on a perfect and complete equality with man, and the Prophet's teachings often place her in a position superior to the males in some respects. [...] The property rights which American women have enjoyed for only a few years have been enjoyed by Mohammedan women for 1,200 years, and today there is no class of women in the world whose rights are so completely protected as those of the Mussulman communities. [...]

There is nothing in [Islam] that tends to immorality, social degradation, or fanaticism. On the contrary, it leads on to all that is purest and noblest in the human character; and any professed Mussulman who is unclean in his person or habits, or is cruel, untruthful, dishonest, irreverent, or fanatical, fails utterly to grasp the meaning of the religion he professes. [...] It will not produce the kind of civilization that we Americans seem to admire so much, but it will make a man sober, honest, and truthful and will make him love his God with all his heart and all his mind and his neighbor as himself. [...]

I will confess that when I went to live among the intelligent Mussulmans, I was astonished beyond measure at the social conditions I encountered. I had acquired the idea that prevailed generally in this country and Europe and was prepared to find the professed followers of Islam selfish, treacherous, untruthful, intolerant, sensual, and fanatical. I was very agreeably disappointed. I saw the practical results of Islam manifested in honesty, truthfulness, sobriety, tolerance, gentleness, and a degree of true brotherly love that was a surprise to me. The evils that we Americans complain of in our social system—drunkenness, prostitution, marital infidelity, and cold selfishness—were almost entirely absent. [...]

I have seen it asserted that under the Islamic system, a high state of civilization is impossible. [...] True civilization—a civilization based upon purity, virtue, and fraternal love—is the kind of civilization that exists today among the better classes of Mussulmans and brings with it a degree of contentment and happiness unknown amid the tumult of the Western social system.

Source: Alexander Webb, “The Influence of Social Condition,” in *Neely’s History of the Parliament of Religions* [...], ed. Walter R. Houghton (Chicago: Frank Tennyson Neely, 1893), 544-550, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo1.ark:/13960/t6m04pp2r>. Public domain.

“The Influence of Islam on Social Conditions” is the title under which Baker’s address was published in the official proceedings of the World’s Parliament of Religions. Mohammed Webb, “The Influence of Islâm on Social Conditions,” in *The World’s Parliament of Religions*, ed. John Henry Barrows (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Co., 1893), 2:1046-1052, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3316178>. The official proceedings published an abridged version of Webb’s address.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Two paragraph breaks omitted for a more compact presentation of the text. A grammatical infelicity corrected. Spelling corrected or modernized, except that spellings of names are retained from the source publication. A comma omitted where it makes the word *Mohammedan* appear to be one in a list of nouns, when context indicates that the word should be read instead as an adjective. Other punctuation emended in line with modern conventions for readability. For the sake of modernization, the word *purdah* and the initial word in a quoted phrase have been converted here to lowercase, where they were capitalized in the source publication. Conversely, the appellation *Man in the Moon* is capitalized here where lowercase in the source.

These edited excerpts from Webb’s address are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite one of the sources listed above.

See also: On the reception of Webb’s addresses at the World’s Parliament of Religions, see Umar F. Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), chap. 9.



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