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DEMANDING RESPECT:

Muslims protested in Paris on Feb. 11 after French newspapers published offensive cartoons of the prophet Muhammad.

JACQUES BRINON/AP

Roots of violence found in disrespect

By Jane Lampman | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Perplexing violence overseas and in America seems to have a common thread - the yearning for respect. In the ongoing controversy over the Danish caricatures of the prophet Muhammad, people on both sides agree that the strongest spark for the protests in the Muslim world is the message the cartoons send of disrespect for Islam and its followers.

In several cities in the United States, police report a disturbing pattern of rising violence - including homicides - linked to disputes in which people say they were "disrespected." "We're seeing a very angry population," one police chief recently told The New York Times

Respect is one of the most widely shared yearnings among human beings, and it touches the emotional core of people in profound ways. Respect given can be powerful and transformative. The results of respect withheld can be painful or even explosive. At a time when civility seems to be diminishing, some see the power of mutual respect as a way to break through cultural stereotypes and religious prejudices.

"Cultures are rubbing against each other more than ever before in history," says Akbar Ahmed, professor of Islamic studies at American University in Washington. "We need to be sensitive to ... respect, honor, dignity, and how they are viewed in different societies."

The prime ministers of Turkey and Spain, nations at the crossroads of East and West, have proposed a major initiative of structured dialogue to explore differing values and what Islamic and Western societies consider sacred.

"We have to have a deeper conversation about why Western democracies came to this place of tolerance of offensive language; and what we can do, not in the realm of the law, but of decency, to be more aware of what each other's [hot] buttons are," says Marc Gopin, director of the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University in Arlington, Va.

Rabbi Gopin has engaged in discussions among enemies in the Middle East. Because of his belief in the "power of gestures of respect," he visited Damascus last year at some risk to himself as a Jew, and faced tough questions about America and Israel from more than 300 Syrians. The 90-minute session was televised nationally.

While people give lip service to the idea that everyone is created in the image of God or that everyone has human rights, he says, they often act as if others aren't human beings.

"So when you cut through that and demonstrate enormous respect for a person who is an enemy, it's a shock. It brings that deeper truth, buried under suspicion and hatred, to the surface, and evokes honesty from the other parties," he adds. "Respect can have remarkable effects."

The controversy is also spurring deeper discussion on international rights.

Muslim leaders from 57 countries are pressing for the new UN human rights body to take steps to prevent the defamation of religions and prophets. That will likely raise issues of where Muslim countries stand on questions of religious freedom and persecution - and practices of disrespect in their societies. The Iranian president's recent questioning of the Holocaust is one provocative example.

Yet finger-pointing is not the way out of what many see as an increasingly dangerous state.

"We are losing a lot of the Muslim world. We must have Muslim allies on our side," says Dr. Ahmed. "This is possible through the language of respect." He says symbolic gestures by US officials could help defuse the situation, such as ambassadors in various Muslim countries visiting mosques, as President Bush did right after Sept. 11.

Respect needs to be taught

Of deep concern to some people, however, is the growing devaluation of respect itself, including in American culture.

"We have dropped the ball," says Carl Taylor, a professor at Michigan State University in East Lansing, who conducts research among families and youths in urban and suburban areas.

"Young people today are not being taught what respect is, and that is true in the middle class as well," says the African-American criminologist.

Nor is it being modeled enough for them. "When young people feel they aren't respected by law enforcement, by teachers, by others, they respond in kind," he says. He recalls one youth in trouble telling him, "If they talked with me the way you do, I'd never have done those things."

After lengthy study of violent criminals, James Gilligan of Harvard Medical School concluded that warding off disrespect, shame, and humiliation constitutes the basic psychological motive, or cause, of violent behavior. Street culture, he says, often evolves around a desperate search for respect.

At the same time, entertainment and media industries are promoting distorted ideals of manhood and womanhood, Dr. Taylor says, from rappers to video games that glorify violence and disrespect, to reality shows that are steeped in humiliation.

"Uncivilized behavior is celebrated and applauded like never before," he says.

Peter Yarrow's classroom solution

Others share those concerns, and one group tackling them through education is starting with the early years.

"Elements in our culture are promoting disrespect, but there's a strong yearning for respect in the human spirit, and our work makes us hopeful," says Mark Weiss, education director for Operation Respect (OR), which provides curricula to help build respectful school environments. Founded in 2000 by Peter Yarrow of the folk trio Peter, Paul, and Mary, OR makes strong use of music to engage children on how they treat one another.

Kristin Krycia, a school counselor and teacher in Alexandria, Va., says the music evokes an immediate response in students.

"I had tried everything for several years and nothing worked," she says. "With this program, the changes were fast and monumental."

She tells of several bullies whose behavior turned around, and a sixth-grader who was always pointing a finger at people and laughing.

"Kids started to hate him because he was always ridiculing," she says. When she played the song, "Don't Laugh at Me," in the class, the boy "came up afterward and said, 'That

song is about me. Can you help me stop?" "He not only succeeded in changing, but began helping other kids do the same.

"The word 'respect' has power," says Jeff Edmondson, OR's interim director, who previously worked in Washington, D.C., public schools. "The No. 1 thing you could say to a student to stop a fight ... was 'Listen, it's about respect, me and you. What's up?' And it would just defuse the situation."

More than 125,000 sets of their curricula have been distributed in several countries, and OR is currently giving workshops for teams from every elementary school in New York City. The program is about "harnessing the power of respect so the beast that might result from disrespect doesn't happen," Mr. Edmondson says.

But students spend only 12 percent of their time in a school environment, he adds. "If we all start demonstrating respect for them and each other, we can turn the tide on some of the headlines we see on a daily basis."

It sometimes seems to feel good to bully or beat up on others - we seem to get something from this negative stuff, Mr. Weiss says.

"But it's like junk food - there's instant gratification, but in the long run, it's unhealthy and doesn't get us very far."