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UB Viewpoint - The silence of the Muslims

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A little more than a year ago, the death of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl at the hands of his captors, depicted in gruesome detail on videotape, shocked most of the civilized world and was immediately condemned by virtually all governments, religious groups, journalists, and common citizens. The silence of the Muslims, however, has been deafening. According to those who saw the tape, Mr. Pearl was forced to read a statement saying: "My father is a Jew, my mother is a Jew, and I am a Jew" and "America will bear the consequences for our government's unconditional support for Israel." Then his kidnappers slit his throat, cut off his head, and stabbed repeatedly his lifeless body. Western societies adhere to a moral standard that abhors such barbarism. We are told that Islam does as well. But if that's so, many Americans are asking, where is their outrage, their shame, their urge to distance themselves from such foul deeds? Shouldn't the Muslim clergy declare that Mr. Pearl's killers are blasphemers of the faith? Surely there must be millions of moderate Muslims out there who yearn for peace and offer nothing but good will toward others. One would think they'd yearn to speak out, especially those who are American citizens, to reassure the rest of us that Islam is truly a peaceful religion. We have heard virtually nothing of the sort, at least not on radio or television or in the newspapers. Why, for that matter, has the Muslim world had nothing to say about Palestinians dancing in the streets to celebrate the slaughter of Jewish innocents at the hands of suicide bombers? Israel never targets Palestinian children; it immediately expresses its regrets whenever non-combatants are accidentally killed. Jewish vigilantes are openly repudiated by both the government and the overwhelming majority of the Israeli people. But the almost total absence of such condemnations by Muslims fosters the belief that Islam does indeed sympathize with the killers of "infidels," which in turn leads to fear, bias, and group defamation of its adherents. This kind of prejudice is not nurtured only by Christian fundamentalists like Pat Robertson, but has been bought into by an increasing number of otherwise fair-minded and level-headed Americans. The First Amendment guarantees the freedom of both speech and conscience — and the liberty to condemn the speech (or silence) of others. Muslims certainly have the right to disagree openly with American foreign policy, or to remain tight-lipped about it. The more they keep quietly to themselves, however, the more they allow the burning question to fester: Does the Islam they practice honor the values of life and liberty — the dignity of the human spirit, the right to religious freedom — for which innocent people like Daniel Pearl stood, and for which many others like him have been slaughtered? The civilized world would like to think that the Muslims among us share those values. For our peace of mind — and for their own — they should tell us.

Kenneth Lasson is a law professor at the University of Baltimore, where he specializes in civil liberties.