

## Clarity versus Confusion

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**Raymond Ibrahim Interviewed by Lawrence Wright**

**Book TV on C-Span2**

Sunday, 16 September 2007

On Sunday, 16 September, 2007, Raymond Ibrahim, editor and translator of *“The Al Qaeda Reader”* was interviewed on Cable Television station C-SPAN2., by Lawrence Wright, a staff writer at the New Yorker, and author of *“The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11.”* ”

I looked forward eagerly to the Interview, having been alerted about it on Thursday, the 13th of September. I presumed that the author of the *“Al Qaeda Reader”* ” must have been of Levantine background, and familiar with Arabic-language sources. In doing some research about Mr. Ibrahim on the Internet, I found the following information:

“Raymond Ibrahim is a scholar and writer of the Middle East and Islam. He was educated at California State University, Fresno (BA and MA in History) and has done graduate work in the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies of Georgetown University. His op-eds, essays, translations, and al-Qaeda related analyses have appeared in various publications and syndications (*Los Angeles Times, New York Times Syndicate, United Press International, Washington Times, Financial Times, National Review, Washington Post, The Jewish Press, Assyrian International News Agency* as well as in international publications). He works at the Near East section of the African and Middle Eastern division of the Library of Congress, where he discovered many of the never-before-translated Arabic texts that make up the bulk of *The Al-Qaeda Reader.*”

As I listened to the interview, it became clear that Raymond was a budding scholar and an expert on Islam, its history, and its sacred texts. He spoke with an authority that comes from one who has done his homework in the most exacting way. Furthermore, he demonstrated a good knowledge of the Christian faith, its history and theology. Here are some points of the interview based on the notes I took while watching the telecast.

Lawrence Wright began by asking him about his interest in the subject. He responded that while he was studying at California State University, his research dealt with the battle of *Yarmouk* which took place in southern Syria in 636 A.D., four years after the death of Muhammad. That battle was the first major encounter between Islam and Christianity, and resulted in the loss of the Syrian province of the Byzantine Empire. It became a “role model” for the Islamic *futuhat* (conquests) and an integral part of its theology throughout history.

The interview then turned to al-Qaeda’s ideology. When it first surfaced, this organization had a list of grievances, such as the presence of U.S. forces on Saudi soil during the early 1990s in preparation for the liberation of Kuwait, Western humiliation of

the Muslim world, as well as the creation of State of Israel.

Raymond Ibrahim remarked that when Osama Ben Laden and Ayman Zawahiri address the West, they use a different set of arguments and pronouncements than when they write for a specifically Muslim audience in Saudi Arabia. For example, when a number of Saudi religious scholars wrote a document addressed to the West entitled "***How We Can Co-exist***" they were severely criticized by Ben Laden, and charged as having "***prostrated to the West.***" "

Then Wright turned to the subject of Israel. Mr. Ibrahim stated that even if Israel were to cease to exist, Islamic antagonism towards Christians and Jews would not stop. He referred to the early history of Islam where the Jews stood condemned. He quoted Chapter 9:29 from the Qur'an as a proof that Jews, as ***dhimmis***, " must submit to Islamic authority. "*Fight against those who (1) believe not in Allâh, (2) nor in the Last Day, (3) nor forbid that which has been forbidden by Allâh and His Messenger (4) and those who acknowledge not the religion of truth (i.e. Islâm) among the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians), until they pay the Jizyah with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.*" Ibrahim concluded his comment on this text by saying that the teaching of this verse "***has been codified in the Islamic Shariah Law.***" "

At this point Lawrence Wright commented: "***All religions have their fundamentalists and tend to have radicals who interpret the sacred texts in a literalistic way, thus giving rise to violence. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all have had their share of violence.***" "

Raymond Ibrahim disagreed. He explained that we must differentiate between the teachings of these religions, and the actions of their followers. Islam has its violent sacred texts enshrined in the ***Qur'an, the Hadith, and the Sunna.*** " When the doctrine of abrogation is applied in the exegesis of the Qur'an, the violent texts of the ***Medinan Surahs***" that 'descended' between 622 and 632 abrogate the more peaceful texts of the ***Meccan Surahs***" that date from 610 to 622.

Mr. Ibrahim explained that while Christians have been involved in violence across the centuries, it does not follow that their sacred texts can be charged with aggressive teachings. He added that the Christian sacred texts "*advocate passivity and are metaphysical.*" And while the Old Testament has its share of violent acts such as in the days of Joshua and the conquest of the Land of Promise, that was only for a specific period in Old Testament history. ***Judaism did not codify violence in its laws,*** " and does not have a worldview that advocates the conquest of whole world.

It was very perceptive of Raymond Ibrahim to respond to the attempts of Mr. Wright who sought to paint Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with the same brush. He insisted that violence is part and parcel of the official and unchanging teachings of the Qur'an. He quoted this well-known verse (among Muslims) from 9:111  
*"Allah hath purchased of the believers their persons and their goods; for theirs (in return) is the garden (of Paradise): they fight in His cause, and slay and are slain: a promise binding on Him in truth, through the Law, the Gospel, and the Qur'an."*

Lawrence Wright persisted in his claim that violence and extremism are universal, as in the activities of the *Tamil Tigers* in Sri Lanka, and in the behavior of the *Japanese* pilots during WWII. Raymond disagreed; the Japanese were following an **ideology** which has been discredited after the war. As for the Tamil Tigers, their motivation was not religious. He pointed to a very important distinction that must be made between **ideologies and theologies**. "In Islamic theology, *the Qur'an is held to be God's very word, is immutable, and valid in all time and space*". Even moderate Muslims, who don't engage in violence, agree with the worldview of the radicals as to the validity of Jihad.

Mr. Wright continued his argument which tended to further confuse the issue, by saying that **"every religion has contradictions"**. Some literalist Jews, he said, would like to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Fundamentalist Christians would like to bring about the Apocalypse. But as Raymond retorted, there is no New Testament teaching about the rebuilding of the Temple. He also insisted that we must always distinguish between what Christians say and do, and what their sacred text teaches. It is the Islamic authoritative texts that teach and advocate violence. Not only so, but in Islam, the consensus of the **'Ulema**, or religious scholars, constitutes another source of teaching for the Umma. It is this belief that gave birth to the Islamic worldview that divides the world into two distinct realms: **Daru'l Islam** and **Daru'l Harb (Household of Islam and Household of War.)**

The above belief, whether articulated or not, was behind all the Islamic violence and **futuhats**, beginning with the 7th century and down to the 17th century. All these conquests were done as a **Jihad fi Sabeel Allah**, i.e. **War in the Pathway of Allah**. Raymond Ibrahim referred to the little known **Houroob al-Radda**, i.e. the **Wars of Apostasy**. They took place soon after the death of the Prophet in 632, when many of the Arabian tribes left Islam, and returned to their former faiths. **Abu Bakr**, the first caliph, waged war against them, and violently forced them to return to Islam.

Lawrence Wright continued his attempt to paint an attractive portrait of Islamic history by referring to the **"beauty and tolerance"** of Islam in **Al-Andalus** (Spain.) He followed that by referring to the expulsion of the Muslims from Spain in 1492. But Raymond Ibrahim reminded him that it was the Muslims who first invaded the Iberian Peninsula back in the 8th century. The same thing pertains to the criticisms of the Crusades. Yes, many violent acts took place in the Holy Land from the 11th to the 13th centuries; but why forget that it was the Islamic armies that had first conquered Palestine in the early years of the 7th century? The Crusader Wars were a belated reaction to the prior conquest of the Holy Land by the Islam.

At this point I would like to reiterate that while Raymond Ibrahim did an accurate and objective exposition of the true nature of Islam, Lawrence Wright manifested a weakness that bedevils several Western writers on Islam as they tend to downplay the aggressive nature of this faith. They accomplish that by lumping Islam with Judaism and Christianity, and claiming that all theistic religions have violent teachings and histories.

Mr. Ibrahim, more than once during the interview, challenged this point of view in Mr. Wright's statements. While it would not be proper for me to put Lawrence Wright in the same category as some well-known Western apologists for Islam, I was saddened when he tried to downplay the violent teachings and actions of Islam. Having done his research for writing *"The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11"* one would have hoped that he had gained a better knowledge of Islam than he actually exhibited during the Interview. While watching the Interview, this thought kept coming to me: 'was Lawrence Wright engaged in self-censorship to avoid criticisms from CAIR?' Of course, only he can give the answer to that.

In order to give the readers of FFI, a fuller acquaintance with Raymond Ibrahim's views on Islam, I would like to quote excerpts from his article *Karen Armstrong's Islamic Apologetics* that was published on 10 May 2007, in **National Review Online**.

"Islamic apologist extraordinaire Karen Armstrong is at it again. In an article entitled *"Balancing the Prophet"* published by the **Financial Times**, the self-proclaimed *"freelance monotheist"* engages in what can only be considered second-rate sophistry.

"The false statements begin in her opening paragraph:

*"Ever since the Crusades, people in the west have seen the prophet Muhammad as a sinister figure. ... The scholar monks of Europe stigmatized Muhammad as a cruel warlord who established the false religion of Islam by the sword. They also, with ill-concealed envy, berated him as a lecher and sexual pervert at a time when the popes were attempting to impose celibacy on the reluctant clergy."*

"This is just an obvious error of fact. Armstrong and others try as a routine to tie European sentiments toward Islam to the Crusades, but in fact, *"people in the west"* had something of a *"dim"* view of Mohammed half a millennium before the Crusades. As early as the 8th century -- just a few generations after Mohammed -- Byzantine chronicler **Theophanes wrote in his Chronographia:**

**"He [Mohammed] taught those who gave ear to him that the one slaying the enemy - - or being slain by the enemy -- entered into paradise [e.g., Koran 9:111]. And he said paradise was carnal and sensual -- orgies of eating, drinking, and women. Also, there was a river of wine ... and the woman were of another sort, and the duration of sex greatly prolonged and its pleasure long-enduring [e.g., 56: 7-40, 78:31, 55:70-77]. And all sorts of other nonsense."**

Raymond Ibrahim continued:

"It wasn't only during the Crusades -- when, as Armstrong would have it, popes desperately needed to demonize Mohammed and Islam in order to rally support for the Crusades -- that Westerners began to see him as a **"sinister figure."** Many in the West have seen him as that from the very start. So, claims of Mohammed being a **"lecherous pervert"** were not due to any *"ill-conceived envy"* on the part of 12th-century popes trying to *"impose celibacy on the reluctant clergy."* (Indeed, this last notion posited by

Armstrong -- an ex-nun -- appears to be more telling of her own "ill-conceived envy" against the Church.) Despite the oft-repeated mantra that the West is "ignorant" of Islam -- dear to apologists like Armstrong -- this passage reveals that, from the start, Westerners were in fact aware of some aspects of the Koran.

"Having distorted history, she next goes on to distort Islamic theology:

*"Until the 1950s, no major Muslim thinker had made holy war a central pillar of Islam. The Muslim ideologues Abu ala Mawdudi (1903-79) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-66), among the first to do so, knew they were proposing a controversial innovation. They believed it was justified by the current political emergency."*

Raymond Ibrahim corrects Ms. Armstrong:

*"Even better than a "major Muslim thinker," Allah himself proclaims: "Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor forbid what has been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger [i.e., uphold sharia], nor embrace the true faith, [even if they are] from among the People of the Book [Jews and Christians], until they pay tribute with willing submission, and feel themselves utterly subdued" (Koran 9:29). Mohammed confirms: "I have been commanded [by Allah] to fight against mankind until they testify that none but Allah is to be worshipped and that Muhammad is Allah's Messenger" (Bukhari B2N24; next to the Koran, the second most authoritative text in Islam).*

"Armstrong then spends an inordinate amount of time criticizing author Robert Spencer and his new book **The Truth about Muhammad:**

*"The traditions of any religion are multifarious. It is easy, therefore, to quote so selectively that the main thrust of the faith is distorted. But Spencer is not interested in balance. He picks out only those aspects of Islamic tradition that support his thesis. For example, he cites only passages from the Koran that are hostile to Jews and Christians and does not mention the numerous verses that insist on the continuity of Islam with the People of the Book: 'Say to them: We believe what you believe; your God and our God is one [29:46]'."*

"But is Armstrong not herself being a bit disingenuous by assuring the people of the West -- primarily Christian -- that the Koran's notion of God "insists on continuity" with theirs? What about the other Koranic verses: "Infidels are those who say Allah is one of three... [i.e., the Christian Trinity;]" (5:73). "Infidels are those who say Allah is the Christ [Jesus], son of Mary" (5:17). The divinity of Christ -- anathema to Islam -- is fundamental to the Christian view of God. Surely Armstrong has not forgotten this from her days at the convent.

"Armstrong's lament that "there is widespread ignorance of Islam in the west," and that we should rectify this by developing a more "balanced" and "nuanced" understanding of the Koran is as ridiculous as asking Muslims living in Palestine and Iraq to overlook the "Crusader" presence there and instead consult the Bible itself to see how many portions

of it accord with peace and justice. (Indeed, such a proposition is worse than ridiculous, since the Bible comes nowhere near to theologically justifying violence against the "Other" in perpetuity as found in the Koran.

“In the final analysis, Armstrong's historical and theological "discrepancies" (to be polite) are baffling -- particularly her many oneline sentences that simply defy historical fact: *"Muhammad was not a belligerent warrior."* *"The idea that Islam should conquer the world was alien to the Koran..."* *"Muhammad did not shun non-Muslims as 'unbelievers' but from the beginning co-operated with them in the pursuit of the common good."* *"Islam was not a closed system at variance with other traditions. Muhammad insisted that relations between the different groups must be egalitarian."*

“Still, in the end one can sympathize with Armstrong's closing sentence: *"Until we all learn to approach one another with generosity and respect, we cannot hope for peace."* But we should also hasten to add the more important virtues of honesty, sincerity, and truthfulness.”

Thus far my quotations from Raymond Ibrahim’s article in NRO.

What the world needs more than anything else is clarity vis-à-vis Islam and its teachings. Raymond Ibrahim succeeded in depicting a true picture of Islam during the Interview. Unfortunately, Lawrence Wright, while conducting an interesting Interview, spoiled his part by indulging in moral equivalence between Islam on the one side, and Judaism and Christianity on the other side. He added confusion to a subject that requires utmost clarity during these critical times.