

Concerning a New Definition of Non-Muslims

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By Jacob Thomas

Back in September 2005, I came across an article in the daily Arabic online *Al-Sharq-al-Awsat* with this headline: ***“On Defining ‘al-Akhar’ (the Other): A Discussion between Two Generations at a Preparatory Session of the National Dialogue Initiative.”***

Here are excerpts from the article.

*“On Tuesday, 20 September, 2005, the preparatory meetings of the **National Dialogue Initiative** that took place at the Meridian Hotel in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, ended. A large generational gap surfaced at the close of the discussions. It became clear, during the meetings which had lasted for three days that the sixty-three adult participants were looking for an exact and proper definition of **“Al-Akhar.”** At the same time, seventeen young men and women who participated in a training program, in conjunction with this meeting at Jeddah, had already completed their deliberations, having concluded that their relations with the **“Akhar”** must have one purpose only, that of calling him or her, **to convert to Islam.***

*“The specific goal that had been set for these young men and women was to teach them the art of dialogue, and the proper means of communication. They were expected to learn the relation between dialogue and convincing the **‘Other’** of one’s point of view, without alienating him. However, as far as these young people were concerned, only the non-Muslim should be classified as **“Al-Akhar,”** regardless of where he or she had come from.”*

The fact that Saudis were discussing a new definition of the **Other**, indicates that a totally new situation in the history of Islam had surfaced. It was precipitated by the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia. This brought thousands of non-Muslims from Europe, America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, to work on Saudi soil. Their presence was essential for the economic wellbeing of the Kingdom. Added to that, millions of Muslims from North Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia rushed to work in Western Europe soon after the end of WWII. This new phenomenon has initiated serious discussions among Saudi intellectuals, as they begin to realize the full implication of emerging inter-dependent world.

The September 24, 2005 article went on to explain:

*“The differences between the two groups did not consist only in their ages, or in the degree of their education. The real differences consisted in their definitions of the identity of the **‘Other.’** Here it must be mentioned that the theme of the dialogue initiative was **‘We and the ‘Other’: Toward a National Vision for Dealing with Western Cultures.’***

*“The average age of the academicians, intellectuals, and businessmen and businesswomen who met at the main hall of the Meridian, ranged between the mid-thirties to the mid-forties. As far as they were concerned, the term ‘Other’ should be understood **etymologically**. In that sense, it should not carry any derogatory baggage, the non-Muslim should be known by his nationality, and not his religious affiliation.*

*“In contrast, the ages of the students who participated in the learning sessions and who had come from Saudi secondary schools, ranged between sixteen and eighteen. They defined the **Other** as a **Kafir** or **Infidel**. For them, the term was not understood **etymologically, but culturally and religiously**. So, as far as they were concerned, the goal for learning the art of dialogue was restricted to **da’wa (calling)** i.e. inviting the ‘Other’ to embrace Islam, the true Pathway of Allah.”*

Fast forward to 2009

In January of this year, the Kuwaiti website *kwtanweer* visited the subject of the need for a new definition of non-Muslims in an article with the title, **“The ‘Other’ According to the Islamic View” (Al-Akhar fi’l Tsawwor al-Islami)**

Here are excerpts from this timely article.

*“According to the Islamic view, the ‘Other’ is any non-Muslim. He may be a follower of Judaism or Christianity, a Zoroastrian, or an atheist. Sunnis would add to this list all those who don’t follow their brand of Islam such as Shi’ites, Ismailis, Ahmadiyya, and Abadiyya. The vast majority of Shi’ites have the same attitude as the Sunnis vis-à-vis those Muslims who do not follow their own understanding of Islam, not recognizing, for example, Non-Twelvers Shi’ites. **1***

“The Muslim view of the ‘Other’ is not a theoretical subject; it translates itself into the practical areas of life on earth, as well as the afterlife. So we find real discriminatory practices in the areas of human rights, duties, and the treatment of those classified as ‘Others.’ For example, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, only a Shi’ite may become President; which implies the non-Shi’ite is not a Muslim, and is therefore not eligible to occupy the office of president! And even though the vast majority of Sunni countries with written constitutions have no specific article that bars a Shi’ite from assuming the office of president, nevertheless the very idea of such a thing happening is unthinkable.

*“The discriminatory practices against non-Muslims are actually very grave. Usually, all non-Muslims are regarded as Kuffar. They may be either followers of revealed religions such as Christianity and Judaism, (with Zoroastrianism added by some Fuqaha **2**), or simply heathens. The difference between them is that the former are allowed to pay the Jizya tax, thus gaining the freedom to remain in their own religion, while the heathens have only one choice: either convert to Islam, or have your neck cut off! One must add here, for the sake of objectivity, that such an awful rule was seldom put into practice, even though the sacred text was very clear about that punishment! There were quite a few differences within the Four Sunni Schools for the interpretation of the Shari’ah Law*

whether followers of non-revealed religions (heathens,) may pay the Jizya tax, and thus avoid Islamizing.

“All non-Muslims living within Islamic societies are thoroughly marginalized. After all, the sacred text requires the killing of the Mushrikeen 3, wherever they may be found. See, Qur’an, Surat al-Tawbah #9 (Repentance) ayat 5 and 29.

When the sacred months are over, slay the pagans wherever you find them. Capture, besiege, and ambush them. If they repent, perform prayers and pay the religious tax, set them free. God is All-forgiving and All-merciful (9:5)

Fight against those People of the Book who have no faith in God or the Day of Judgment, who do not consider unlawful what God and His Messenger have made unlawful, and who do not believe in the true religion, until they humbly pay tax with their own hands. (9:29)

“It is clear that the verses do require fighting those who do not believe in Allah, or the Last Day, and forbid what Allah and His Prophet have forbidden, and do not practice the true religion, even though they are the People of the Book (Jews and Christians), and they must pay the Jizya with an attitude of abject humility!

*“Regardless of what the constitutions of Arab and Islamic countries may clearly state regarding nondiscrimination and equality between all their citizens, it is a well-known fact that non-Muslims are regarded with suspicion, and treated as second-class or third-class citizens. The testimony of a non-Muslim against a Muslim is not admissible in a court of law. When a **Kafir** kills a Muslim, he will surely be punished with the death penalty; whereas if a Muslim murders a **Kafir**, the Muslim is not liable to the death penalty, according to the **Hadith of Bukhari**. It is well-known that a non-Muslim may not marry a Muslim woman. Some authoritative texts command that Muslims may not greet Jews or Christians. And should a non-Muslim greet a Muslim, the latter may ‘**take back**’ (reject) that greeting. And when a Muslim meets a Jew or a Christian on the road, he should make it hard for them to proceed easily on their way.*

*“When it comes to the Jizya tax that Muslims are to impose on non-Muslims, it constitutes a very complicated matter in the relations between the two groups. At present, it is not applied in any Muslim society, even though the consensus of the **Fuqaha** is that it must be paid to spare the lives of the **Kuffar**, or merely to allow them to live within Daru’l Islam. Some even claim that the Jizya is a punishment laid on the **Kuffar** for their refusal to accept Islam. As **Ibn al-Qayyim** put it: ‘**The Jizya is placed on the heads of the Kuffar to humiliate and debase them, making them feel inferior.**’ 4.*

“While Islam was tolerant with the People of the Book in allowing them to practice their faith, nevertheless it placed upon them some severe restrictions such as forbidding showing the Cross over their churches, or praying and reading their Scriptures in a loud voice.

“Someone may say that most of these restrictions are no longer being applied. This is true. However, the very fact that they exist (in the sacred texts of Islam) constitute a sword placed over the necks of non-Muslims that may go into action any time. This is why it is necessary to strengthen those constitutions and man-made laws (i.e. not based on Shari’a) for the protection of individual freedoms and personal rights against the encroachments of the religious leaders, by forbidding them to interfere in the peoples’ daily lives, in a tyrannical manner.”

Thus far the quotations from the article in the *kwtanweer* website

The strength of his words is verified in the history of Islam itself and in its sacred texts. For example, at the very time when Islam was spreading its hegemony, at first in the Arabian Peninsula, and later on in the world at large, the two verses he quoted from the **“Repentance”** Surah explicitly mandated the killing of non-Muslims. Verse 5 is very clear in the Arabic original, **“Faqtulu al-Mushrikeen haythu wajadtumuhom”** translated as “kill the infidels wherever you find them.”

Verse 29 of that same chapter, mandates fighting against those who give no credence to the basic teachings of the Qur’an, and refers specifically to **“allathena ootu’l Kitab”** i.e. those who have been given the Book which they consider to be Allah’s previous revelations, the Torah, the Zaboor or Psalms, and the Injeel)

While it is true that these Medinan texts are not being put into practice in many parts of the Islamic world where non-Muslim minorities live, yet they have not been abrogated, and may be used any time a radical Islamic group takes it upon itself to initiate a plan of persecution and murder of non-Muslims.

The writer ended his article by pleading for the strengthening of “those constitutions and man-made laws (i.e. not based on Shari’a) for the protection of individual freedoms and personal rights against the encroachments of religious leaders, by forbidding them to interfere in the peoples’ daily lives, in a tyrannical manner.” However, one has to ask: where in the Arab world can be found those who are willing to declare that man-made constitutions and laws should be considered as more authoritative or normative than the so-called “divinely-inspired” rules and regulations of the Qur’an? Thus, while I appreciate the author for bringing this subject to the attention of the readership of *kwtanweer*, I have to say that his closing sentiments are nothing more than wishful thinking!

So I must conclude that what I had read back in 2005, and at the beginning of 2009 about the quest for a new definition of non-Muslims, remains a merely academic subject. Nothing has changed in the Islamic worldview. One either is a Muslim or a **Kafir**, and the status of the latter does not improve by calling him, **al-Akhar!**

Notes

1. Several sects and sub-sects arose in Islam after the assassination of Ali. Some Shi'ites believe that it was the Twelfth Imam (descendant of Ali) who went into occultation, and would return to earth to bring justice; others believe that it was the Seventh Imam. Ahmadiyya Muslims follow an Indian Muslim who claimed that he was a Prophet. Ismailis are radical Shi'ites, and so are the Nusayris, and the Druze. Abadiyya are the spiritual descendents of the Khawarej who assassinated Ali in 661 A.D.

2. Fuqaha, plural of Faqih, a legal authority in Islam, similar to a theologian.

3. Mushrikeen, all non-Muslims who do not adhere to the strict monotheism of Islam.

4. Ibn al-Qayyim (1292-1350) was a Syrian Sunni jurist and a commentator on the Qur'an.

The URL of the Arabic text is:

<http://www.kwtanweer.com/articles/readarticle.php?articleID=2119>