

## How to Deal with the “Other?”

The Saudis Are Tackling a Difficult Subject

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I am not exactly sure when I first noticed a news item regarding a meeting in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, where the participants were discussing the “Other,” or as they referred to him in Arabic as, “Al-Akhar.” It was a very intriguing subject to follow, but somehow I did not download or print that report.

The subject surfaced again. I noticed in the 24 September issue of the online Al-Sharq-al-Awsat daily, this headline: On the Definition of “the Other”: A Discussion between Two Generations at a Preparatory Session of the National Dialogue Initiative.

This time, I would not let the opportunity go by, so I printed the Arabic text of this

two-page report. It began with this introduction:

“On Tuesday, 20 September, the preparatory meetings of the National Dialogue Initiative that took place at the Meridian Hotel in Jeddah, ended. A large generation gap surfaced at the end of the discussions. It was 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 in 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 communications. 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 men and women were concerned, only a non-Muslim should be classified as “Al-Akhar,” regardless of where he or she had come from.”

What a revelation! I have no idea when or why “The National Dialogue Initiative” began in Saudi Arabia. But that several preparatory meetings under its umbrella have already taken place is something to ponder and reflect on. First, it is necessary that these discussions be placed within a historical framework that, for more than a millennium, had defined the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. I’ll try to be brief.

Soon after the migration of Muhammad to Medina, a new vocabulary came into existence. The Meccan believers who migrated to Medina were called, "Muhajiroun." As for those from Medina itself who joined them and acknowledged the mission of the Prophet, they were designated as the "Ansar," i.e. the Partisans. The residents of Arabia, who were of the Jewish or Christian faith, could remain in their particular religion, but their status as Dhimmis required that they pay the Jizya tax in order to enjoy the "protection" of the Islamic Umma. Quite early in the history of Islam, all Christians and Jews were banned from living in Arabia. However, a Jewish minority continued to live in Yemen until recent times.

As the Islamic conquests gathered steam soon after the death of Muhammad in 632, all the conquered peoples of the Middle East, North Africa, and Andalusia (Spain) were classified according to the terms of the emerging Islamic Shari'ah. A Dhimmi had to pay the Jizya, as well as to submit to the requirements of Dhimmitude. This meant that his status was lower than that of Muslims. Another classification was made that proved to be detrimental to the unity of the growing empire. Non-Arab Muslims were called, "Mawalis." Theoretically, they were considered on par with Arab Muslims, but not in practice. That created a tremendous resentment among them, and was a potent factor in the downfall of the Umayyad Caliphate in 750.

Eventually, Muslim jurists divided the world into two segments: Daru'l-Islam, (the Household of Islam,) and Daru'l-Harb, (the Household of War.) The latter category included all the areas of the world that had not yet been conquered by Islam. It was legal to conquer such lands, and the means was obviously, war or Harb, in Arabic. During the last fourteen centuries, Muslims lived only within their realms. So there was no question about what to do with the "Other." Should he or she happen to be a member of the People of the Book, i.e. Jews or Christians, they had the choice of embracing Islam or live under the regime of Dhimmitude. But if they were followers of a pagan religion, there was not much choice, they had to convert or else face persecution, and quite likely death. This happened in India over a long period of time.

The fact that now Saudis are discussing a new modus vivendi with the "Other" indicates that a totally new situation in the history of Islam has surfaced. First, it was precipitated by the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia. This brought thousands of "Others" from Europe, America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia to work on Saudi soil. Their presence is essential for the wellbeing of the Kingdom. Add to that, millions of Muslims from North Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Subcontinent rushed to work in Western Europe soon after the end of WWII. Such a totally new phenomenon for Islam has initiated some serious discussions among Saudi intellectuals, as they began to realize the full implications of the emerging globalized and inter-dependent world.

Thus far, I have sketched out the classical Islamic view of non-Muslims. I now return to quote from the article of 24 September 2005:

"The differences between the two groups did not consist only in their ages, or in the degree of their education. Their real differences consisted in their definitions of

“Al-Akhar.” i.e. the identity of the “Other.” Here it must be mentioned that the theme of dialogue initiative was [very specific and rather urgent]: 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 “Other” [may belong to various categories]; he may be a Bedouin or a city dweller; a Sunni, or a Shi’ite, or a Kafir; a man or a women; a traditionalist or a secularist. [In other words in their view, the term “Other” should be understood etymologically. In that sense, it should not carry any baggage other than its literal meaning]. At the conclusion of their meetings they arrived at several recommendations.”

“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 simply the Kafir. [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 calling or inviting [the Akhar] to [embrace] the Pathway of Allah.”

“During the heated discussions that took place in the main hall of the hotel as the participants sought to arrive at a clear definition of the “Other,” Dr. Saleh al Hasseen, head of King Abdul Aziz Center for the National Dialogue Initiative said: “The goal for defining and describing the ‘Other’ is to enable us to learn how we should deal with such a person.”

The reporter for Al-Sharq al-Awsat emphasized the generational gap that separated the adult participants from the young students who felt no need whatsoever for a nuanced definition of the “Other.” They reached a consensus: there was no reason at all to depart from the age-long outlook that had defined all non-Muslims, as “Others.” In other words, they saw life in terms of black and white.

For example, “an eighteen year old student from a school in Mecca who participated in the training sessions said: “the ‘Other’ is anyone who differs from us in religion; so the purpose of our dialogue must simply be to ask him to embrace Islam. We should accomplish that through kind words coupled with an exposition of the principles of the Islamic Shari’ah.”

The author of the report went on to explain: “This third preparatory meeting in Jeddah was related to the coming Fifth National Dialogue Initiative which is to take place at Abha, in the Province of ‘Asir. As mentioned above, the students did not have the same outlook as the adults who participated in the discussions. Their differences may be the result of two contrasting milieus that surrounded their upbringings: the older generation having grown up within a conservative community. Now, some of them [who may have studied or lived overseas] would prefer to liberate themselves from the grip of the traditional restrictions that had governed relations with the “Other.” At the same time, the

young generation who grew up in the space-age [and as a reaction to the allurements of modernity] believes that the proper way [to deal with the subject at hand] is to return to the [traditions of the past.] It is this conviction which leads them to [regard] the “Others” as objects of Da’wa, i.e., the duty to invite them to embrace Islam. [Unlike the adult intellectuals and business people who have to rub shoulders with many “Others,” both at home and abroad], these young adults are not the least interested in being ‘accepted’ by those classified in the Shari’a as Kafirs or Infidels.”

“The adult group at the Jeddah meetings recommended that a special Information Center be organized to examine new concepts and expressions [that appear in our contemporary Arabic vocabulary] in the light of the unchangeable principles of the Shari’ah. One businesswoman suggested, that the information media should be strengthened and enabled to ward off all ideas that are incompatible with Islamic moral standards. “Finally it must be noted that the young group disagreed with their seniors by insisting on the necessity of an information policy whose unique task is the Islamic Da’wa.”

The reporter ended his article by asking some crucial questions:

“Is the next generation in Saudia to entertain the same thought pattern that surfaced among the young adults, namely that dialogue with the “Other” should take place within the restrictions of the Shari’ah? [In other words, dialogue for the young students always equals Da’wa.] Are there no grounds to consider the thoughts and deliberations of the adult conferees? [For example, we may ‘invent’ a classification that would place the “Akhar” in a neutral category, thus eliminating the stigma of Kafir.]” Or, is the Shari’ah door to remain the only one open for all and any discussions and relations with “Others”? In other words, may we expect some changes in the status quo?”

Thus far, I allowed the reporter to share with us his musings. It is quite evident that two divergent points of view appeared in this report. One view is rather encouraging; as it indicates that some intellectuals and business people in Saudi Arabia are actually attempting to do something rather dangerous: re-opening the door of Ijtihad. They are suggesting the need for a new hermeneutic in the interpretation of the Qur’an, Hadith, and the Shari’ah. But this door has been closed for 500 years, and every attempt to

re-open it since then has eventually failed.

With respect to the projected meeting at Abha, in Saudi Arabia, for the discussion of the “Other,” may we entertain any hope for the eventual resumption of Ijtihad in a milieu that has been dominated for decades by the Wahhabi school of interpreting the Sacred Law? If we take seriously the conclusions of the young students who participated in their own sessions, the outlook for any basic change vis-à-vis the “Other”, the “Akhar” remains dim. I am afraid they represent the vast majority of Saudi opinion. I may be wrong in this conclusion, but I have very little evidence from my study of past attempts at reforming Islam, that real change is coming soon. I am sorry to forecast a tempestuous future for our world brought on mostly by Islam, exactly as Samuel Huntington predicted around ten years ago in his “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order.”\*

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\* *Huntington, Samuel P. The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order.*  
*New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996*