

[Is Islam a Tolerant Religion. Part II](#)

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In my previous article, “**Is Islam a Tolerant Religion?**” posted on 30 June, 2006, I did not expect it to be Part One of a series of articles on this subject. The **Tanweer** website, where I saw the Arabic text, gave no indication of a continued discussion of the topic. But while I was glancing at the website of the Arabic online daily **Elaph**, I discovered Parts II & III of the series.

As is my method in my contributions to FFI, first I begin with excerpts from the article, and then end with my analysis and comments.

The author began his second installment by describing the reactions he received after posting Part One.

“After publishing the first part of my article, “**Is Islam a Tolerant Religion?**” I received 96 responses; most of them in favor of its contents, while some registered their violent disagreement with it. They considered that the mere posing of the question was a provocative act, an unwarranted criticism of Islam, and ultimately, an insult directed at Allah Himself. I was advised to cease and desist from any further discussion of the subject!

“It is evident that the Islamists, who consider themselves as custodians of the truth, regard anyone who disagrees with them as being absolutely ignorant. One of my critics wrote, ‘*The very title of your article was extremely provocative, and prejudices the very basis of any dialogue before it can even begin.*’

“Another person sent this e-mail, ‘*If you would come to Gaza and see the sufferings of the Palestinian people, you would understand why they become suicide bombers.*’ My answer is: ***My dear brother, I’m with you; I do sympathise with the plight of the Palestinians. But what does that have to do with a Saudi or a Yemeni going to Iraq, and killing himself and many other worshippers at a mosque? Please tell me, what does the tragedy of Palestinians have to do with the brutal murder of a young Algerian girl at the gate of her school, merely for not wearing the hijab? What’s the connection between the pro-Israeli policies of the United States and the murder of 250,000 Algerians by their own people?***

“Actually, those criminal *Jihadists* use the Palestinian problem and the sacred texts of Islam, as a pretext to justify their crimes against innocent people. To blame our problems and the root causes of *Irhab* on America and Israel is a clear proof of our moral and intellectual bankruptcy. **The real problem resides in our religious teachings and our social heritage.**

“Others who disagreed with my previous article insisted that we should leave the

discussion of such topics to the specialists among our religious leadership. I don't agree at all. In fact, nowadays Islam has been highjacked by the new *Khawarej*,* and finds itself in a bloody and asymmetrical confrontation with the entire world. Should we fail to deal with this situation, greater tragedies await us. Are we to leave the reformation of Islam to the likes of *Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, Rashed Al-Ghanoushi, Ali Khamanei, Muqtada al-Sadr*, and hundreds of similar imams who incite *Irhabis* to commit their crimes? It is the duty of liberal writers and moderate religious authorities to join in the discussion of the subject I mentioned in my first article.

“The trouble with the Islamists is that they cannot stand any criticism. They consider their heritage, their culture, their political and religious leaderships, to be sacrosanct and above reproach. Woe to any one who dares to criticize a religious authority anywhere in the Arab or Muslim world; as we witnessed when a television program made fun of the head of Hezbollah's party, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah! Recently, a reporter in Egypt was sentenced to one year in prison for having criticized President Hosni Mubarak. And let's not forget the plight of another Egyptian, Ayman Noor. He was sentenced to a seven year term in jail, for having dared, in the presidential elections, to compete with Mubarak for the presidency of Egypt! Any criticism of a political leader, or opposition to his policies, becomes an unforgivable sin in Arab and Muslim societies.

“Unfortunately, the lack of freedom of speech and of democratic institutions, has religious roots based on the Qur'an and the Sunna. ***“O ye who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the messenger and those of you who are in authority; and if ye have a dispute concerning any matter, refer it to Allah and the messenger if ye are (in truth) believers in Allah and the Last Day. That is better and more seemly in the end.” Qur'an 4:59*** Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall translation.

“The expression, *those of you who are in authority* refers to the ruling authorities. There is also a Hadith that says, *obey your ruler even if he whipped you on your back or took your money*. Now don't such texts give the green light for tyranny and oppression?

“In my first article, I thought that the meaning of ***“tolerance”*** was clear. However, the responses I received indicated it was otherwise. I never meant by ***“tolerance,”*** that we should pardon criminals, or be lenient with the enemy, or anyone who breaks the law. What I meant was that tolerance implied ***the right to differ, and to co-exist with the one who holds a different opinion, or religion, or political beliefs***. In brief, by using that word I meant a willingness to practice ***pluralism and peaceful coexistence***. The basic problem with Muslims is their refusal to accept the ***“Other.”*** They claim sole ownership of the truth; and that their religion should rule the entire world. And in order to accomplish that goal, they should carry on their global jihad.

“Some may object, claiming that I am blaming Islam and Muslims for the actions of a minority, like al-Qaeda and the Irhab perpetrated by some Islamist militias. Frankly, such organizations like al-Qaeda are engage in their activities under the impulse of those sacred texts known as the ***“Ayat al-Sayf”***** (the *Sword Texts*) that I mentioned in Part One of my article.

“It is important to realize that Islamic fascism is far more dangerous than the national fascism that both Syria and Iraq had suffered from, under the rule of the Ba’athists. Islamic fascists consider their policies and activities as sacred and above reproach, since they rule in the name of Allah. Thus, to criticise them is considered to be a criticism of Allah Himself!

“The reputation of Muslims and of Islam has been tarnished throughout the world, and especially the West. The former Prime Minister of Italy said, *‘Islam is unable to become a part of the modern age.’* A French journalist wrote, *‘Islamic fundamentalism has become the main threat to world peace and security. It is similar to the threat that was posed by the Nazis and the Fascists in the 1930s and by the Communists in the 1950s. There is no room for freedom in the social and moral realms that are based on Islamic Shari’ah law. This can be seen in the fact there is not one democratic regime throughout the entire Muslim world.’* Also, the former Archbishop of Canterbury leveled sharp criticism of Islam and Muslims for the politicization of Islam, and for the terrorist acts perpetrated by the radicals. He referred to the lack of democracy in the Muslim world blaming moderate Muslims for their reluctance to condemn the Irhabis and suicide bombers. He went on to comment on the absence of Islamic participation in enriching world culture during the last several centuries.

“The absence of freedom in the Islamic world is related to their religion. For example, ***Sheikh Tabtaba’i***, the imam of the Kadhimain mosque in Baghdad said recently, *‘The West calls for freedom and liberation. Islam rejects this freedom. True freedom is obeying Allah.’* The Islamist author of ***‘The Future of Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula’*** attacked secularism and democracy, *‘One of the worst by-products of secularism is democracy, because it nullifies the rule of Shari’ah in society, both in form and substance. As the Exalted One says, ‘Government belongs to Allah;’ while democracy declares that government belongs to the majority of the people.’* Do we need any more proof that Islamists are against progress, and do not want to participate in the world’s civilization?

Analysis

In Part II of “Is Islam a Tolerant Religion?” the writer reacts to the comments he received after the posting of Part I. He uses the negative responses to re-affirm his thesis that that lack of tolerance in Islam is due to a religious tradition that was formed by a blind adherence to the authoritative texts of the Qur’an, and the Hadith. He deplored the absence of freedom of speech and expression, and pointed to the restrictions placed on newspaper articles and correspondents, such as in Egypt. Today, as I glanced at the 8 July edition of **Elaph**, I noticed a news report about the decision of several Egyptian newspaper editors to refrain, for one day, from publishing their papers in order to protest a new law that would further restrict freedom of speech! How could one register a negative attitude vis-à-vis the President of the country, ***if there is a Qur’anic text that enjoins total obedience to the powers that be?!***

The author sadly remarks that it is only the imams who enjoy absolute freedom to proclaim from their pulpits their violent messages denouncing the Infidels, the secularists, and the liberals! Rather than surrender to the status quo, he calls on all liberal intellectuals to shoulder their responsibility by calling for reformation and liberalization of Islam.

Comments

I cannot but applaud the great zeal and courage shown by this Arab intellectual in stating bluntly that unfortunately, and in fact, Islam is not a tolerant faith. Even though he faces insurmountable obstacles in his way, he keeps on witnessing against such intolerance. His commitment to the cause is unquestionable. However, the question remains: What kind of Islam would it be, if all those “martial” ayats of the *Medinan Surahs* are declared no longer normative? And what school of Islamic jurisprudence would initiate a new hermeneutic that would advocate that only the *Meccan Surahs* are now to be followed?

In this connection, I would like to quote a pertinent section from my article, **“Reformation in Islam: ‘Islam of Mecca’ versus ‘Islam of Medina,’”** that was posted on FFI website on 22 June, 2006:

“Unfortunately for Muslim reformers, they do not have the same tradition vis-à-vis the Qur’an as Christians have regarding the Bible. What I mean is that in the Christian tradition, **the teachings of the Old Testaments must be interpreted in the light of the New Testament.** Thus, since the New Testament clearly teaches two distinct and separate realms: the realm of God, and the realm of “Caesar,” it leaves no room for the establishment of a theocracy in areas of the world where Christians dominate.

“Furthermore, such parts of the Old Testament that deal with the conquest of the Promised Land, and the various aspects of the Mosaic law, **excepting the Ten Commandments,** are regarded as pertaining to a **specific temporary era, and thus, are not normative for the present.**

“What I mean is that the Christian Scriptures themselves describe two phases of revelation, the first being temporary and preparatory for the second phase, which is final. As mentioned above, it is the New Testament itself that authoritatively endorses this view, and is not a later addition to the Christian tradition. It is true that after the conversion of Emperor Constantine, the lines of demarcation separating Church and State became blurred. And after the fall of Rome, the Western Church began to interfere in the affairs of the State. However, such changes were contrary to the teachings of the Bible. So the Reformers of the 16th Century simply called for a return to the Biblical teachings, not only regarding spiritual matters, but equally in connection with the affairs of the state.

“Muslim scholars today, interested in some kind of reform, don’t have the “luxury” that Luther, Calvin, and Knox had, almost five hundred years ago. Their Holy Book doesn’t allow for such a radical hermeneutic as called-for by the author of the article I referred to at the beginning of my essay. I cannot solve their dilemma. It is intractable; as they find

themselves within a closed circle. I wonder how many other would-be reformers will join the call for making the *Meccan Qur'an*, the only standard for politics in Islam!"

Well, what I wrote a few weeks ago is still valid. Still, I am very encouraged that some Muslim intellectuals, fully realizing the grip of their sacred texts on their worldview, are doing their utmost to liberate Islam from its traditional intolerance. Let's encourage them in their Herculean efforts.

***Khawarej:** Initially, they were followers of Ali, the fourth caliph. Mu'awiya, the governor of Damascus disputed Ali's claim to the caliphate, and rebelled against him. When Ali opted for a settlement of the dispute, some of his followers objected to his decision, and left his camp. Eventually they murdered him. Their name is derived from the Arabic verb, "*kharaja*" which means to leave or secede. The *Khawarej* are considered as the prototypes for radical Islamist terrorists during the last 1400 years.

****The Sword Texts are taken from the Medinan Surahs of the Qur'an, after Muhammad had established the First Islamic State. In contrast with the revelations that "descended" in Mecca, the Medinan revelations are intolerant of any opposition to the Prophet, whether coming from the unbelievers in Mecca, or from those known as "Ahl-al-Kitab," (Jews and Christians.)**