

“Moderate” Muslims Muddy the Waters

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Every Friday issue of The Wall Street Journal has an article on religion that appears under the general headline of “**Houses of Worship.**” The March 31, 2006 , title of the article was “**Holier Than Thou: Muslims declare each other apostates--with violent results.**” The author, Masood Farivar, is a reporter for Dow Jones Newswires.

I appreciated much of what Mr. Farivar wrote. However, when I reached the last part of his article, I became very disappointed. Unfortunately, his contribution, as well as other ones coming from “moderate” Muslims, tends to muddy the water rather than give an accurate description of the true nature of Islam.

The author began by mentioning the plight of the Afghani Muslim who had converted to the Christian faith.

“The international uproar over the case of Abdul Rahman, the Afghan convert to Christianity charged with apostasy, has drawn attention away from a far more common and nefarious practice infecting religious practice in Islam: the accusation of heresy leveled by Muslims against fellow Muslims, a practice known as takfir. Historically, little more than a rhetorical device, takfir has in recent years grown into a deadly weapon in the hands of Muslim extremists bent on purging Islam of just about anyone who does not subscribe to their views. Today jihadist terrorists in Iraq have begun to use takfir as a rallying cry for violence against the Shiites.”

It is quite likely that most readers of the WSJ have never heard the word **takfir**. It is derived from an Arabic verb *kafara* “to be an infidel, or to blaspheme God.” The first time I heard of **takfir** was in connection with the name of a radical Islamist group in the United Kingdom , “**Al-Hijra wal-Takfir.**” The followers of this extremist group claim to follow in the foot steps of the Prophet who left Mecca in 622 A.D. and settled in Medina . That event, known in Arabic as **Hijra** (migration,) signified Muhammad’s separating himself from the **kafirs** (unbelievers) of Mecca , in order to settle in a pure milieu where he could freely spread Islam.

Mr. Farivar explained the serious consequences that result, when some Muslims accuse other Muslims of heresy:

“The concept of religious censure is not unique to Islam, of course, but under Islamic law the charge of apostasy may not only condemn the person to hell but require his immediate death, if he does not repent.”

Then he went on to give a historical account of a group of Muslims who anathemised everyone who disagreed with them. He referred to “*the emergence in the late seventh century of a radical group known as Khawarij, whose members argued that committing a*

simple sin constituted heresy.” Actually, the case of the Khawarij, known also in English as the Kharijites, is much more complex, and needs further explanation.

When Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, assumed the position of the fourth caliph in 655, Mu’awiya, the governor of Syria, revolted against him claiming that Ali was involved in the murder of Uthman, the third caliph. In the fight that ensued, the forces of Ali who held the upper hand were led to accept an offer for a truce that came from the other side. Some of Ali’s supporters did not agree with him, and left his camp. They were called the **Khawarej**, an Arabic word that signifies leaving a group. They became the prototypes for Islamic radicals. They assassinated Ali in 661. They went on to declare all Muslims who did not follow them, as unbelievers. They wrought havoc for a long time among the Muslims of the Middle East. This explains the similarity between these seventh century **Khawarej** and present-day **Takfiris**.

Mr. Farivar continued:

“Until recently, mainstream Muslims dismissed the takfiris as a fringe group, the extreme of the extreme. But with wanton terrorist acts on the rise, a response seemed required. The leaders of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan --themselves targets of apostasy charges--have denounced the takfiris.”

“Mainstream Muslim thinkers have also started speaking up. In the U.S., Mr. Siddiqi has led a group of prominent Muslim religious scholars in issuing a fatwa denouncing extremist interpretations of the Koran and hadith. In Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abd al-Muhsin Al-Abikan, an eminent religious scholar, has given a series of high-profile interviews calling for a campaign to combat takfir culture among Muslims.

“Whether these arguments stem the tide of takfir-inspired violence remains to be seen. The lack of a central synod or council to define Islamic orthodoxy makes it difficult to issue a broad pronouncement discouraging the practice. What passes for sound belief in one country or one historical period may be seen as a heresy in another.

“That is not to say that there is no orthodoxy or, just as important, that religious leaders lack clout. They might want to remind the faithful, especially now, of the Prophet's tolerant teachings. As Sheikh Al-Abikan put it: “The authority to declare takfir is God's alone, and no man has that authority.”

It is indeed helpful to read that *“in the U.S., Mr. Siddiqi has led a group of prominent Muslim religious scholars in issuing a fatwa denouncing extremist interpretations of the Koran and hadith.”* However, a “mainstream” reading of the Sacred Text of Islam reveals a very negative view of non-Muslims. Consider for example, the accusatory texts from the Qur’an:

*"Because of the wrongdoing of the Jews We forbade them good things which were (before) made lawful unto them and because of their much hindering from Allah's way."
Surah 4: 160*

"O people of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not 'Three' --- Cease! (it is) better for you! Allah is only One God. Far it is removed from His transcendent majesty that he should have a son. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is sufficient as Defender." Surah 4: 171

Above all, we should not forget that in the very first Surah of the Qur'an, known as

Al-Fatiha, mention is made of the Jews and Christians in a derogatory way:

"Ihdina as-Sirata'l Mustaqeem, Sirata'l al-Latheen an'Amta 'Aleyhem, Ghayra'l Maghdoobi 'Aleyhem, wala'Dalleen."

"Lead us in the Right Path, the Path of those whom Thou hast blessed; and not in {the path of} those upon whom Thy wrath has come; nor of those who have gone astray"

(Chapter 1:6, 7) [Translation is mine JT]

Muslim commentators explain that the Jews are "those upon whom" the wrath of God has come; as for Christians they are the ones who have gone astray. This chapter, which is in the form of an invocation addressed to Allah, is memorized by most Muslims. It defines their relation not only to Allah, but to the "Others" as well. It is ingrained in their memory that, while the grace of Allah has been abundantly given to them, those "Others" are either lost, or are the objects of Allah's wrath!

The mass media and our political leaders incessantly tell us that mainline Islam is "tolerant" and "magnanimous." They may refer to texts in the Qur'an that teach freedom of religion. Most of us have heard *ad nauseam*, the following verse:

"There is no compulsion in religion..." Surah 2: 256a

However, this verse must be understood in the light of history. Ask those communities that have endured 1400 years of Islamic domination about the true meaning of "***La Ikraha fi'l-Deen,***" i.e. the **No Compulsion** clause. They will tell you about the awful status of *dhimmitude* that they and their forefathers suffered. Sure, ***the People of the Book*** (Jews and Christians) were allowed to remain in their faith, but were subjected to the most humiliating conditions. Just read the books of Bat Ye'or to learn about this most degrading institution that was inflicted on the original inhabitants of the Middle East and North Africa. And please don't forget to learn about the Ottoman's abominable ***Devshirme***, whereby thousands of young boys from the Balkans were forcibly taken from their parents, Islamized, and enrolled in the special corps of the ***Janissaries!***

I return to the title of my essay, "**Moderate Muslims Muddy the Waters.**" Please read the last paragraph again:

“That is not to say that there is no orthodoxy or, just as important, that religious leaders lack clout. They might want to remind the faithful, especially now, of the Prophet's tolerant teachings. As Sheikh Al-Abikan put it: “The authority to declare takfir is God's alone, and no man has that authority.””

These words of summing-up are very deceptive. To quote Sheikh Al-Abikan's words may fool the naïve, but they are no different than the mantra, *‘Al-Islam hua al-Hall’* i.e. ***Islam is the Solution!***

“The authority to declare takfir is God's alone.” What a pious statement. It reminds me of the ruse of Mu'awiya's camp back in 661! When his soldiers were losing in their confrontation with Ali's forces, they suddenly lifted copies of the Qur'an on their spears and shouted, ***“Let God decide.”*** Pure and unadulterated exhibition of piety! But Allah had already spoken his final word, and this word must be interpreted by mere humans. The umpires that Ali and Mu'awiya agreed upon were not impartial. They deposed Ali, and confirmed his opponent as the lawful caliph of the Islamic Umma. Chaos broke loose as a result. Just read the violent crimes committed by the ***Khawarej*** to learn about the consequences of empty and vapid slogans!

It is up to moderate Muslims, if they are to be believed, to initiate a new hermeneutic of the Sacred Texts of Islam, and devise ways where those texts and teachings that declare gloom and doom of the “Others,” are interpreted as belonging to the distant past, and are no longer valid today. In our globalized and interdependent world, there is no room for any type of ***takfiri ideologies***. I am waiting eagerly for true moderates who don't engage in muddying the waters; but acknowledge the mistakes of the Islamic past.