

“Our Men and Their Men”

Author : Jacob Thomas on Jul 19, 2008 - 01:43 AM

By Jacob Thomas

There is no end to the surprises I get when glancing at the Arabic-language websites that offer forums for liberal thinkers. Last month, I noticed a brief article on the Kuwaiti *Tanweer* site: "***Rijaluna wa Rijaluhom.***" It was a very frank comparison between Muslim clerics and their Christian counterparts. Here are excerpts from the article, followed by my analysis and comments.

The writer began with a shocking statement followed by his reasons for making it:

"By men, I refer here to Christian clerics and their Muslim counterparts. It is my conviction that on a social level, a Christian cleric is one million times better than a Muslim cleric. Muslim clerics exhibit a condescending attitude toward their people. This may be observed, for example, in their being called, "***Ulema,***" plural of "***Alim,***" a term which means a "scientist." Since a Muslim cleric's diploma is granted by a religious institution; it has no value or relevance whatsoever in the general fields of knowledge and science! And regardless of his very limited knowledge, we find him issuing *fatwas* on all kinds of topics. In fact, I have never heard of a Muslim cleric who admitted his ignorance about any subject!

"By contrast, there isn't one Christian cleric who provides answers to all kinds of questions. Rather, he consults his church, seeking the opinion of his people; and the result is far from resembling those *fatwas* which come clothed with an irrational halo of sanctity. In fact, several *fatwas* have advocated murder. For instance, a *fatwa* was issued in Saudi Arabia allowing for the murder of ***Dr. Shemlan al 'Aessa*** simply for the way he responded to a question that was put to him by a Kuwaiti Islamist. Let's not forget the *fatwa* that led to the assassination of the writer, Dr. Farag Foda; or the one that authorized the murder of the well-known novelist, ***Naguib Mahfoudh,*** the only Arab writer that has earned the Nobel Prize for Literature! Fortunately, the assailant failed in his attempt. Add to that, the numerous *fatwas* against the ***Kuffar,*** and those who have committed the sin of ***radda*** (apostasy.) In short, a Muslim cleric has become a perpetual cultural calamity, and a source of a dictatorship that opposes all true knowledge and freedom.

"Let's now consider the case of a Christian cleric. Actually, he has learned a great deal from the experiences of the Middle Ages and the ***Reconquista*** of Spain that ended with the expulsion of the Muslim population that had lived there for seven centuries. He limits his concerns to his needs and to those of his congregation. He regards no one in society as his enemy. People come to him seeking the Lord's forgiveness. He doesn't declare anyone to be a ***kafir.*** And when someone makes derogatory remarks about the Messiah, the church deals with him in a conciliatory manner. The church does not seek legal actions in order to defend its beliefs. Has anyone heard a Christian cleric issuing a

fatwa authorizing the murder of a Christian or a non-Christian, after charging him with apostasy? Have we ever heard of a Christian cleric that has ready answers to all kinds of questions, as the case is in our own Muslim societies?

"A Christian cleric is more merciful in his relationships with his people than his Muslim counterpart. Nowadays, we witness a bitter harvest being gathered by Muslims due to the *fatwas* issued by their clerics: ***Irhab, assassinations, oppression, and an absence of a creative literary activity.*** The irony is that when Muslims are fed up with their own societies, they flee to the heavenly West! Even Muslim clerics choose the infidel West, when they leave their own countries. This why the West is filled with ***Irhabis***; it explains why Muslims find little respect in the West, since they are regarded as potential terrorists, unless they can prove the opposite!

"A Muslim cleric's sin is unforgivable due to the harmful *fatwas* that he has proclaimed, and which have resulted in the death of his society. Therefore, I will continue to show more respect for Christian clerics on account of their humane attitude towards all people."

Analysis

The author of "*Our Men and their Men*" is very upset by the behavior of several Muslim clerics. His statement, "*a Christian clergyman is one million times better than a Muslim clergyman,*" sounds rather shocking, especially when you read it in the original Arabic. He was venting his anger on account of the great harm done to Islamic societies by irresponsible men who had arrogated to themselves the right to issue religious edicts.

Comments

At the outset, I must say that this comparison between Muslim and Christian clerics is done exclusively on an ethical basis. The author is not comparing Islamic teachings or doctrines with those of the Christian faith. In other words, as a Muslim, he approached his subject **pragmatically, and not theologically.**

Another thing I would like to observe is that the writer arrived at his conclusions, on account of the experiences he may have had, during his residence in the West.

He alluded briefly to the lessons Christian religious leaders must have learned from the experiences of the Middle Ages. This is rather a vague statement. He may have had in mind Martin Luther, a German monk who revolted against the practice of selling "*indulgences*" guaranteeing forgiveness of sins for a sum of money given to the church! Luther became the leader of a reform movement that spread throughout Europe. One of the results of his work was the "democratization" of the government of the church. The

old hierarchal structure was dismantled among the Protestants, and was replaced by a simpler form where people from the congregation were chosen as elders and deacons, to work with the minister. Once or twice a year, the entire congregation would meet to discuss financial and spiritual matters, and participate in the election of new office holders.

While the writer may have had such facts in mind, as he described a Christian cleric's work in his society, he failed to consider the ultimate cause for the differences between Muslim and Christian clerics.

Let me explain. Muslim and Christian men who enter their vocations are likely to face many temptations. In other words, neither is inherently perfect in his relationship with his society. If there is any difference between the two, it must not be located in the person himself, but in the authoritative texts of his faith.

If a Christian clergyman is conciliatory and humane in his attitude towards his people, it is due to his conformity to the ethics of Christ that were marked with tolerance and love. Early in his preaching, Christ taught, ***"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*** And Paul, who was responsible for the spread of the Christian faith in the Mediterranean world, wrote these words to the young Christians in Rome: ***"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. If your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him something to drink."***

It is such ethical teachings that have informed and impacted the behavior of the Christian clerics over the years.

On the other hand, our writer was not willing to dig deeper into the matter, and to look for a doctrinal reason that would have explained the basis for any Muslim cleric's fatwa authorizing the assassination of a member of his society. Violence is embedded in the sacred text of Islam. This is recognized by some liberal Muslims.

On 22 June, 2006, I posted an article on this website that referred to the subject of Islamic violence, as advocated in the Medinan chapters of the Qur'an. Here are excerpts from that article:

"Early in June, I was struck by an article with this title: 'Religious Reformation in Islam: *'Islam of Mecca' versus 'Islam of Medina.'* (*Al-Islah al-Deeni Fi'l-Islam: Islam 'Mecca' Fi Muwajahat Islam 'Al-Medina.'*)"

"I found this article quite bold in positing the existence of a confrontation (*Muwajahat*) between the Islam that was revealed in Mecca, and the Islam that was, later on, revealed in Medina. The author began by stating his theory about the existence of *'two Islams.'*"

"For a long time now, Westerners have been hearing from two divergent groups within

Muslims. One group keeps telling them, "*Islam is a religion of tolerance, peace, and mercy.*" The other tells a contrary story, "*Islam is a religion of jihad, killings, and the persecution of non-Muslims.*"

"Obviously, Westerners find themselves in a quandary. Which group are they to believe? Is it possible for a religion to proclaim, at the same time, two contradictory messages? Something must have gone wrong with the telling of the story of Islam.

"One explanation is that there are actually two Islams. *There is the Islam of Mecca, and then, the Islam of Medina.* The first Islam (as revealed in Mecca) is characterized by peace and the absence of violence; that is when Muhammad was weak and persecuted by the leadership of the Quraysh tribe.

"But when he migrated to Medina, he became strong, and eventually organized an Islamic state. It was during this period (622-632,) that he received *surahs* that called for *Jihad* against the unbelievers in Mecca, as well as the Jews and Christians in Arabia. Therefore, those who claim that Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance are right; and those who say that Islam is a religion of jihad are right. The problem is: to which Islam are they pointing, is it to "*the Islam of Mecca, or the Islam of Medina?*"

"Ultimately, if a real reformation is to take place, it would require the adoption of a new view of the sacred text, and the rise of *a new fiqh (hermeneutic) based on reason as informed and enlightened by the new sciences.* This requires that the reformists must cling to the '*Meccan Islam,*' with its basic spirituality, tolerance, and love; while at the same time, rejecting the '*Medinan Islam*' that promotes violence and jihad against non-Muslims." [End of quotation from the 2006 article]

"Our Men and Their Men" was a very revealing article; it shed light on some of the perplexities that haunt Muslim intellectuals. Unfortunately, the writer of this article, was either unable or unwilling to go as far as the one who (around two years ago,) had acknowledged the root cause of Islamic violence, namely in the Medinan chapters, and especially in those verses described as *Ayat al-Sayf*, i.e. the Sword Verses. It is not enough to lament the sad state of affairs in *Daru'l Islam*, a far-reaching reformation is needed that would declare the Meccan surahs as the only basis for faith and action! Is there any Muslim today who is willing to take part in this Mission Impossible?