

Reformation in Islam: “Islam of Mecca” versus “Islam of Medina”

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The relatively new Kuwaiti website, *Tanweer* (Enlightenment --- founded in 2002,) is a forum dedicated for dialog on *Democracy, Human Rights, Status of Women, Religious Reformation, Civil Society and Window on Kuwait*. In my previous contributions to **FaithFreedom.org** website, I commented on certain discussions going on among Arab intellectuals who are preoccupied with *Tahdith* (modernization), *Tajdid* (renewal), and *Islah* (reformation.)

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. Here are excerpts from the article, followed by my analysis and comments. 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 Quraish 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."

First, the analysis.

The author of this article is bold and candid. He recognizes that non-Muslims keep on hearing the mantra, **"Islam is a peaceful religion,"** while the daily news brings them reports of violent acts perpetrated by Islamic groups all over the world. As I write these words, the news from Iraq tells of the brutal and barbaric killings of the two American soldiers that were kidnapped in mid-June, by some radical Jihadists, in the name of Islam. So, what are we to believe, is **Islam is a religion of peace, or is Islam a religion of violence?"**

The answer depends on two different and contrasting parts of the Qur'an. The surahs that came to Muhammad in Mecca proclaimed the unity of God, and the vanity of idols. However, after Muhammad's *Hijra* to Medina, where he founded an Islamic state, the *surahs* altered their tone and began to deal with topics of war and peace, the status of Jews and Christians, etc. Then, after the death of the Prophet, the caliphs began a *jihad* for the conquest of the world; and within one hundred years, the Islamic empire spread from Spain to India. **Both the facts of history, as well as the Medinan surahs of the Qur'an, testify that Islam is a religion that endorses violence and spreads by conquests.** While Muslims never cease decrying Western imperialism, they love and cherish their **futuhats** (conquests) of vast areas of Asia, Africa, and Europe. Their sacred Book, at least in its Medinan part, implies the existence of a "divine" sanction for a global war against the Infidels. Eventually, this view gave rise to the division of the world into two parts: **Daru'l Islam** (House of Islam,) and **Daru'l Harb** (Household of War!)

Now some modernizing Muslims, recognizing the urgent necessity of avoiding a clash between Islam and the rest of the world, would like their worldview to change and become gentler, willing and able to co-exist with other members of the human family. So, they call for **restricting the normative parts of the Qur'an to the Meccan surahs,** i.e. to the peaceful section of their Book. This is the only way to stop radical Muslims, who find support for their *jihadism*, in the Qur'anic *surahs* that were revealed to Muhammad in Medina.

My Comments.

While the goal of these reformists is laudable, unfortunately it is simply a shot in the dark. Islam is firmly entrenched in the entire Qur'an, the Hadith, and the Sunna. Neither these authoritative texts, nor the way they have been expounded during the last fourteen centuries, allow for any disjunction between the teachings of the **"Meccan Surahs"** and the **"Medinan Surahs"** of the Qur'an. The orthodox doctrine regarding the text of the

Qur'an is its **uncreatedness**. Imam Hanbal, one of the founders of the Four Schools for the interpretation of the *Shari'ah*, went to prison during the 9th century, rather than compromise on this point. He fought and eventually he won the battle for the Qur'an being *qadeem*, i.e., having always existed in heaven. So, there can be no pick and choose between the revelation that descended in Mecca, and the revelation that came later on in Medina.

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!