

# “So That Islam Might Not Die” – “Hatta la Yamutu’l Islam”

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By Jacob Thomas

I couldn't believe my eyes! How would any Arab intellectual dare to write a serious article with this shocking title: *“So That Islam Might Not Die” “Hatta la Yamutu’l Islam?”* I read it on the last day of May, 2009, on the Kuwaiti website, [www.kwtanweer.com](http://www.kwtanweer.com)

The writer manifested a great concern about under-development in the Islamic world, and attributed it to the Muslims' inability to break from their traditional interpretation of the Qur'an. In order to cope with the challenges of modernity, he called on Muslims to adopt an enlightened hermeneutic of the Qur'an, a prescription that is actually quite revolutionary. He went on to claim that unless such a step is taken, Islam will not survive! It was this strong conviction that made him choose this title for his article!

Here are excerpts translated from the author's essay:

“This is my concluding article in a series that dealt with the subject of development. To achieve this goal requires an open mind and liberation from those fixed and fanciful positions that offered ready-made solutions to all types of human problems. We must acknowledge that traditional Islam, with its totalitarian worldview is standing in the way of progress and development. A genuine and serious reformation can only take place by adopting a complete separation between *Allah* and *Muhammad*; *Allah* is an absolute and unchanging Being, while the Prophet is not. It is true that *Muhammad* was the primary founder of the Islamic *Umma*, but as a human being, he acted within the cultural and political contexts of his day. *Therefore, all the texts which the Prophet brought, including the Qur'an, are purely historical texts, and as such, cannot be considered absolutely authentic or accurate.*

“Our problem does not reside in a belief in the existence of God. A person may be a believer and free at the same time. The real problem is that belief in a person or a group of people who claim to be representatives of Allah. This faith must be rejected before any genuine reform can take place. Take for example, Protestant Christianity. It confesses the divinity of Christ and at the same time, it does not acknowledge any person that acts as his representative on earth. This has enabled Protestants to worship Christ according to

their convictions, while at the same time leaving earthly matters to be dealt with in a secular fashion. We conclude that a separation of religion from politics is the *sine qua non*, for the rise of a progressive and non-totalitarian religion.

“To sum up my thesis; it would be difficult and unthinkable for Muslims to reject or abandon their religion in order to achieve progress and development. The best solution for their predicament is to strip Islam of all its totalitarian impulses.”

It is refreshing to read articles by Muslim intellectuals who are very eager to see Islam delivered from the shackles of its attachment to those rigid and irrational elements of their religious heritage. The only way for Arab nations to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century is to break loose from their traditional Qur’anic hermeneutics.

But what struck me the most about this author’s essay was his view of the Qur’an itself. As he put it, ***“Therefore, all the texts which the Prophet brought, including the Qur’an, are purely historical texts, and as such, cannot be considered absolutely authentic or accurate.”***

For anyone who is familiar with Arabic, and the history of Islamic theology, these words sound extremely radical, even revolutionary. Notice how he formulated his view of the Qur’an, not as a book that descended upon Muhammad, but as a book that the Prophet brought, and which is on a par with the other sacred texts of Islam, such as the Hadiths! The writer has gone beyond the views of the *Mu’tazilites* of the 9<sup>th</sup> century who denied the eternal nature of the Qur’an, and stressed its historical nature. He suggested a hermeneutic that would allow for a “higher criticism” of the Qur’an, for the development of a kinder and more compassionate Islam!

At this point I realize that a Westerner reading my translation of this article may not be struck by its full impact. But to read it in Arabic is nothing less than feeling the full impact of a proposal that would shatter a foundational tenet of Islam, namely that Muhammad was the recipient of the very words of Allah. For an orthodox Muslim, whether Sunni or Shi’ite, the author’s prescription is unthinkable and amounts to *kufr*, i.e. utter blasphemy.

In the final analysis, the dilemma for Islam can only be solved by Muslims.

Non-Muslims can study and reflect on the history and challenges that have faced Islam across the last fourteen centuries. We cannot but sympathize with the author and appreciate his “modest proposal” for Islam’s survival in our globalized world. He is absolutely convinced that unless Muslims adopt a new and open-minded hermeneutics, their future remains in doubt.

Note

The following is a transliteration of the author's words about his view of the nature of the Qur'an.

*Inna'l bidaya li-ay Islah Islami jad, hua al-fasl al-tam bayna'l Allah wa'l-Nabi.  
Fal'Allah mutlaq, baynama al-Nabi laysa katalika. Innahu wala shak mu'assess al-  
Umma al-awwal, walakinnahu bashar, kana ya'malu dimna'l itari al-thaqafi wal-  
siyassi lizamanihi, wa-bittali fa-inna kaffat al-nusoos allati ja'a biha al-Nabi, bima  
feeha al-Qur'an, hiya nusoos tarikhiyya bahtat, wa-laysat nusoos sahihat bishaklen  
mutlaq.*