

THE PLACE OF TOLERANCE IN ISLAM

The terrorist attacks on New York City and the Pentagon have focused public attention on the site of Muslim theology. For most Americans the utter indifference to the value of human life and the unmitigated hostility to the United States shown by some Muslims came as a great shock. Others were confirmed in their belief that we face great struggle between civilizations Islamic values, they say, are fundamentally at odds with western liberal values. The terrorist attacks are symptomatic of a clash between Judeo – Christian civilization with its values of individual freedom pluralism and secularism and

An amoral unWesternized so call authentic Islam. Indeed, Islamic civilization is associated with the ideas of collective rights, individual duties legalism, despotism and intolerance that we associated with our former civilizational rival the Soviet bloc. We seem to project onto the other everything we like to think that we are not.

This intellectual trap is easy to fall into when we deal with the theology of Osama Bin Laden, the Taliban, the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia and the Jihad organizations. The theologically-based attitudes of these Muslim puritans are fundamentally at odds not only with a Western way of life, but also with the very idea of an international society or the notion of universal human values. They display an intolerant exclusiveness and a belligerent sense of supremacy vis-à-vis the other. According to their theologies, Islam is the only way of life, and must be pursued regardless of its impact on the rights and wellbeing of other. The straight path (al-sirat al mustaqim) is fixed, they say by a system of Divine laws (shariah) that trump any moral considerations or ethical values that are not fully codified in the law. God is manifested through a set of determinate legal commands that specify the right way to act in virtually all circumstances. The sole purpose of human life on earth is to realize the Divine manifestation by dutifully and faithfully implementing God's law. Morality itself begins and ends in the mechanics and technicalities of Islamic law. (Though different schools of Islamic law understand the content of those laws differently.) A life devoted to compliance with this legal code is considered inherently superior to all others and the followers of any other way are considered either infidels (kuffar) hypocrites (munafiqun) or iniquitous (fasiqun). Anchored in the security and assuredness of a differentiate between the rightly-guided and the misguided. The rightly – guided obey the law the misguided either deny attempt to dilute or argue about the law. Naturally the rightly – guided are superior because they have God on their side. The Muslim puritans Imagine that God's perfection and immutability are fully attainable on earth-as if God's perfection had been deposited In the Divine Jaw, and, by giving effect to this law, we could create a social order that mirrors Divine Truth. By attaching themselves to the Supreme Being, Puritan groups are able to claim a self-

righteous perfectionism that easily slips into a pretence of supremacy.

Extremism in Islamic History

Perhaps all firmly held systems of belief, especially those founded on religious conviction, are in some way supremacist believers are understood to have some special virtue that distinguishes them from adherents of other faiths. But the supremacist creed of the puritan groups is distinctive and uniquely dangerous. The supremacist thinking of Muslim puritan has a powerful nationalist component which is strongly oriented towards cultural and political dominance. These groups are not satisfied with living according to their own dictates, but are actively dissatisfied with all alternative ways of life. They do not merely seek self-empowerment but aggressively seek to disempower, dominate, or destroy others, The aux of the matter is that all lives lived outside the Jaw are considered an offense against God that must be actively resisted and fought.

The existence of Muslim Puritanism is hardly surprising. Most religious systems have suffered at one time or another from absolutist extremism and Islam is no exception Within the first century of Islam. Religious extremists known as the Khawarij (literally, the secessionists) slaughtered a large number of Muslims and non-Muslims, and were even responsible for the assassination of the Prophet's cousin and companion, the Caliph All b, Abi Talib. The descendants of the Khawarij exist today In Oman and Algeria but after centuries of bloodshed, they became moderates If not pacifists. Similarly, the Qaramites and Assassins for whom error became a raison d'tre earned unmitigated Infamy in the writings of Muslim historians, theologians, and jurists. Again, after centuries of bloodshed, these two groups learned moderation, and they continue to exist in small numbers In North Africa and Iraq. The essential lesson taught by Islamic history is that extremist groups are ejected from the mainstream of Islam they are marginalized, and eventually treated as heretical aberrations to the Islamic message.

But Islam is now living through major shift, unlike any it has experienced in the past. The Islamic civilization has crumbled, and the traditional institutions that once sustained and propagated Islamic orthodoxy-and marginalized Islamic extremism have been dismantled Traditionally, Islamic epistemology tolerated and even celebrated divergent opinions and schools of thought. The guardians or the Islamic tradition were the jurists (fuqaha) , whose legitimacy rested largely on their semi-independence from a decentralized political system, and their dual function of representing the interests or the state to the laity and the Interests or the laity to the state.

But In Muslim countries today, the state has grown extremely powerful and meddlesome and is centralized in ways that were inconceivable two centuries ago. In the vast majority of Muslim countries the state now controls the private religious endowments (awqaf) that once sustained the juristic class. Moreover, the state has co-opted the clergy, and transformed them into its salaried employees. This transformation has reduced the clergy's legitimacy, and produced a profound vacuum in religious authority. Hence there is a state of virtual anarchy in modern Islam: It is not clear who speaks with authority on religious issues. Such a state of virtual religious anarchy is perhaps not problematic in secular societies where religion is essentially reduced to a private matter. But where religion remains central to the dynamics of public legitimacy and cultural meaning, the question of who represents the voice of God is of central significance.

Puritanism and Modern Islam

It would be wrong to say that fanatic supremacist groups such as the al-Qa'ida or al-Jihad organizations now fill the vacuum of authority in contemporary Islam. Though they are obviously able to commit highly visible acts of violence that command the public stage, fanatic groups remain sociologically and intellectually marginal in Islam. Still they are extreme manifestations of more prevalent intellectual and theological currents in modern Islam.

Fanatic groups derive their theological premises from the intolerant puritanism of the Wahhabi and Salafi creeds. Wahhabism was founded by the eighteenth-century evangelist Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab in the Arabian Peninsula. 'Abd al-Wahhab sought to rid Islam of the corruptions that he believed had crept into the religion. He advocated a strict literalism in which the text became the sole source of legitimate authority, and displayed an extreme hostility to intellectualism, mysticism, and any sectarian divisions within Islam. According to the Wahhabi creed, it was imperative to return to a presumed pristine, simple, straight forward Islam, which could be entirely reclaimed by literal implementation of the commands of the Prophet and by strict adherence to correct ritual practice. Importantly, Wahhabism rejected any attempt to interpret the divine law historically or contextually, with attendant possibilities of reinterpretation under changed circumstances. It treated the vast majority of Islamic history as a corruption of the true and authentic Islam. Furthermore Wahhabism narrowly defined orthodoxy, and was extremely intolerant of any creed that contradicted its own.

In the late eighteenth century, the Al Sa'ud family united with the Wahhabi movement and rebelled against Ottoman rule in Arabia. The rebellions were very bloody because the

Wahhabis indiscriminately slaughtered and terrorized Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Interestingly mainstream jurists writing at the time such as the Hanafi Ibn Abidin and the Maliki al-Sawi, branded the Wahhabis the modern day Khawarij of Islam, and condemned their fanaticism and intolerance. In 1818, Egyptian forces under the leadership of Muhammad Ali defeated this rebellion, and Wahhabism seemed destined to become another fringe historical experience with no lasting impact on Islamic theology. But the Wahhabi creed was resuscitated in the early twentieth century under the leadership of Abd al-Aziz Ibn Sa'ud, who allied himself with Wahhabi militant rebels known as the Ikhwan, in the beginnings of what would become Saudi Arabia. Even with the formation of the Saudi state, Wahhabism remained a creed of limited influence until the mid-1970 when the sharp rise in oil prices, together with aggressive Saudi proselytizing, dramatically contributed to its wide dissemination in the Muslim world.

Wahhabism did not propagate itself as one school of thought or a particular orientation within Islam. Rather, it asserted itself as the orthodox "Straight path" of Islam. By claiming literal fidelity to the Islamic text, it was able to make a credible claim to authenticity at a time when Islamic identity was contested. Moreover, the proponents of Wahhabism refused to be labelled or categorized as the followers of any particular figure including Abd al-Wahhab himself. Its proponents insisted that they were simply abiding by the dictates of al-salaf al-salih (the rightly-guided predecessors namely the Prophet and his companions and in going so Wahhabis were able to appropriate the symbolisms and categories of Salafism.

Ironically Salafism was founded in the early twentieth century by Al Afghani Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida as a liberal theological orientation. To respond to the demands of modernity, they argued Muslims needed to return to the original sources of the Quran and Sunnah (tradition of the Prophet) and engage in de novo interpretations of the text. By the 1970s however Wahhabism had succeeded in transforming Salafism from liberal modernist orientation to a literalist puritan and conservative theology. The sharp rise in oil prices in 1975 enabled Saudi Arabia the main proponent of Wahhabism to disseminate the Wahhabi creed under a Salafi guise, which purported to revert back to the authentic fundamentals of religion uncorrupted by the accretions of historical practice. In reality however Saudi Arabia projected its own fairly conservative cultural practices onto the textual sources of Islam and went on to proselytize these projections as the embodiment of Islamic orthodoxy.

Despite its tolerance and rigidity however, Wahhabism itself does not bear primary responsibility for the existence of terrorist groups in Islam today. To be sure Wahhabism and its militant offshoots share both attitudinal and ideological orientations. Both insist on a

normative particularism that is fundamentally text-centred both reject the notion of universal human values and both deal with the other however defined in a functionalist and even opportunistic fashion. But Wahhabism is distinctively inward – looking although focused on power it primarily asserts power over other Muslims. This is consistent with its obsession with orthodoxy and correct ritualistic practice. Militant puritan groups however are both introverted and extroverted – they attempt to assert power against both Muslims and Non – Muslims. As populist movements, they are a reaction to the disempowerment most Muslims have suffered in the modern age at the hands of harshly despotic governments, and at the hands of interventionist foreign power. These groups compensate for extreme feelings of disempowerment by extreme and vulgar claims to power. Fuelled by supremacist and puritan theological creeds their symbolic acts of power become uncompromisingly fanatic and violent.

The Theology of Intolerance

Islamic puritans whether of the Wahhabi or more militant varieties, offer a set of textual references in support of their exclusionary and intolerant theological orientation. For instance, they frequently cite the Quranic verse that states: ‘O’ you who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies. They are allies of each other, and he amongst you who becomes their ally is one of them. Verily, God does not guide the unjust Wahhabi and militant puritanism read this and similar Quranic verses literally and ahistorically, and therefore reach highly exclusionary conclusions. For example, while Muslims may elicit the support or aid of non- Muslims over particular issues when the self-interests of Muslims so require, they may not befriend or share the non-native values of non-Muslims. This orientation often demands the performance of symbolic acts, which aim to distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims for instance, dressing in a particular Way or marking non-Muslims with distinctive symbols.

Islamic puritanism also often invokes the Qur'anic verse asserting that, "whosoever follows a religion other than Islam this will not be accepted from him and in the Hereafter he will be among the losers. This verse is invoked in arguing that the theology and rituals of Islam is the exclusive path to salvation. Moreover, a mere testament of faith or a general act of submission to God is insufficient to attain salvation in the Hereafter; rather, a person must comply with the particulars of the Divine law in order to qualify as a "true" believer. The puritan trend is thus uncompromising in its rejection of all forms of belief and ritual that do not qualify as the "true" religion of God.

As to the principles that should guide the interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims,

the puritan trend cites the Qur'anic verse commanding Muslims to fight the unbelievers until there is no more tumult or oppression, and until faith and all judgment belongs to God. Moreover justifying an essentially supremacist view towards non-Muslims, proponents of puritanism often quote the following Qur'anic injunction: "Fight those among the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) who do not believe in God or the Hereafter, who do not forbid what God and His Prophet have forbidden and who do not acknowledge the religion of truth-fight them until they pay the poll tax (jizyah) with willing submission and feel themselves subdued.

Relying on such textual evidence, Muslim puritans assert that Muslims are the inheritors of an objectively ascertainable and realizable Divine Truth; while Jews and Christians may be tolerated they cannot be befriended. Ultimately, however, they must be subdued and forced to acknowledge Muslim supremacy by paying a poll tax. The puritan doctrine is not necessarily or entirely dismissive of the rights of non-Muslims, and it does not necessarily lead to the persecution of Jews and Christians. But it does assert a hierarchy of importance, and the commitment to toleration is correspondingly fragile and contingent. So it is conducive to an arrogance that can easily descend into a lack of respect or concern for the well-being or dignity of non-Muslims. When this arrogant orientation is coupled with textual sources that exhort Muslims to fight against unbelievers (kuffar) it can produce a radical belligerency.

The Case for Tolerance in Islam

The puritans construct their exclusionary and intolerant theology by reading Qur'anic verses in isolation, as if the meaning of the verses were transparent as if moral ideas and historical context were irrelevant to their interpretation. In fact, however, it is impossible to analyse these and other verses except in light of the overall moral thrust of the Qur'anic message.

The Qur'an itself refers to general moral imperatives such as mercy, justice, kindness, or goodness. The Qur'an does not clearly define any of these categories, but presumes a certain amount of moral probity on part of the reader. For instance, the Quran persistently commands Muslims to enjoin the good. The word used for "the good" is ma'ruf which means that which is commonly known to be good. Goodness, in the Quranic discourse, is part of what one may call a lived reality-it is the product of human experience and constructed normative understandings. Similarly, the Qur'anic term for kindness is ihsan, which literally means to beautify and improve upon. But beautification or improving upon can have meaning only in the context of a certain sociological understanding and practice.

In a further example, as to justice, the Quran states : "O you who believe, Stand firmly for justice, as witnesses for God, even If it means testifying against yourselves, or your parents, or you kin, and whether it is against the rich or poor, for God prevails upon all. Follow not the lusts of your hearts, lest you swerve, and If you distort Justice or decline to do justice, verily God knows what you do. The idea that Muslims must stand up for justice even against their own self-interests is predicated on the notion that human beings are capable of achieving a high level of moral agency. As agents Muslims are expected to achieve a level of moral conscientiousness, which they will bring to their relationship with God. In regards to every ethical obligation, the Qur'anic text assumes that readers will bring a pre-existing, innate moral sense to the text. Hence, the text will morally enrich the reader, but only if the reader will morally enrich the text. The meaning of the religious text is not fixed simply by the literal meaning of its words, but depends, too, on the moral construction given to it by the reader. So if the reader approaches the text without moral commitments, it will almost inevitably yield nothing but discreate, legalistic, technical insights

Similarly, it is imperative to analyse the historical circumstances in which specific Qur'anic ethical norms were negotiated. Many of the institutions referenced in the Qur'an-such as the poll tax or the formation of alliances with non-Muslims-can be understood only if the reader is aware of the historical practices surrounding the revelation of the text. By emptying the Qur'an both of its historical and moral contexts, the puritan trend ends up transforming the text into a long list of morally non-committal legal commands.

The Qur'anic discourse, for instance, can readily support an ethic of diversity and tolerance. The Qur'an not only expects but even accepts the reality of difference and diversity within human society. "O humankind, God has created you from male and female and made you into diverse nations and tribes so that u may come to know each other. Verily, the most honoured of u in the sight of God is he the most righteous! Elsewhere, the Qur'an asserts that diversity is part of the Divine Intent and purpose in creation: "If thy Lord had willed, He would have made humankind into a single nation but they will not cease to be diverse And for this God created them (humankind). The classical commentators on the Quran 'an did not fully explore the implications of this sanctioning of diversity or the role of peaceful conflict resolution in perpetuating the type of social interaction that would result in people 'knowing each other' nor does the Quran provide specific rules or instruction about how diverse nations and tribes are to acquire such knowledge. In fact the existence of diversity as a primary purpose of creation as suggested by the verse above, remained underdeveloped in Islamic theology. Pre-modern Muslim scholars did not have a strong incentive to explore the meaning and implications of the Quranic endorsement of diversity

and cross-cultural intercourse. This is partly because of the political dominance and superiority of Islamic Civilization which left Muslim scholars with a sense of self-sufficient confidence. Nevertheless it is fair to say that the Islamic civilizations were pluralistic and unusually tolerant of various social and religious denominations. Working out the implications of a commitment to human diversity and mutual knowledge under contemporary conditions requires moral reflection and attention to historical circumstance precisely what is missing from puritan theology and doctrine.

Other than a general endorsement of human diversity the Quran also accepted the more specific notion of a plurality of religious beliefs and laws. Although the Quran clearly claims that Islam is the Divine Truth and demands belief in Muhammad as the final messenger in a long line of Abrahamic prophets it does not completely exclude the possibility that there might be other paths to salvation. The Quran insists on God's unfettered discretion to accept in His mercy whomever He wishes. In a rather remarkable set of passages that again have not been adequately theorized by Muslim theologians the Quran recognizes the legitimate multiplicity of religious convictions and laws. In one such passage for example the Quran asserts "To each of you God has prescribed a Law and a way. If God would have willed He would have made you a single people. But God's purpose is to test you in what he has given each of you so strive in the pursuit of virtue and know that you will all return to God(in the Hereafter) and He will resolve all the matters in which you disagree. On this and other occasions the Quran goes on to state that it is possible for Non-Muslims to attain the blessing of salvation. "Those who believe those who follow Jewish scriptures, the Christians, the Sabians and any who believe in God and the Final Day, and do good and all shall have their reward with their Lord and they will not come to fear or grief. Significantly this passage occurs in the same chapter that instructs Muslims not to take the Jews and Christians as allies. How can these different verses be reconciled?

If we read the text with moral and historical guidance, we can see the different passages as part of a complex and layered discourse about reciprocity and its implications in the historical situation in Mohammed's Medina. In part the chapter exhorts Muslims to support the newly established Muslim community in Medina. But its point is not to issue a blanket condemnation against Jews and Christians (who 'shall have their reward with their Lord"). Instead, it accepts the distinctiveness of the Jewish and Christian communities and their laws, while "also insisting that Muslims are entitled to the same treatment as those other communities. Thus it sets out an expectation of reciprocity for Muslims while calling upon Muslims to support the Prophet of Islam against his Jewish and Christian detractors, it also recognizes the moral worth and rights of the non-Muslim "other"

The challenge most often invoked against an argument for tolerance in Islam is the issue of jihad. Jihad, especially as portrayed in the Western media, is often associated with the idea of a holy war that is propagated in the name of God against the unbelievers. Therefore, jihad is often equated with the most vulgar image of religious intolerance.

At the most rudimentary level the Quran itself is explicit in prohibiting any form of coerced conversions to Islam. It contends that truth and falsity are clear and distinct, and so whoever wishes to believe may do so, but no duress permitted in religion. There is no compulsion in matter of faith. Of course this response is incomplete- even if forced conversions to Islam are prohibited, aggressive warfare to spread Islamic power over non-believers might still be allowed. Does the Quran condone such expansionist war?

Interestingly, Islamic tradition does not have a notion of holy war. "Jihad" simply means to strive hard or struggle in pursuit of a just cause and according to the Prophet of Islam, the highest form of Jihad is the struggle waged to cleanse oneself from the vices of the heart. Holy war (In Arabic al-harb al-muqaddasah) an expression used by the Qur'anic text or Muslim theologians. In Islamic theology, war is never holy it is either justified or not and if it is justified those killed in battle are considered martyrs. The Qur'anic text does not recognize the idea of unlimited warfare, and does consider the simple fact of the belligerent's Muslims identity to be sufficient to establish the justness of his cause. In other words, the Qur'an entertains the possibility that the Muslim combatant might be the unjust party in a conflict.

Moreover, while the Qur'an emphasizes that Muslims may fight those who fight them, it also insists that Muslims may fight those who fight them it is also insists that Muslims may not transgress. Transgression is an ambiguous term, but on several occasions the Qur'an intimates that in order not to, transgress. Muslims must be constrained by a requirement of proportionality, even when the cause is just. For Instance, it states "Mandated is the law of equality, so that who transgresses against you, respond in kind, and fear God, and know that God is with those who exercise restraint.

Despite the prohibition against transgression and condemnation of unlimited warfare many classical jurists adopted an imperialist orientation, which divided the world into the abode of Islam and the abode of war supported expansionist wars against unbelievers. But this

view was not unanimous. Classical Muslim jurists debated whether unbelief is a sufficient justification for warfare, with a sizeable number of classical jurists arguing that non-Muslims may not be fought unless they pose a physical threat to Muslims. If non-Muslims seek peace Muslims should make an effort to achieve such a peace. This discourse was partly inspired by the Quranic injunctions concerning peace. The Quran asserts that God does not prohibit Muslims from making peace with those who do not fight Muslims, but God does prohibit Muslims from making peace with those who have expelled Muslims from their homes and continue to persecute them elsewhere, the Qur'an pronounces a stronger mandate in favour of peace in stating: "If your enemy inclines towards peace, then you should seek peace and trust in God. Moreover, the Qur'an instructs Muslims not to haughtily turn away unbelievers who seek to make peace with Muslims, and reminds Muslims that, if God would have willed, He would have given the unbelievers power over you (Muslims) and they would have fought you (Muslims) Therefore if they (the unbelievers) withdraw from you and refuse to fight you and instead send you guarantees of peace know that God has not given you a license [to fight them]. These discussions of peace would not make sense if Muslims were in a permanent state of war with non-believers were a permanent enemy and always a legitimate target.

The other major issue on the point of tolerance in Islam is that of the poll tax (jizyah) imposed on the People of Book (Christians and Jews) who live in Muslim territory. When the Qur'an was revealed it was common inside and outside of Arabia to levy poll taxes against alien groups. Building upon the historical practice, classical Muslim jurists argued that the poll tax is money collected by the Islamic polity from non-Muslims in return for the protection of the Muslim state. If the Muslim state was incapable of extending such protection to non-Muslims. It was not supposed to levy a poll tax. In fact, 'Umar the second Rightly Guided Caliph and close companion of the Prophet. Returned the poll tax to an Arab Christian tribe that he was incapable of protecting from Byzantine aggression.

Aside from the juristic theory justifying the poll tax, the Qur'an does not, however, pronounce an absolute and unwavering rule in favour of such an institution. Once more, attention to historical circumstance is essential. The Qur'an endorsed a poll tax as a response to particular groups in Arabia who were persistently hostile, to the early Muslims. Importantly, the Prophet did not collect a poll tax from every non-Muslim tribe that submitted to Muslim sovereignty, and in fact. In the case of a large number of non-Muslim but non-hostile tribes, he paid them a periodic sum of money or goods. These tribes were known as "those whose hearts have been reconciled. Furthermore Umar entered into a peace settlement with Arab Christian tribes pursuant to which these tribes were obligated to pay the Islamic annual tax known as the zakat and not the poll tax. Reportedly, although

they refused to convert to Islam the Christian tribes contended that paying the jizyah (poll tax) was degrading and instead, asked to pay the zakat, and 'Umar accommodated their request.

In short, there are various Indicators that the poll tax is not a theologically mandated practice but functional solution that was adopted In response to a specific set of historical circumstances. Only an entirely ahistorical reading of the text could conclude that It is an essential element in a Divinely-sanctioned program of subordinating the non-believer.

Final Thoughts

Ultimately the Qur'an, or any text speaks through its reader. This ability of human beings to interpret texts is both a blessing and a burden. It is a blessing because it provides us with the flexibility to adapt texts to changing circumstances. It is a burden because the reader must take responsibility for the normative values he or she brings to the text. ANY TEXT INCLUDING THOSE THAT ARE Islamic Provides possibilities for meaning not inevitabilities. And those possibilities are exploited developed and ultimately determined by the readers effort - good faith efforts we hope – at making sense of the text complexities. Consequently the meaning of the text is often only as moral as its reader. If the reader is intolerant, hateful or oppressive, so will be the interpretation of the text. It would be disingenuous to deny that the Quran and other Islamic sources offer possibilities of intolerant interpretation. Clearly these possibilities are exploited by the contemporary puritans and supremacists. But the text does not command such tolerant readings. Historically, Islamic civilization has displayed a remarkable ability to recognize possibilities of tolerance and to act upon these possibilities. Islamic civilization produced a moral and humanistic tradition that preserved Greek philosophy, and generated much science art, and socially benevolent thought. Unfortunately, however. The modern puritans are dissipating and wasting this inspiring moral tradition. They are increasingly shutting off the possibilities for a tolerant interpretation of the Islamic tradition.

If we assess the moral trajectory of a civilization in light of its past record then we have ample reason to be optimistic about the future. But the burden and blessing of sustaining that moral trajectory – of accentuating the Quranic message of tolerance and openness to the other – falls squarely on the shoulder of contemporary Muslim interpreters of the tradition.