Editorial

Overcoming the Polemics of Intolerance

The September 11 attacks on the United States have had many dire consequences. In addition to destroying innocent lives and devastating the lively dreams of the individuals and families caught in the web of death and destruction, the attacks have reinvigorated a few bigoted spirits who found an excellent opportunity to spread their bigotry in the name of fighting intolerance in post-September 11's murky atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. Since that horrific date, a new unholy alliance has been formed among leading members of the Religious Right. Its avowed aim is to vilify Islam and demonize even the most moderate Muslim voices.

The most recent, vicious, and mean-spirited attacks to date on Islam have created a new paradox: Islam, which historically has provided an outstanding model of religious accommodation and tolerance, stands accused of intolerance by intolerant and bigoted people. This paradox deserves extensive attention and study. In addition, the worldview and mindset behind the mean-spirited attacks on Islam by individuals whose outlooks and spirits recall those of the Middle Ages must be analyzed deeply and understood thoroughly. In this editorial, I will argue briefly that the accusation of intolerance leveled against Islam is unfounded and that Islam is an essential partner in any effort to develop a more tolerant and peaceful world.

Islam is essential for developing a gentler and more caring world, because it holds in high esteem the most fundamental values that make a tolerant and pluralist society possible: equality, freedom, and justice, as well as interracial and interreligious solidarity. The emphasis that Islam places on these values is manifested in the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the Companions' exemplary lives; in the Muslim society's historical experience; and in the ethos of contemporary Islamic reform movements.

The Qur'an, Religious Freedom, and Tolerance

In western society, tolerance is a modern virtue. The West now embraces freedom of religion and abhors religious, ethnic, and racial discrimination. Yet multiculturalism is more anchored in a secular than a religious ethos, and remains far from being entrenched in western society. In historical Islam, multiculturalism emanated directly from religious teaching and hence reflected a deeper individual and societal commitment.

The first thing that strikes us when we study the Qur'an is that it does not confine faith and salvation to Muslims or deny faith and salvation to non-Muslims. Nor does it limit the attribution of faith and salvation to Muslims; rather, it extends it to non-Muslims. The Qur'an clearly states that everyone who believes in God and the Last Day and does good are assured of salvation:

> Those who believe (in the Qur'an), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians and the Christians – any who believe in God and the Last Day and work righteous deeds – on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (5:69)

In addition, the Qur'an does not consider all those who accepted Islam to be true believers, for some have accepted it as a general mode of life but failed to internalize its worldview and ethical mission. Others conform to Islamic teachings only in appearance, but continue to harbor suspicion, doubt, and even ill-will toward Islam, its adherents, and advocates. It follows that believers and nonbelievers can belong to all religions. Thus, given that believers and nonbelievers cannot be distinguished on religious lines, the Qur'an urges Muslims to seek a political order based on peaceful cooperation and mutual respect. It also warns them not to place religious solidarity over covenanted rights and principles of justice.

The Qur'an, therefore, directs Muslims to find common ground with other religious communities. This common ground is expressed as a mutual respect for each religious community's freedom and autonomy. In other words, no community has the right to impose its way of life on other religious communities. The Qur'an also states that force has no place in religious matters.

Islam's Formative Political Principles

Scholars who have studied the history of Islam and the Muslims' attitude toward non-Muslims have concluded that Islam teaches tolerance and respect for religious freedom. While this is true, it only partially describes

the prevailing attitude in historical Muslim society, for it fails to capture the essence of Islam's remarkable contribution to sociopolitical liberation. On the sociopolitical level, Islam went further than religious tolerance by embracing the moral autonomy of religious and ethnic communities.

Equipped with the principles discussed above, the Prophet established in Madinah a multireligious political community based on a set of universal principles known as the Compact of Madina (*Sahifat al-Madinah*). The rules enunciated therein sought to maintain peace and cooperation, protect the life and property of Madinah's inhabitants, fight aggression and injustice regardless of tribal or religious affiliation, and ensure freedom of religion and movement. It is remarkable that this Compact of Madinah placed the rules of justice over and above religious solidarity by affirming the right of those who had been wronged to obtain justice regardless of tribal or religious affiliation.

The Compact of Madinah formed the constitutional foundation of the political community established by the Prophet. It established a number of important political principles that, when joined together, became the political constitution of the first Islamic state, defined the Muslim and non-Muslim members' political rights and duties, and drew up the nascent society's political structure.

The Islamic political system adopted religious tolerance based on freedom of belief for everyone. Jews were given the right to act in accordance with Judaism's principles and rulings: "The Jews of Banu Awf are one community with the believers. The Jews have their religion and the Muslims have theirs." The Compact emphasized the fundamental nature of Muslim – non-Muslim cooperation in establishing justice and defending Madinah against foreign aggression: "The Jews must bear their expenses and the Muslims must bear theirs. Each must help the other against anyone who attacks the people of this Compact. They must seek mutual advice and consultation." It prohibited the Muslims from doing injustice to the Jews or retaliating for their Muslim brothers against the followers of Judaism without adhering to the principles of truth and goodness: "To the Jew who follows us belongs help and equality. He shall not be wronged, nor shall his enemies be aided."

The Compact stipulated that the new system's sociopolitical activities must be subject to a set of universal values and standards that treat all people equally. Sovereignty would not rest with the rulers or any particular group, but with the law based on justice and goodness, in order to maintain everyone's dignity. It repeatedly emphasized that justice, goodness, and

righteousness were fundamental, and condemned injustice and tyranny: "They would redeem their prisoners with kindness and justice common among the believers," the Compact stated. It proclaimed: "The God-conscious believers shall oppose the rebellious and those who seek to spread injustice, sin, enmity, or corruption among believers. The hand of every person shall be against him, even if he be a son of one of them."

The Compact introduced several political rights for all citizens of the Madinan state, regardless of religion. Among them were the obligation to help the oppressed; outlaw guilt by association, a common practice among pre-Islamic Arab tribes: "A person is not liable for his ally's misdeeds"; freedom of belief: "The Jews have their religion and the Muslims have theirs"; and freedom of movement to and from Madinah: "Whoever goes out is safe, and whoever stays in Madinah is safe, except those who wronged (others) or committed offense."

Islam's openness to other religions is seen in the emerging Muslim community's excellent relationship with the Christian Kingdom of Abyssinia, which maintained its Christian identity long after Islam was established in Arabia and North Africa. Only a few Muslim families could be found even in the fourth *hijri* century. From the beginning, the Abyssinians showed their good will to the early Muslims who sought refuge in their country from Qurayshi persecution. These émigrés were welcomed by the Abyssinians, who also refused to turn them over to the Qurayshi delegation sent to bring them back to Makkah. The two states continued to enjoy good relations, and Abyssinia was the only state to acknowledge Islam at that time.

A Tradition of Equality and Autonomy

The death of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (661), the fourth caliph, marked the end of participatory politics and the beginning of Muslim dynasties. The commitment of Muslim society to religious freedom and the rule of law remained, however, strong and firm. It also remained cognizant of the need to differentiate law in order to ensure moral autonomy, while working diligently to ensure equal protection under the law as far as fundamental human rights were concerned.

Thus early jurists recognized that all non-Muslims who signed a peace treaty with the Muslims were entitled to full religious freedom and equal protection under the law for their personal safety and property. In al-Sarakhsi's book *Sharh Kitab al-Siyar*, al-Shaybani (d. 805) stated in unequivocal terms that when non-Muslims sign a peace treaty with Muslims:

> Muslims should not appropriate any of the non-Muslims' houses and land, nor should they intrude into any of their dwellings, because they have become party to a covenant of peace, and because on the day of the Peace of Khaybar, the Prophet's spokesman announced that none of the property of the covenanters is permitted to the Muslim. Also, because the non-Muslims have accepted the peace covenant so as they may enjoy their properties and rights on a par with Muslims.

Similarly, early Muslim jurists recognized the non-Muslims' right to self-determination and gave them full moral and legal autonomy in the villages and towns under their control. Therefore, al-Shaybani, who wrote the most authoritative work on non-Muslim rights, insists that Christians who have signed a peace treaty are free to trade in wine and pork among themselves, even though Muslims consider such practice unlawful.

Likewise, early Muslim jurists recognized the right of non-Muslims to hold public office, including the offices of judge and minister. However, because judges had to refer to laws sanctioned by the religious traditions of various religious communities, non-Muslim judges could not administer law in Muslim communities, nor were Muslim judges permitted to enforce the Shari'ah on non-Muslims. There was no disagreement among the various schools of jurisprudence on the right of non-Muslims to be ruled according to their laws. They only differed in whether the positions held by non-Muslim magistrates were judicial in nature (which would entitle them to be called judges) or purely political (which would make them political leaders).

Contemporary Islamic Reform

Since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, the Islamic reform movement has rejected traditionalist interpretations of Islam and embarked on an ambitious reform project to relate Islamic beliefs and values to modern life. The works of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), and Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935) – the founders of what has been termed the reform school – present us with an unmistakably egalitarian and liberal discourse that emphasizes openness and tolerance. Early reformists rejected the anti-intellectual approach of traditionalist jurists and advocated a rational and critical reading of classical Islamic works. For instance, they rejected the restrictive role assigned by traditionalist jurists to women by emphasizing the importance of women's education and social participation. Indeed, as early as the 1930s, Rida not only advocated women's

right to education and social participation, but also to political participation. Similarly, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (d. 1903) attributed Muslim society's cultural decline to denying women the right to education and stressed the importance of their public involvement so that they could provide children with proper guidance and a sound upbringing.

While reformist scholars were – and continue to be – outnumbered by their traditionalist counterparts, they have had a profound and far-reaching influence upon contemporary Muslim society. This can be seen in the increasingly more open views adopted by leading figures within the traditionalist schools. Several influential and widely respected traditionalist jurists are on record as supporting democracy and human rights, as well as the right of women to compete equally with men for public office. If they had expressed such views just one century ago, not to mention teaching them in public and in the Shari'ah departments of traditional Islamic colleges, they would have been branded as heretics. Such leading al-Azhar scholars as Muhammad Abu Zahra, Mahmoud Shaltut, Muhammad al-Ghazali, and Yusuf al-Qardawi have emphasized equality between men and women and between Muslims and non-Muslims.

More recently, enlightened Muslim scholars and political leaders have advanced more open and tolerant visions of modern Islam. Such scholars as Salem Awa, Tariq Bishri, Fahmi Huwaidi, and Rashid Ghanoushi have emphasized democracy, freedom, and equal protection under the law. Similarly, American Muslims are undergoing a profound intellectual and communal reform, for they are engaged in a fresh reading of the Qur'an and the Islamic heritage as they enjoy their share of the American exceptionalism.

The reformers' views continue to mature in the direction of recognizing human dignity and reciprocity in society. Most recently, Fahmi Huwaydi, a leading journalist in the Arab world and a respected Muslim reformer, discussed the question of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims in his *Muwatinun La Dhimiyun* (Citizens, not Dhimmis). He rejected the *dhimmi* classification of non-Muslims as a historically bound concept and showed, by referring to Islamic sources, that non-Muslims in a Muslim political order enjoy full citizenship rights on a par with Muslims. These views also are supported by the founder and leader of Tunisia's main Islamic opposition party, who stresses that non-Muslims enjoy equal citizenship with the Muslim majority.

In Search of Common Ground

The question that preoccupies us here is: Can we find common ground on which Muslims and non-Muslims can stand comfortably in a democratic and pluralist society? My answer is a resounding yes.

Religious conflict, particularly between Islam and Christianity, often rose out of human excesses and the desire to stir religious passion to support political goals. While both religions advance a slightly different conceptualization of God and of humanity's relation to the divine, doctrinal differences are not limited to interreligious relationships. In fact, one can find more doctrinal diversity within each religion than between them. Muslims and Christians, on the other hand, share similar core values of respect for human life and dignity and a profound commitment to charity and the common good.

A Muslim who murders a non-Muslim for monetary gain deserves a just punishment, and a non-Muslim who saves someone's life deserves praise and admiration. The reactions of Christians and Jews to such acts would be the same. One ought to condemn wrong doings and support good deeds regardless of the actor's identity. Hence, action rather than religious affiliation should determine each person's social worth.

The question of global peace in a multicultural and multireligious world is ultimately one of shifting the locus of social evaluation and order from doctrine to value. Since complete secularism has led to the erosion of morality and the rise of nihilism, religious commitment is becoming increasingly central to public life. Thus we all need to search for an alternative conceptualization of the relationship between religion and politics – a conceptualization that asserts the religious basis of moral action and rejects religious intolerance and self-righteousness.

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