



ISLAM: RELIGION OR IDEOLOGY?

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July 25th, 2006

Introduction

“Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet they murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their streets, in all corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost all of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience. Look at them today swaying between atomic and spiritual disintegration.... That same Europe where they are never done talking of Man, and where they never stopped proclaiming that they were only anxious for the welfare of Man: today we know what sufferings humanity has paid for every one of their triumphs of the mind.”

Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth

The following essay, *Islam: Religion or Ideology?*, was written three weeks ago, before the government of Israel began its brutal, murderous assault on the civilian population of Lebanon, allegedly in response to the capture of two Israeli soldiers by fighters affiliated with the Lebanese Islamic organization, Hizbollah. This latest Israeli campaign only underscores the price the people of the Middle East have paid owing to the triumph of Zionism. That price has been high indeed, and as Lebanon is reduced to bloodstained rubble, the price only escalates.

That said, we should never lose sight of the fact that the Jewish people have also paid heavily for that triumph. The growing number of Jewish victims of the deepening cycles of violence plaguing the region, evidenced most recently in the indiscriminant Hizbollah rocket attacks on northern Israeli cities, is part of that price. However, in my opinion, the greater price lies in how the triumph of Zionism threatens to transform mainstream Judaism from a religion characterized by the loftiest of moral codes, to one that is willing to sacrifice its morality on the altar of political expediency.

Evidence of Jewish philanthropy, and goodwill towards the generality of humanity still exists—one has to only look at the charitable and social justice work done both here and globally by Jews—however, the overwhelming support the people of Israel, and Jews in other parts of the world, have given to this most recent campaign of murder and destruction against the defenseless Lebanese people

(most of whom are not politically aligned with Hizbollah) points to the sad reality of a great world faith being diminished by the political agenda of the Zionist state.

The following is part of an effort by this writer to warn Muslims against allowing the reduction of our religion by similar political imperatives. We should never hope to see the day when, if possessing the requisite firepower, Muslims would visit upon the civilian population of Israel the sort of savage violence we see decimating the innocent civilians of Gaza and Lebanon. God has imposed limits on our behavior, even in times of war, and we should never transgress those limits. Our failure to observe those limits not only threatens to destroy the moral foundations of our religion, it will also add to the suffering of innocent human beings.

Time does not allow a deeper analysis of the current crisis. In the near future, I plan to write an extensive article on this issue. For now, I will conclude my remarks with the deeply insightful and frighteningly prophetic words of the Zionist philosopher Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsberg). He writes over one hundred years ago:

“One thing we certainly should have learned from our past and present history, and that is not to create anger among the local population against us... We have to treat the local population with love and respect, justly and rightly. And what do our brethren in the Land of Israel do? Exactly the opposite! Slaves they were in their country of exile, and suddenly they find themselves in a boundless and anarchic freedom, as is always the case with a slave that has become king; and they behave towards the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, infringe upon their boundaries, hit them shamefully without reason, and even brag about it. Our brethren are right when they say that the Arab honours only those who show valor and fortitude; but this is the case only when he feels that the other side has justice on his side. It is very different in a case when [the Arab] thinks that his opponent's actions are iniquitous and unlawful; in that case he may keep his anger to himself for a long time, but it will dwell in his heart and in the long run he will prove himself to be vengeful and full of retribution.”

Ahad Ha'am, Complete Works

Islam: Religion or Ideology?

At a recently concluded convention of the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), I mentioned during one of my presentations that the verse quoted below should be understood as a religious—not a political—statement:

It is He who has sent His Messenger with Guidance and the Religion of Truth in order that He shows its superiority over all other religion, even if the idolaters detest it. [Al-Qur'an 9:33, 61:9]

In doing so, my purpose was to challenge one of the principal texts offered as a proof to support the idea that Islam advances a scheme of global domination, and as such there is no basis in Islamic teaching for peaceful coexistence with other faiths and communities.

After my presentation, I was met by several young Muslims who vehemently expressed their opposition to my referring to the above verse as a religious proclamation. I understood the reason for their objections and responded by explaining the theological basis of my claim. Left unsaid, however, was the greater issue that informs the popular understanding of the verse, which is the growing tendency among Muslims to read many of our foundational texts politically and not theologically. Such a reading shifts the emphasis of our religion away from the Hereafter and creates a distorted focus on the world.

Islam is one of the world's great religions. As such, it concerns itself with the principal issues that dominate the discourse surrounding any faith. These issues include identifying, believing in, worshipping, and obeying the Divine in anticipation of otherworldly rewards, or the avoidance of otherworldly punishments. At the heart of these issues is a deep concern for the eventual salvation of the human being. Islam shares these religious concerns, God mentions in the Qur'an:

Every soul will experience death, and you will be given your recompense in full on the Day of Resurrection. The one who is saved from Hellfire and admitted into Paradise will be truly victorious. And what is the life of this world except a deceptive enjoyment. [Al-Qur'an 3:185]

Like all other religions in their respective milieus, Islam also has profound and far-reaching political implications. It has shaped law, government, commerce, social relations, and virtually every other sphere of life in

the Muslim world. However, its political implications are subordinate to its religious teachings. Hence, for example, a Muslim individual or polity may succeed politically, while being damned religiously, because basic injunctions of the religion have been sacrificed to unsanctioned political imperatives, or unacceptable motives. A vivid illustration of this result is given to us in the well-known prophetic tradition that mentions a great *Mujahid* (warrior) who achieved the epitome of worldly success, but lost his soul because of the corrupt intention motivating his efforts.¹

Politicized readings of our texts can be seen as part of the growing tendency to reduce Islam to a political ideology. The implications of this reduction are grave. Perhaps the gravest of those implications is turning the primary focus of Islam away from the spirit or soul and orienting it towards the world, thereby reducing the sacred understanding to the level of the mundane.

The reasons we must resist this reorientation become clearer when we reflect upon the nature of ideologies. The noted political philosopher, Roger Scruton, defines an ideology as:

Any systematic and all-embracing political doctrine, which claims to give a complete and universally applicable theory of man and society, and to derive there from a programme of political action.²

A Muslim might read this definition and opine that Islam is indeed an ideology as it presents a “complete and universally applicable theory of man and society.” However, the relevant realm of action and thought for an ideology is the political, as Scruton points out. This limitation to the political realm marks where Islam parts with ideology. Islam is not simply concerned with man's political condition; it is also concerned with his spiritual condition, and at the heart of the Islamic call is a normative program for spiritual salvation. That program accommodates the political, but on its own terms, and it is never limited to it or by it.

Moreover, ideologies are also utilitarian in that the doctrines they espouse are informed as much by their effectiveness as they are by any overarching principles. Few ideologies would deviate far from the Machiavellian maxim that “the ends justify the means.” Scruton continues with his definition:

An ideology in this sense seeks to embrace everything that is relevant to man's political condition, and to issue doctrine whenever doctrine would be influential in forming or changing that condition.³

Hence, doctrine issuing from a particular ideology is marshaled based on its efficacy in advancing the cause, not on the basis of any preexisting moral or ethical standard. Such a formulation is at complete odds with Islam and, thus, largely alien to its classical tradition. However, when Islam is reduced to an ideology, it is inevitably relegated to the realm of political expediency. Whatever appears to advance the political cause is seen as Islamic, such as suicide bombings, massacring civilians, murdering other Muslims, destroying public order, or other tactics that have become associated with the ideology and practice of “Islamic Jihad.”⁴

A strictly political reading of the Qur’an urges such expediency. Such a reading tends to reduce verses of clearly theological or eschatological import to statements of political doctrine. The implications of this for understanding and action, again, are profound. Events whose unfolding is confined to the end of time are assigned an immediacy that begs their applicability here and now. The introductory verse in question provides a stark example of this tendency.

In examining the verse, one has to admit that some latter-day exegetes have mentioned a few prophetic traditions that if taken in isolation would seem to urge a political understanding. For example, Ibn Kathir, in commenting on the verse mentions the prophetic tradition:

God has folded up the ends of the Earth for me [showing me] its easternmost and westernmost reaches. The dominion of my nation will reach the extents He has shown me.⁵

Although the word “dominion,” mentioned in the above tradition may lend itself to a political understanding of the verse, it must be noted that Ibn Kathir mentions other narrations that lend themselves to a strictly theological understanding. Meanwhile, the primary theological and eschatological import of the verse is made clear by Imam Tabari, the dean of Qur’anic exegetes. He mentions in his commentary:

The scholars of [Qur’anic] interpretation differ concerning the meaning of [God’s] saying...*in order that He shows its superiority over all other religion*. Some of them say that will occur when Jesus returns and all religions will become a single faith. Among those mentioning this [view]:

On the authority of Abu Huraira concerning His [God’s] saying ...*in order that He shows its superiority*

over all other religion he said, “At the time Jesus the Son of Mary returns.”⁶

Imam Tabari continues:

Others say that this means He [God] will teach him [the Prophet, Peace and Blessings of God upon him] the laws associated with every religion... Among those mentioning this [view]:

On the authority of Ibn ‘Abbas concerning His [God’s] saying ...*in order that He shows its superiority over all other religion* he said, “In order that God shows His prophet the rulings associated with every religion. He subsequently showed him, and [thereafter] nothing [of religious knowledge] was hidden from him.”⁷

Imam Suyuti mentions the two narrations quoted above in his exegetical work, *ad-Durr al-Manthur*. He then relates from Imam al-Bayhaqi and others a narration that further emphasizes both the theological and eschatological nature of the verse being discussed. He says:

Sa’id bin Mansur relates, as does Ibn al-Mundhir, along with Imam al-Bayhaqi in his *Sunan* on the authority of Jabir, May God be pleased with him, concerning the phrase ...*in order that He shows its superiority over all other religion* that he said, “That will not come to pass until every Jew and Christian has entered into Submission, nor until no harm issues from the wolf towards any sheep, from the lion towards any cow, nor from the viper towards any human being. That will not be until even the mouse will not gnaw on a bag of grain. That will not be until the tribute is suspended, the cross is broken, and the pig is slaughtered. All of this will occur when Jesus descends, Peace upon him.”⁸

This theological and eschatological understanding, clear in the exegesis of both Imam Tabari and Imam Suyuti, is shared by Imam al-Qurtubi.⁹ They all make it clear that these events will occur at the end of time, after the return of Jesus. Accepting this understanding of the verse, coupled with other widely known religious teachings, helps us to assess our current situation in light of the realities confronting us, and to devise strategies to deal with those realities free from a false political imperative, informed in part by this verse, that will likely lead to questionable, desperate, and ill-advised acts owing to our strategic and political weaknesses.

This argument is not meant to imply that Islam is a pacifist religion. As Muslims we believe in the concept of justified warfare. God mentions in the Qur'an:

Permission [to fight] is given to those who are unjustly fought against, and God is most capable of assisting them. Those who have been wrongfully expelled from their homes [for no reason] except their saying, "Our Lord is Allah (God)..." [Al-Qur'an 22:39-40]

Similarly,

Fight in the Way of God those who fight you, but do not transgress. God loves not those who transgress. [Al-Qur'an 2:190]

Hence, Islam has instituted fighting to defend life, honor, property, to restore usurped rights, and to protect the integrity of the religion and the community of the faithful. However, that fighting is governed by well-established laws and principles that articulate rules, regulations, and limitations that outline for Muslims when, where, how, and against whom it is permissible to fight. Those laws and principles have never sanctioned anarchist terrorism, wanton murder, tumult, and mayhem.

Reducing Islam to an ideology threatens to subordinate those laws and principles to political imperatives that have little to do with Islamic teachings. If this happens consistently enough, the social foundation of our religion may be lost. As Muslims we may well continue in our various struggles. However, those struggles would be better informed by the revolutionary teachings of Bakunin, Georges Sorel, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, Mao, Che Guevara, and others than by the revelation given to our Prophet Muhammad, Peace and Blessings of God upon him. In some circumstances, we could possibly muster a credible defense against any number of threats confronting us. However, at the end of the day, we may find that we have very little left to defend.

¹ Imam Abu Zakariyya Yahya bin Sharaf an-Nawawi, *Riyadh as-Saliheen* (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1985/1405), 448, no. 1615.

This tradition was originally transmitted by Imams Muslim, Tirmidhi, Nasa'i, and others.

² Roger Scruton, *A Dictionary of Political Thought* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1982), 399.

³ Ibid, 399.

⁴ Saying this is not to all imply that all of the murder and mayhem that is occurring in Iraq, or that which has

occurred in places like Algeria during much of the 1990s can be attributed solely to Muslims. Certainly, a share of such violence can be traced to elements of relevant intelligence agencies in both Iraq and Algeria, or non-Muslim mercenaries, such as the French commandos in Algeria, or Serbian paramilitary militia members, or former South African death squads, both of which are active in Iraq. However, to deny the role of the ideology of Jihad in that violence is to display an ignorance of the doctrines, proclamations, and history of that the Jihad movement.

⁵ Abu al-Fida' Isma'il bin Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Adhim* (Sidon, Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Asriyya, 1996/1416), 2:319.

⁶ Imam Abu Ja'far bin Jarir at-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan fi Ta'wil al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1997/1418), 6:356, no. 16,660.

⁷ Imam at-Tabari, 6:356-357, no. 16,662.

⁸ Imam Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti, *Ad-Durr al-Manthur fi at-Tafsir bi'l-Ma'thur* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' at-Turath al-'Arabi, 2001/1421), 4:161.

⁹ See Imam Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami' li Ahkam al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1987/1407), 8:121.

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