THE PLACE OF TOLERANCE IN ISLAM

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The terrorist attacks on New York City and the Pentagon have focused public attention on the state 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 a 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, un-Westernized, so-called “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 organization. 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 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 well-being of others. The straight path (al-sirat al-mustaqim) is fixed, they say, by a system of divine laws (shari'ah) 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 (fasiquun). Anchored in the security and assuredness of a determinable law, it becomes fairly easy to 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 law, 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 pretense 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 puritans has a powerful nationalist component, which is strongly oriented toward 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 crux of the matter is that all lives lived outside the law 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 Ali b. Abi Talib. The de-
cendants 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 terror became a raison d’être, 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 less-
on taught by Islamic history is that extremist groups are ejected from the mainstream of Islam; they are marginal-
ized, and eventually treated as heretical aberrations to the Islamic message.

But Islam is now living through a 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 marginal-
ized Islamic extremism—have been dismantled. Traditionally, Islamic epistemology tolerated and even celebrated
divergent opinions and schools of thought. The guardians of the Islamic tradition were the jurists (fuqaha), whose le-
gitimacy rested largely on their semi-independence from a decentralized political system, and their dual function of

representing the interests of the state to the laity and the in-
terests of the laity to the state.

But in Muslim countries today, the state has grown ex-
tremely 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 pro-
duced 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 dy-
namics of public legitimacy and cultural meaning, the ques-
tion of who represents the voice of God is of central sig-
nificance.

Puritanism and Modern Islam

It would be wrong to say that fanatic supremacist groups
such as al-Qaeda or al-Jihad organizations now fill the vac-
uum 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 sociologi-
cally 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, straightforward 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 'Abdin and the Malikī al-Sawi, branded the Wahhabis the modern day Khawarij of Islam, and condemned their fanaticism and intolerance.1 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-1970s 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 labeled 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,
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namely the Prophet and his companions), and in doing 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 Qur'an 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 a 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 intolerance 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-centered; both reject the notion of universal human values; and both deal with the

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other, however defined, in a functionalist and even opportunist 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 powers. These groups compensate for extreme feelings of disempowerment by extreme and vulgar claims to power. Fueled 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 Qur'anic 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 Qur'anic 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 normative 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, "whomsoever 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 are 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 (jizyāh) 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 (kuffār), 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 analyze 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 Qur’an persistently commands Muslims 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 Qur’anic 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 Qur’an states: “O you who believe, stand firmly for justice, as witnesses for God, even if it means testifying against yourselves, or your parents, or your 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 preexisting, 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 discrete, legalistic, technical insights.

Similarly, it is imperative to analyze 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. But by emptying the Qur’an both of its historical and moral context, the puritan trend ends up transforming the text into a long list of morally noncommittal 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 you may come to know each other. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is he who is 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 Qur'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 Qur'an provide specific rules or instructions 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 Qur'anic endorsement of diversity and cross-cultural intercourse. This is partly because of the political dominance and superiority of the Islamic civilization, which left Muslim scholars with a sense of self-sufficient confidence. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the Islamic civilization was 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,
can see the different passages as part of a complex and layered discourse about reciprocity and its implications in the historical situation in Muhammad'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 images of religious intolerance.

At the most rudimentary level, the Qur’an itself is explicit in prohibiting any form of coerced conversions to Islam. It contends that truth and falsity are clear and distinct, and so whomever wishes to believe may do so, but no duress is permitted in religion: “There is no compulsion in matter of faith.”11 Of course, this response is incomplete—even if forced conversions to Islam are prohibited, aggressive war-

fare to spread Islamic power over nonbelievers might still be allowed. Does the Qur’an condone such expansionist wars?

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 (al-harb al-muqaddasah) is not 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 not consider the simple fact of the belligerent’s Muslim identity to be sufficient to establish the justice 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 not transgress.12 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.”13

Despite the prohibition against transgression and the
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, and 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 Qur’anic injunctions concerning peace. The Qur’an 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 favor 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, “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 nonbelievers, and if nonbelievers 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 the 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 (r. 632–644), 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 unswerving rule in favor 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
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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 zakab (almsgiving), and not the poll tax. Reportedly, although they refused to convert to Islam, the Christian tribes contended that paying the jizya was degrading, and instead, asked to pay the zakab, and ‘Umar accommodated their request. In short, there are various indicators that the poll tax is not a theologically mandated practice, but a 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 nonbeliever.

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 reader’s efforts—good faith efforts, we hope—at making sense of the text’s complexities. Consequently,

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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 Qur'an 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 intolerant 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 Qur'anic message of tolerance and openness to the other—falls squarely on the shoulders of contemporary Muslim interpreters of the tradition.