

Normative Islamic (Qur'anic)  
Teachings on Pluralism  
*Reflections on "The People of the Book"*

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On September 11, 2001, the United States arguably suffered the most serious foreign attack ever on its soil. American intelligence agencies identified the perpetrators as being of Muslim and Arab origin. The post-September 11 world is radically different from the world that existed before that fateful day. The sense of invulnerability and invincibility that characterized the consciousness of the world's lone superpower was suddenly, and irrevocably, lost. Understandably, many Americans wanted to lash out at those responsible for the dreadful terror. Most of the immediate perpetrators were dead and could not be punished. But still very much alive were others—such as Osama bin Laden—who were believed to have masterminded and financed the assault. Apprehending them seemed necessary to make a bleeding nation whole again and to restore confidence in the “manifest destiny” of the United States to lead and control the world.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Islam and Muslims and the association of both with violence has been the focus of more attention than perhaps at any other point in modern history. Much of this attention—particularly in the case of mainstream American television coverage—has

been negative, not only with regard to those who committed the criminal acts but also with regard to Islam, Muslims, and Arabs.

The September 11 assault on the United States has been condemned strongly by the global community including a large number of Muslims, ranging from leaders of Muslim countries to ordinary people. From the outset, however, the crisis was perceived and described in terms that polarized the world into two absolutely opposed camps. This worldview, which became dominant in the discourse of both the American administration and the U.S. media, was symbolized by expressions such as “us versus them,” “either you are with us or you are against us,” and “good versus evil.” The dualism that permeated this discourse seemed, at times, to be cosmic in magnitude.

However one interprets the fateful events of September 11, 2001, one thing is clear. The world changed forever on that day. This change poses a serious challenge both for (non-Muslim) Westerners and for Muslims. Is it possible to “depolarize” the world and to build a bridge between “the West” and “the world of Islam” in the aftermath of 9/11? Reflection on this crucial question needs to recall the philosopher George Santayana’s insight that those who do not remember the past and know their history are condemned to repeat it. In particular, we need to be aware of the West’s long history of negative imaging and stereotyping of Muslims and Islam.

Edward Said has ably documented how Muslims, Arabs, and Islam have been misrepresented persistently by “Orientalists.” Although Said may have succeeded in discrediting the term *Orientalist*, the aforesaid Orientalists have played a major part in shaping Western perceptions of Muslims, Arabs, and Islam. Their mind-set, exhibited by many media “experts” and non-Muslim academics such as Bernard Lewis (writing about “Muslim rage”) and Samuel Huntington (writing about “the clash of civilizations”), is similar to that of the non-Muslim detractors of Islam in earlier times. In such an environment, bridge building between Muslims and non-Muslim Americans has become a most challenging task, one that is more vital today than ever before.

All too often two key shortcomings hinder interreligious dialogue: first, inadequate distinctions are made between the fundamental teachings of a religion and the cultural practices of its adherents; second, invidious comparisons are made between the highest ideals and best practices of one’s own religion and the worst features of another religion. Given the persistent demonization of Islam in the United States and other parts of

the world since September 11, it is evident to me that any serious effort to engage in authentic dialogue with Muslims must start with a review of normative Islamic—or Qur’anic—teachings on religious and ethical pluralism, rather than with perceptions of popular Muslim culture. Muslims regard the Qur’an as the highest source of authority. Therefore, I focus on identifying those major teachings of the Qur’an that are relevant in this context, particularly those passages referring to interaction among the *Ahl al-Kitab*, or “People of the Book”: Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

The cardinal principle of Islam is belief in the absolute oneness of God, or *Tawhid*. In the opening chapter of the Qur’an, *Al-Fatiha*, God, is described as *Ar-Rahman* (the Most Merciful), *Ar-Rahim* (the Most Gracious), and *Rabb al-‘alamin* (the Lord of all the peoples and universes). As noted by Fathi Osman, in the Qur’an God is related not to any particular place or people but to all creation.<sup>1</sup> The Qur’an affirms that God “cares for all creatures” (2:268). As numerous verses testify, its message is universal (25:1, 36:69–70, 38:87, 81:27–28). The Qur’an also affirms the universality of the prophet Muhammad’s mission.<sup>2</sup>

Verses such as the following express the nonexclusive spirit of Islam, an often-repeated teaching of the Qur’an:

Verily, those who have attained to faith (in this divine writ), as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians—all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds—shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. (2:62)

Indeed, everyone who surrenders his whole being unto God, and is a doer of good withal, shall have his reward with his Sustainer; and all such need have no fear, and neither shall they grieve. (2:112)

Be conscious of the Day on which you shall be brought back unto God, whereupon every human being shall be repaid in full for what he has earned, and none shall be wronged. (2:281)

Since God is the universal creator who sends guidance to all humanity, Muslims are commanded by the Qur’an to affirm (a) the divine message given to all the previous prophets and (b) the continuity of Islam with previous revelations and prophets. Muslims are also expressly forbidden

to make a distinction among the prophets, as can be seen from the following verses:

Say: "We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed to Moses and Jesus, and that which has been vouchsafed to all the [other] prophets by their Sustainer: we make no distinction between any of them. And it is unto Him that we surrender ourselves." (2:136)

Step by step has He bestowed upon thee from on high this divine writ, setting forth the truth which confirms whatever there remains [of earlier revelations]: for it is He who has bestowed from on high the Torah and the Gospel aforetime as a guidance to mankind, and it is He who has bestowed (upon man) the standard by which to discern the true from the false. (3:13)

Say: "We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed by their Sustainer unto Moses and Jesus and all the [other] prophets: we make no distinction between any of them. And unto Him do we surrender ourselves." (3:84)

Behold, We have inspired thee [O Prophet] just as We inspired Noah and all the Prophets after him—as We inspired Abraham, and Ishmael. And Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendants including Jesus and Job, and Jonah, and Aaron, and Solomon; and as We vouchsafed unto David a book of divine wisdom; and [We inspired other] apostles whom We have mentioned to thee ere this, as well as apostles whom We have not mentioned to thee; and as God spoke His Word unto Moses: (We sent all these) apostles as heralds of glad tidings and as warners, so that men might have no excuse before God after (the coming of) these apostles: and God is indeed almighty, wise. (4:163)

In matters of faith, He has ordained for you that which He enjoined upon Noah—and into which We gave thee [O Muhammad] insight through revelation—as well as that which We had enjoined upon Abraham, and

Moses, and Jesus: steadfastly uphold the (true) faith, and do not break up your unity therein. (42:13)

One major reason why the prophet Abraham is so important in the Islamic tradition is that he symbolizes Qur'anic teachings regarding the unity of all believers. Not only is he the prophet most often mentioned in the Qur'an after Muhammad, but he is also regarded in a significant way as the first *muslim*—a term signifying total submission to God. The Qur'an states that "Abraham was neither a 'Jew' nor a 'Christian,' but was one who surrendered himself unto God; and he was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him" (3:67). The Qur'an regards Abraham as a model monotheist who was *haneef* (true in faith). Referring to him as *khaleel Allah* (a friend of God), the Qur'an asks rhetorically, "And who could be better in faith than he who surrenders his whole being unto God and is a doer of good withal, and follows the creed of Abraham and turns away from all that is false—seeing that God exalted Abraham with His love?" (4:125).

According to the Qur'an, Abraham's spirit enabled Muslims (and other believers in God) to become witnesses for humankind: "And strive hard in God's cause with all the striving that is due to Him: it is He who has elected you [to carry His message], and has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains to] religion, [and made you follow] the creed of your forefather Abraham. It is He who has named you—in bygone times as well as in this [divine writ]—'those who have surrendered themselves to God,' so that the Apostle might bear witness to truth before you, and that you might bear witness to it before all mankind" (22:78).

Among the God-given rights strongly affirmed by the Qur'an, the following are particularly pertinent in the context of religious and ethical pluralism:

*The Right to Life:* Upholding the sanctity and absolute value of human life, the Qur'an says: "Do not take any human being's life [the life] which God has declared to be sacred—otherwise than in (the pursuit of) justice: this has He enjoined upon you so that you might use your reason" (6:151). Emphasizing that the life of each individual is comparable to that of an entire community, the Qur'an also states: "We ordain[ed] unto the children of Israel that if anyone slays a human being—unless it be [in punishment] for murder or for spreading corruption on earth—it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; whereas if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all mankind" (5:32).

*The Right to Dignity:* The Qur'an categorically and emphatically proclaims, "We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam" (17:70). Therefore, the humanity of all persons, regardless of other differentiating factors including religious belief, must be respected by Muslims.

*The Right to Free Belief in Religion:* The well-known Qur'anic proclamation that "there shall be no coercion in matters of faith" guarantees freedom of religion and worship (2:256). According to fundamental Islamic teaching, non-Muslims living in Muslim territories should have the freedom to follow their own faith traditions without fear or harassment. Numerous Qur'anic passages clearly state that the responsibility of the prophet Muhammad is to communicate the message of God but not to compel anyone to believe. For instance: "And say: 'The truth [has now come] from your Sustainer: let, then, him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it'" (18:29). The Qur'an also makes clear that God will judge human beings not on the basis of what they profess but on the basis of their belief and righteous conduct (2:62, 5:69).

The Qur'an regards diversity of peoples and religious and ethical perspectives as a part of God's design. In a remarkable passage in which reference is made to the unity and diversity of humankind, the Qur'an states: "O men! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware" (49:13). This verse makes clear that one of the basic purposes of diversity is to encourage dialogue among different peoples and also that a person's ultimate worth is determined not by what group he or she belongs to but by his or her degree of God-consciousness.

Additional Qur'anic verses attest that a plurality of religions and ethical viewpoints is sanctioned by God:

Every community faces a direction of its own, of which He (God) is the focal point. Vie, therefore, with one another in doing good works. Wherever you may be, God will gather you unto Himself: for verily, God has the power to will anything. (2:148)

Unto every one of you have We appointed a (different) law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but (He willed it otherwise) in order to test you by means of

what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ. (5:48)

Having lived in the West for the greater part of my life, I am all too painfully aware that many people in the West—including many Christians and Jews who, like Muslims, are “People of the Book”—see Islam as a religion spread by the sword and Muslims as religious fanatics who are zealously committed to waging “holy war” against non-Muslims or even against nonconforming Muslims. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the historical roots of these perceptions, I stress that my Muslim identity means not turning away in hatred or anger from those who regard Muslims as “adversaries” but engaging in dialogue with them in a spirit of amity and goodwill, as prescribed by the Qur’an in the following verse: “Do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner—unless it be such as are bent on evildoing—and say: ‘We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you, for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that we [all] surrender ourselves’” (29:46).

The ethical imperative central to Qur’anic teaching and the normative Islamic worldview is to enjoin the good—*al-ma’ruf*—and forbid the evil—*al-munkar*. Within the parameters of this categorical imperative, Islam is open to accepting and cooperating with any religious or ethical perspective.

#### CONTRIBUTORS’ QUESTIONS FOR RIFFAT HASSAN

1. All three Western monotheisms are based on a revealed “book” or scripture (Tanakh, New Testament, Qur’an). None of these religions depends on its scripture alone; interpretive traditions are normative as well. Is it really possible to go back directly to the foundational scripture (in your case, the Qur’an) and yet remain true to the religious tradition as it has been shaped over history and come down to us? Is not any attempt to go back directly to the founding document (of any of our traditions) in fact a proposal for a radical reform that introduces a break with a religion as we have received it? Can such a “return” succeed, as you seem to imply, in closing the gap between the founding

teachings and the “cultural practices” evident in the Islamic world over the centuries?

2. You have outlined Qur’anic views that embrace pluralism; can you identify values shared by the three Abrahamic religions that could form a basis for needed dialogue, particularly in contexts that include the Holocaust and twenty-first-century violence and counterviolence that implicate all three of the major monotheistic traditions? What are the main issues of difference that such dialogue needs to engage?

#### RESPONSE BY RIFFAT HASSAN

Jews, Christians, and Muslims do not understand the meaning of “revelation” in identical ways. While Jews and Christians take their respective scriptures to be “divinely inspired,” the human authorship of these texts is not denied. The vast majority of Muslims, however, do not regard the Qur’an as a “divinely inspired” text that was written by one or more human authors. They staunchly believe that the Qur’an is the Word of God “revealed” by the archangel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad, who transmitted it, without change or error, to others. This process of revelation and transmission took place over a period of almost twenty-three years. As written by officially designated scribes, the Qur’an was completed during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad, who is believed to have recited the Qur’an in its entirety in the last Ramadan of his life.

I have noted that the Qur’an is the highest authority in Islam. The text is distinct from, and has primacy over, what may be called “the Islamic tradition.” Over many generations, however, Muslims have interpreted the Qur’an through the lens of the cultural milieus in which “the Islamic tradition” developed. As the central point of reference in Islamic theology and religious thought, the Qur’an has played pivotal roles at critical times in Muslim history. For instance, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when much of the Muslim world was under colonial rule, the rallying cry of the Muslim modernist reformers and would-be liberators was “Back to the Qur’an, forward with jihad.” This admonition implied that to identify Islam’s core ethical principles and values and to get Muslim history back on track, Muslims should return to the foundation of their faith: the Qur’an. Having done so, they had to exert their mental capabilities (jihad) to figure out how best to implement those principles and values in the current context.



Should the modernist movement that advocated a return to the Qur'an be seen as calling for radical reform entailing a break with traditional religion? This question can be answered both positively and negatively. The modernist movement was radical in that it did not regard tradition as sacrosanct and challenged the claim of the conservative *ulema* (scholars) regarding the "finality" of the popular schools of Muslim law. Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), arguably the most outstanding Muslim thinker since Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273), believed it necessary "to tear off from Islam the hard crust which has immobilized an essentially dynamic outlook on life, and to rediscover the original verities of freedom, equality, and solidarity with a view to rebuild our moral, social, and political ideals out of their original simplicity and universality."<sup>3</sup> In another sense, however, the modernist movement was not radical. It did not aspire to break with the Islamic religious tradition but wanted a return to foundations that would free the tradition from fossilization and stagnation and make it live vibrantly again.

Elsewhere in my writings, I have discussed the discrepancy between normative Qur'anic teachings and the way women are treated in most Muslim cultures. As a feminist theologian and activist, I have found that the best hope for the empowerment of women in Muslim societies and communities lies in demonstrating in a compelling way that negative cultural ideas and attitudes toward women are not warranted by a correct reading of the Qur'anic text, a text that is highly affirming of women's rights and dignity. While patriarchy has colored most interpretations of women-related Qur'anic texts, I affirm that the Qur'an itself represents the justice and mercy of God and is free of cultural biases. I believe that as more and more Muslim women and men become aware of the non-patriarchal and compassion- and justice-centered teachings of the Qur'an, the gap between God's intentions and cultural practices will diminish.

In response to the second question posed to me, I list key ideas, beliefs, and values shared by the Abrahamic faiths, followed by a listing of differences among the three traditions. First, here are elements that can advance the needed dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims:

1. The three traditions share belief in the One God, who created all that exists. Since all human beings are created by One God, they are equal in terms of their creation.

2. According to Genesis 1, Adam was created in the image of God, and according to the Qur'an, God conferred dignity on all "children of Adam." These texts imply that, owing to its special status in God's creation, humanity has special responsibilities, namely, to be God's steward on earth.
3. The figure of Abraham is central to the three monotheistic faiths and is a powerful symbol of unity among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.
4. The prophets mentioned in the Hebrew Bible are recognized as such not only by Jews but also by Christians and Muslims. They are a connecting link among the three traditions.
5. Common to the three Abrahamic faiths is an ethical framework in which primary emphasis is placed on justice and compassion. Working collaboratively for the welfare of disadvantaged or marginalized people—something stressed by all three Abrahamic faiths—would make the interaction among Jews, Christians, and Muslims a solid basis for peace building.
6. Common to the three Abrahamic faiths is the imperative to be instruments of peace in the world. (The Qur'anic text, for example, claims that justice is a precondition for peace and, therefore, no genuine peace building can take place without a concurrent effort to create a just environment.)

With regard to the main issues of difference that dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims needs to engage, I wish to note that since the late 1970s I have been intensively and extensively engaged in interreligious dialogue among the three Abrahamic religions. While this dialogue/trialogue has contributed to my personal growth as a Muslim woman, theologian, scholar, teacher, and activist, I have not seen it making a visible difference "on the ground" in terms of relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims (Christians and Jews). Salient reasons for this outcome are that Muslims feel that in general Jews and Christians (a) lack adequate knowledge of Islam, (b) do not regard Islam as being on a par with Christianity and Judaism, and (c) expect that interreligious dialogue should be carried out on their terms (mostly Christian), which may be alien or even hostile to Muslims' experience and understanding of Islam.

Development of a sound methodology for interreligious dialogue among Muslims, Jews, and Christians is crucial. In my view, the following ideas should be central to this methodology:

1. Trialogue participants should have sound knowledge of the normative teachings of the three faiths.
2. Authentic dialogue cannot exist without mutual respect. Respect for Islam entails that its basic terms are understood and referred to correctly. It also entails that the meaning given to terms of central significance in Islam should be recognizable and acceptable to Muslims (*jihad*, for example, which is generally and often misleadingly translated as “holy war,” in fact refers to moral, intellectual, and spiritual struggle for the development of the self and the community).
3. In the modern period, numerous Muslim thinkers and activists sought to reform aspects of the Islamic tradition. These reformers were instrumental in liberating the Muslim world from Western imperialism and colonialism by the mid-twentieth century. However, colonialism was followed by neocolonialism in a number of Muslim countries, and new reform initiatives were undertaken by progressive Muslims in areas such as women’s rights, literacy programs, poverty eradication, and economic development. Interreligious trialogue would be enhanced if these initiatives were better recognized and supported by Western countries, especially the United States. Unfortunately, these steps have been largely ignored while attention has focused on extremist views.
4. Social transformation can come only from within; it cannot be imposed from without by force. Strengthening the moderates in Muslim societies seems to have become the agenda of many governments in today’s world.
5. A course of action that would be effective in enhancing interreligious dialogue would be to provide leadership training for select groups of Muslims and non-Muslims. These groups could be educated in particular regarding the normative teachings of Islam and the ways in which these teachings are being violated by a number of cultural practices.

Currently, a widespread feeling among Muslims is that Islam is misunderstood and unfairly maligned. A new methodology for interreligious dialogue, one that embraces the points mentioned above, can encourage Muslims, Christians, and Jews to address difficult problems collaboratively and constructively.

## NOTES

- 1 Fathi Osman, *Concepts of the Qur'an: A Topical Reading*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Multimedia Vera International Publications, 1999), 23.
- 2 For instance. See Qur'an 34:28.
- 3 Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore, Pakistan: Kitab Bhavan, 1962), 156.

"Normative Islamic (Qur'anic) Teachings on Pluralism: Reflections on the 'The People of the Book'," in *Encountering the Stranger: A Jewish Christian Muslim Trialogue*, edited by Leonard Grob and John K. Roth, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2012, pp. 137-148