

**“IS ISLAM A FORCE FOR GOOD OR BAD?”**

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Call to Gather from the Qur'an

And I have created peoples and tribes so that they could get to know each other.<sup>1</sup>

Reading from *The Trouble with Islam Today* by Irshad Manji  
*Manji writes the book as a letter to her fellow Muslims.*

In this letter, I'm asking questions from which we can no longer hide. Why are we all being held hostage by what's happening between the Palestinians and the Israelis? What's the stubborn streak of anti-Semitism in Islam? Who is the real colonizer of Muslims—America or Arabia? Why are we squandering the talents of women, fully half of God's creation? How can we be so sure that homosexuals deserve ostracism—or death—when the Koran states that everything God made is “excellent”? Of course, the Koran states more than that, but what's our excuse for reading the Koran literally when it's so contradictory and ambiguous?

Is that a heart attack you're having? Make it fast. Because if we don't speak out against the imperialists within Islam, these guys will walk away with the show. And their path leads to a dead end of more vitriol, more violence, more poverty, more exclusion. Is this the justice we seek for the world that God has leased to us? If it's not, then why don't more of us say so publicly?...

Through our screaming self-pity and conspicuous silences, we Muslims are conspiring against ourselves. We're in crisis, and we're dragging the rest of the world with us. If ever there was a moment for an Islamic reformation, it's now. For the love of God, what are we doing about it?

You may wonder who I am to talk to you this way. I am a Muslim Refusenik. That doesn't mean I refuse to be a Muslim; it simply means I refuse to join an army of automatons in the name of Allah...

When (the Prophet Muhammad) was asked to define religion, he reportedly replied that religion is the way we conduct ourselves toward others. A fine definition—simple without being simplistic. And yet, by that definition, how we Muslims behave, not in theory but in actuality, is

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. 217.

Islam. Which means our complacency is Islam. It also means the power is ours to restore Islam's better angels, those who care about the human rights of women and religious minorities...

By writing this open letter, I'm not implying that other religions are problem-free. Hardly. The difference is, libraries abound in books about the trouble with Christianity. There's no shortage of books about the trouble with Judaism. We Muslims have a lot of catching up to do in the dissent department.

Whose permission are we waiting for?<sup>2</sup>

### Sermon

I have to tell you that I seriously hesitated about taking on this topic. This is a highly volatile topic. I can tell always tell when my sermon topics are volatile because I start getting the congregational response *before* I actually give the sermon!

I also hesitated about using the title "Is Islam a Force For Good or Bad?" I don't want to fuel the Islam-bashing that continues to lurk just below—and sometimes above—the surface of our culture. But in the end I decided to use the title because it clearly and succinctly gets at the heart of what I want to explore today.

It is important to say that the question in the title is one I can imagine posing about Christianity or Buddhism or—more to the point—Unitarian Universalism. Is Christianity or Buddhism or Unitarian Universalism good or bad? I think these are fair questions to ask about any religion, and about religion in general. (I will address this latter question in a sermon in the fall.)

All of this begs another question: Is it acceptable to critique other people's religions? In this case, is it okay for me—a non-Muslim—to critique Islam? I suspect that many Unitarian Universalists and many multiculturalists would answer no: it's not acceptable to critique religions other than ones own. As a UU and an avowed multiculturalist myself, this gives me pause. What's more, there are some very good reasons for saying it's not okay to critique other people's religions. For example, it is abundantly clear that unfair, ignorant, malicious attacks on other's religions have greased the wheels of oppression and war for a very long time.

But in spite of all this, I believe that it is possible to critique other people's religions. I believe it is also desirable to do so. Doing so is a necessary part of a mature multiculturalism. You see, a mature multiculturalism is not an "anything goes" relativism. Instead, a mature multiculturalism requires real, honest dialogue. This dialogue should include tentative and skillfully asked questions and observations about that which seems inadequate or destructive in another's religion. A prerequisite for this is that we seek knowledge first so that our observations and questions are not based on ignorance.

Why should we ask tough questions of one another? Because in doing so we help keep each other honest and growing. Tough questions and critical

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<sup>2</sup> Irshad Manji, *The Trouble With Islam Today* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003), pp. 2-4.

thinking can bring the best out of each one of us. This is a significant part of the magic here at the Fellowship.

So I believe that asking tough questions of Islam does not in and of itself make us anti-Muslim. As Fred Halliday asserts in his book *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation*, it is not inherently anti-Muslim to question Sudan's or Iran's human rights record, or terrorist acts committed by Islamist organizations, or the practice of removing the clitoris of girls, or verses in the Qur'an sanctioning rape in marriage or the authority of men over women.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, it is not inherently anti-Christian to ask about Christianity's possible connection to sexism, slavery, homophobia and environmental degradation. And it's not inherently anti-UU to ask about our faith's mixed record on slavery, or the continued relative absence of racial and economic diversity in most of our congregations, or our tendency over the years to be excessively heady at the expense of the heart. As long as these questions are asked respectfully, they are all fair questions.

Maybe here is the key to mature multicultural dialogue: how we ask questions of one another. We need to ask the questions in a fair and respectful and sensitive way, and then we need to actually listen to the response. If we ask these questions in a mean-spirited way or in a way that is simply an attack and allows for no real dialogue, we are not engaging in true multicultural dialogue. We also need to remember that the conclusions we come to might be wrong.

So, is Islam good or bad? Has it made the world a better, more just and peaceful place, or has it made it worse?

For many a good place to start is with the Qur'an, the authoritative holy book that lies at the center of Islam. I think it is fairly easy to find passages in the Qur'an that support either conclusion. So, for example, we have the quotation from the Qur'an with which we opened the service: "And I have created peoples and tribes so that they could get to know each other."<sup>4</sup> What a beautiful line! This could be the motto for multiculturalism. Here's a passage with a similar theme: "To each of you We have given a law and a way of life. If God would have desired He could surely have made you into a single people—professing one faith [and following one law]. But He wished to try and test you by that which He has given each of you. So excel in good deed. To Him you will all return in the end, when He will resolve that upon which you disagreed."<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, there are these words from the Prophet Muhammad's farewell address in March 632: "I was ordered to fight all men until they say 'There is no god but Allah.'" In his book *Islamic Imperialism: A History*, Efraim Karsh from the University of London powerfully traces this one line through Islamic history from the Prophet Muhammad to Osama bin Laden. Saladin, the famed Muslim general and ruler from the twelfth century, said, "I shall cross this sea to their islands to pursue them until there remains no one on the face of the earth who does not acknowledge Allah." Ayatollah Khomeini echoed the line in 1979 when he said, "We will export our revolution throughout the world...until

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<sup>3</sup> Halliday, p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> Halliday, p. 217.

<sup>5</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), p. 211.

the calls ‘there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah’ are echoed over the world.” And then there are these words from Osama bin Laden in November 2001: “I was ordered to fight the people until they say there is no god but Allah, and his prophet (is) Muhammad.”<sup>6</sup>

I have long been perplexed by the confusing and contradictory lines from the Qur’an that are thrown about. I’ve wanted to find the truth about the Qur’an: at its heart, is it peaceful, or is it an inciter of war and oppression? My conclusion is that it’s both. It contains passages that could be used to support or justify almost any proposition or action. Sound like any other holy book? Of course: the Bible, which we know can be and is used to justify all sorts of things, from slavery to Abolition, from the rankest sexism or horrible homophobia to full inclusion and justice for all people. Martin Luther King, Jr. used the words of the Bible to galvanize the most significant movement for justice and equality in our nation’s history; his segregationist opponents quoted different passages from the same book. In Sri Lanka there are sacred Buddhist scriptures that contain the most sublime messages of peace, and lines about Buddhist monks leading the people into victorious battles against the country’s Hindu minority. Hindu scriptures have been used in India by Gandhi to bring people together in the non-violent movement to oust the British, and to bring Hindus together to attack Muslim mosques. As Irshad Manji concludes, the Qur’an “is not transparently anything except enigmatic.”<sup>7</sup> The same can probably be said about just about any set of scriptures.

Is the Qur’an—or the Bible or the Hindu or Buddhist scriptures—good or bad? Well, I guess the answer is both: it depends on what verses you use. And it depends on how you use them.

In the end, though, I don’t really think scriptures are a valid basis for judging a religion. I agree with the Prophet Mohammad’s assertion that religion is the way we conduct ourselves toward others. This is what matters—not the words on which we act. This means for us Unitarian Universalists we don’t get a free pass because we don’t really have any scriptures we all agree on. Darn! That would have been a nice idea. No, it’s our actions that matter. How do we live our faith in this world?

So, is Islam good or bad? We have to look at the actions of Muslims. I think the answer to this question is similar to the question about whether the Qur’an is good or bad: it depends on how the religion is practiced. Because religion is always in our imperfect human hands regardless of whether its origins are divine, I think this is true of all religions.

There are some tough questions that we need to ask our Muslim brothers and sisters. These are the same questions Irshad Manji and moderates like Khaled Abou El Fadl, a professor at the UCLA School of Law, ask of their fellow Muslims. Questions like: regardless of the contradictory words about the role of women in the Qur’an, why is it that in many Muslim cultures, women have considerably less power than men? I believe treating women as second class citizens—a status that causes great suffering and even violence against women

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<sup>6</sup> Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Manji, pp. 35-36.

not to mention tremendous loss of potential—is morally and ethically wrong. For me, this is a universal statement. Islam needs to wrestle with this.

I am also troubled by prejudice and hostility against gays and lesbians and others with non-heterosexual orientations in much of Muslim culture. This hostility in many cases keeps people in the closet at great personal cost and in some cases has resulted in the imprisonment, torture and even execution of some GLBT people.

Another area that calls for tough questioning is the deep and seemingly intractable divide between the Sunni and Shi'ite sects in Islam—a divide that goes way back almost to the beginning of Islam. As we see in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, this divide continues to have a catastrophic impact resulting in incalculable human suffering.

And what about the apparent domination of Islam by the Wahhabi sect based in Saudi Arabia? Wahhabism is a Sunni sect that is based on the teachings of the eighteenth century evangelist Muhammad bin 'Abd Wahhab. These teachings are opposed to mysticism, rationalism, and Shi'ism. The Wahhabi interpretation of Islam seems to me to tend toward narrowness and exclusion as well as hostility toward non-Muslims and also non-Wahhabi Muslims. Wahhabi Islam seems particularly hostile to women and other minorities. Combined with the money and political influence of Saudi Arabia in the twentieth century, the Wahhabis have arguably been the biggest influence in Islam over the past hundred years. Khaled Abou El Fadl from UCLA argues that the Wahhabis have substituted the culture of Saudi Arabia for Islam and have reinvented Islam “on the basis of a new immorality.”<sup>8</sup> The role of the Wahhabis and other “puritans” as Abou El Fadl calls other Wahhabi-like sects is a good topic to explore.

And most significantly, there's the question of violence. Violence aided and abetted by religion is nothing new. Religion can bring out the worst as well as the best in people. Nevertheless, the extent to which Islam is used—or misused—to incite violence is significant and on the rise and to noteworthy to ignore. Efforts to make all people Muslims with force if necessary, violence against unarmed civilians, terrorism in the name of Islam: these all pose difficult questions for Muslims.

To be fair, we non-Muslims in the West have to look at our own part in all these problems. We have contributed much to these problems. The tragic legacy of colonialism, our apparently unquenchable greed for oil that makes us do all sorts of morally reprehensible things, and the unholy alliances we have made with Muslim tyrants all have undoubtedly fueled the problems within Islam. For example, first the British and now our American alliance with the autocratic royal family in Saudi Arabia has clearly strengthened the voice of the Wahhabis within Islam. Here's another example: the exacerbation of the Sunni/Shi'a split by our continuing occupation of Iraq. We also need to look at the possibility that we have an insatiable need for an enemy. It seems that with the demise of communism, we have looked to Islam to provide our next great enemy.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Abou El Fadl, pp. 45-72, 95.

<sup>9</sup> Halliday, p. 113.

Besides examining how we continue to fuel the shadow side of Islam, what else can we non-Muslims in the West do? We can seek to understand Islam rather than remaining ignorant about it. Professor Abou El Fadl observes that “nothing helps the puritans’ cause as much as Western ignorance, prejudice, and hate.”<sup>10</sup> Our ignorance, prejudice and hatred fuels the mission of the Islamic extremists.

One very important thing for us to understand is that Islam is not monolithic. All Muslims do not walk in lock-step with one another. Not all Muslims are Wahhabis or Wahhabist sympathizers or other puritans. Moderates and liberals are present within Islam. In fact, many suggest that the vast majority of Muslims worldwide are moderate. Khaled Abou El Fadl and Irshad Manji urge moderates and liberals to speak up. Writes Abou El Fadl: “Puritans speak loudly with acts of violence. Moderates have to speak more loudly with acts of peace.”<sup>11</sup> Manji encourages loud and insistent dissent as well as self-reflection. Both Manji and Abou El Fadl believe that a great battle is now underway for the soul of Islam. Most Wahhabists wouldn’t disagree with this statement. When we fail to recognize this and ignorantly assume that all Muslims are puritanical fundamentalists, we aid their cause.

So let’s recognize that there are moderates and liberals within Islam. In every continent and every place they are working—sometimes at great risk—to save the soul of Islam. The other thing we can do is seek to be allies with the moderates. This battle for the soul of Islam ultimately will be decided by Muslims and not non-Muslims. But we can at least provide some support and much needed encouragement to the moderates, and not make their work harder.

As we fervently believe, we are all inter-related on this little blue planet spinning in space. What happens in Islam will affect all of us. What we do will affect Islam.

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<sup>10</sup> Abou El Fadl, p. 286.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.