

Islam Is More Than a Religion

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On several occasions when trying to explain the true nature of Islam, I have emphasized the fact that this faith is much more than a religion. Unfortunately, due to the ignorance that prevails in North America about the history and tenets of Islam, our culture is incapable of grasping this reality. Early in February 2004, the case of Ryan Anderson, a convert to Islam, came to my attention. It was alleged that he had tried to get in touch with representatives of Al-Qaeda. When a newsman asked *“if recently ‘detained’ National Guard soldier Ryan Anderson—who allegedly tried to pass on sensitive information to al Qaeda—was a Muslim, the unit spokesman, Lt. Col. Stephen Barger replied, “Religious preferences are an individual right and responsibility, and I really can’t get into it.”*

It is not my intention to meddle with U.S. Army regulations that deal with a soldier who was involved in unlawful activities. However, my concern is to analyze the statement that *“Religious preferences are an individual right and responsibility, and I really can’t get into it.”* Certainly, such words would be relevant had the recruit been of the Christian, or Jewish, or Buddhist, or Hindu faith. Unfortunately, they don’t apply to a convert to Islam. Both ancient and contemporaneous history teaches us that Muslims carry with their faith a political baggage. Whether it was political correctness, or plain ignorance of Islam that dictated the response of the army officer, I am not sure. Anyhow, his claim that a “religious preference” (when it was a specifically Islamic one) had no relevance to the case must not be left unchallenged.

Regardless of what political correctness dictates, the fact remains: **Islam Is More Than a Religion.** Islam is one of the major world religions, however, unlike the other world faiths, Islam is more than religion. This fact escapes the average American since he, or she, understands religion as a set of beliefs and a code of ethics that govern the life of individuals and their families. Unlike Europeans, North Americans, have had very little experience with Islam and Muslims. During the modern era, several European nations colonized large areas of the Muslim world, thus gaining a direct knowledge of Islam. During the early and late Middle Ages, it was Muslims who colonized several European countries. The Arab-Islamic conquest of Spain began in 710, and lasted until 1492! Most of Central and Eastern Europe came under Islamic rule for hundreds of years. The first American military encounter with Muslims occurred soon after independence. The pirates of Tripoli terrorized maritime trade in the Mediterranean, so the U.S. Navy had to deal with them. Then, early in the 19th century, American missionaries entered several Middle East provinces of the Ottoman Turkish Empire. They built schools and hospitals, and played a big role in the renaissance of Arab culture. As a result of their presence, national Protestant churches were also formed.

It was after World War II that the United States got very involved in the Muslim world. Oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia in the 1930s, and U.S. oil companies were the first to develop and market it. When the French and British pulled out of the area in the aftermath of World War II, it was the United States that sought to fill the vacuum.

Now, in the aftermath of 9/11/2001, we need to fully realize that Islam is much more than a religion. A leading expert on the history of the Arabs and of Islam was the late Lebanese-American Philip Hitti, who taught at Princeton University for almost fifty years. His book, **Islam: a Way of Life** has three parts. *Part One, Islam As Religion; Part II, Islam As State; and Part III, Islam As Culture.* This development of Islam into a “way of life,” is rooted in its specific history, a history that is inextricably wedded to its founder, Muhammad. Born in Mecca in 570 AD, he began preaching the absolute unity of God at the age of forty. In 622, he migrated with his some of his followers to Medina. There, he acted both as Prophet and Statesman. By 632, the year of his death, he had conquered Mecca, and gained the submission of the warring tribes of Arabia. His successors, the Caliphs, began the conquests of the Persian and Byzantine Empires. By 732, the new Arab-Islamic Empire stretched from Spain to India!

After the Mongolian invasion of the Middle East, and the fall of Baghdad in 1252, the newly Islamized Turks took over the cause of Islam and continued its conquests. In 1453, they brought an end to the Byzantine Empire when they overran Constantinople, and changed its name to Istanbul. The Ottoman Turks colonized vast territories of Central and Eastern Europe. They laid their first siege of Vienna in 1529, only twelve years after Martin Luther began the Reformation! Had the Turks succeeded to conquer Austria, the history of the West would have been radically different!

An objective study of the rise and expansion of Islam points to the fact that it spread primarily through the futuhat, i.e., conquests. In fact, Islam regards wars of conquest, as an essential part of the faith, calling them, Jihad. At this point, I must add that I do not minimize the fact that Islam is a religion, like other religions. It is a theistic religion, teaching that God is both the Creator and the Governor of the world. It has its religious rites and houses of worship, as well as a specific code of ethics. On the other hand, Islam has a political component that is essential for its proper functioning, and the well-being of the community of believers. Muslims must live under “Shari’a,” the Islamic law, and their rulers are expected to enforce it. Since, Islam is religion, politics, and culture in one entity Muslims carry with them the ideal of ultimately establishing an Islamic regime where the rule of Allah takes a concrete shape in the here and now.

As a result of this monolithic view of life, and the theocratic motif that is of the essence of Islam, it has not fostered any sort of societal pluralism among the subject peoples. Islam brought to an end to the existence of the church in North Africa. In the Middle East, the one-time Christian majority has over the years become a small and marginalized minority.

Before the 1950s, Muslims lived in exclusively Islamic countries. As of the middle of the 20th century, millions of Muslims have settled in Western Europe and North America. This is a completely new phenomenon. By now, Muslims have achieved a high degree of visibility, and have begun to demand representation among both governmental and non-governmental institutions. However, they are reluctant to admit that their faith possesses a political core that does not recognize any separation between “church” and state, or religion and politics. When Ryan Anderson, a convert to Islam, espouses a political agenda and begins to act according to its directives, our PC-dominated culture insists that Islam is simply a religious faith. This attitude is extremely short-sighted, and will have serious consequences in all matters that relate to Homeland Security.

Finally, I would like to illustrate my thesis that Islam is much more than a religion, by referring to a study published under the title of, **The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam**, *From Jihad to Dhimmitude*. The author, Bat Ye'or, was born in Egypt, and was member of a sizable Jewish community that had lived in that country for more than two millennia. The Jewish population of Egypt dwindled rapidly after the birth of Israel in 1948. Bat Ye'or (a Hebrew name that means, Daughter of the Nile), migrated to France and contributed several works on the topic of **"Dhimmis"** (Jews and Christian) under Islam.

Professor Jacques Ellul, of the University Of Bordeaux, France, wrote the Foreword to the book. He reminds us that an intrinsic part of the Islamic faith is jihad. While modern Islamic scholars have endeavored to re-define jihad, claiming that it is primarily a "struggle with self," Jacques Ellul points out that history proves that jihad means primarily, war against non-Muslims.

"But a major, twofold fact transforms the jihad into something quite different from traditional wars... The twofold factor is first the religious nature, then the fact that war has become an institution (and no longer an 'event'). In Islam, however, jihad is a religious obligation. It forms part of the duties that the believer must fulfill. It is Islam's normal path to expansion."

"Hence, the second important specific characteristic is that the jihad is an institution, and not an event, that is to say it is part of the normal functioning of the Muslim world. The conquered populations change status (they become dhimmis), and the shari'a tends to be put into effect integrally, overthrowing the former law of the country. The conquered territories do not simply change 'owners.' Rather they are brought into a binding collective (religious) ideology --- with the exception of the dhimmi condition --- and are controlled by a highly perfected administrative machinery." Pp. 18, 19

Bat Ye'or describes the effects of the institution of Jihad on the native populations in these words:

"In the lands conquered by jihad ... the Peoples of the Book formed majorities, among whom the Arabs of the first wave of Islamization and the Turks of the second wave were in the minority. Presumably the complex and little-known processes that transformed those majorities into minorities covered some three or four centuries for each wave of Islamization. By contracting it, the expression 'religious minorities' reverses a chronological process that had spread over centuries, whose result --- the minority condition --- is taken as its starting point." P. 243

To write and speak honestly about the topic of Islam is not easy. It goes against the spirit of multiculturalism and pluralism that pervade our modern Western civilization. We believe in the freedom of religion, and the US Constitution guarantees this freedom to citizens and residents alike. This is a cornerstone of our way of life. But what if a specific religion brings to America a political baggage that is regarded by its adherents as part and parcel of their faith, but which happens to be incompatible with our modus vivendi? Is it wrong to face this reality and discuss it openly, without being charged with racial or religious prejudice? To ignore this subject is tantamount to burying our heads in the sand, and to invite unforeseen troubles in the future.