Reaching Out to Muslim Clerics: Can We Build Bridges and Strengthen Moderate Voices in Islam?

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On 11 September 2001, four planes were hijacked in the United States. Two would destroy buildings at the financial hub of the country in New York City, another would attack and damage the military heart in Washington, and the fourth would be brought down heroically by its passengers. The sheer scope of the destruction, and the huge numbers of victims who were killed when these attacks took place, created stupefaction and anger throughout the civilized world. This essay shall focus on a survey of the problems affecting Muslim communities around the globe, and will examine some moderate solutions that can respond to Islamic needs and concerns. This topic is closely linked to the problems of radical Islamism and international terrorism, which were so graphically displayed on September 11.

When it became apparent that Islamist networks had carried out the attacks of 9/11, new light was shed on Professor Samuel Huntington's theory, first enunciated in 1993, of the "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the Western world. Huntington believed that the world's geopolitical phenotype had radically changed. The long-standing antagonism between Eastern and Western political blocs, and between the Northern and Southern economic blocs—in other words, the confrontations between capitalism and communism and between the rich and the poor—no longer exists. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the following reunification of Germany clearly demonstrated communism's failure. Frances Fukuyama talked about these events as indicating the end of a major chapter of mankind's history. According to Huntington, the "new world order" would now face a crisis: unconventional conflicts in which political Islam would play a major role, hurling violence and aggression against both the West and the so-called moderate Muslim states. Indeed, on this one day, 11 September 2001, we can say that the face of the world changed. We must now vigorously question the political and individual strategies of both Muslims and non-Muslims, who have to ask themselves if they are capable of changing their perspectives and learning from the lessons that terrorism teaches us.

One could argue that Huntington's basic ideas are not accurate. The civilizations that he mentions have not remained static, and it is not reasonable to say that they retain the powers they once held. Mohammad Abdu and the Iranian Al-Afghani, two of the best known Muslim thinkers during the period known as *An-Nahda*, which represented a renaissance in Islam in the early twentieth century, believed that several Western intellectual developments have decisively affected other cultures. Among these de-

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velopments are the growth of democracy; the stunning progress in the natural sciences and medicine; Darwinian theories focusing on the evolution of species; and the Freudian revolution, which revealed the role of the subconscious. Indeed, ever since Copernicus, the Earth has been revealed to be a simple object in the cosmos, not the center of the universe. Darwin revealed humans as a simple point on the spectrum of the evolution of species. World civilizations are now following the Western path in many respects, and these Western concepts are becoming universal—because, according to Darwin, they are irrefutable and true. And yet certain segments of Islam (and other faiths) hold on to outmoded views of the world and attempt to refute the Darwinian concept of evolution. They also refuse to recognize the equality of women, and try to impose restrictions on female activity and achievement under the guise of religion. This illustrates, frankly, their immature and neurotic attitude toward human sexuality. Clearly, this is not a clash of civilizations, as many Muslims refuse to subscribe to such an antiquated and violent world view. Rather, we are witnessing a growing gap between the modern world in which clear-sighted Muslims live and the world of the past—a medieval world, ruled by superstition and traditional prejudice. In this outmoded world, some mendacious leaders manipulate ignorant and poorly educated people for political reasons to believe that, to restore the ascendancy of Islam, they must return to the ways of their seventh-century ancestors. The classic division of the world between *Dar al-Harab* (literally, "house of war," a term used to refer to territory not under Muslim control) and *Dar al-Islam* feeds the anger of the jihadist movement and makes acts of violent aggression acceptable.

This conception of the division of the planet is both wrong and dangerous, and can lead to a misinterpretation of Islam. Islam forbids aggression or proselytizing through force. During his lifetime the Prophet was forced to defend the monotheistic religion of the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Islam. The Prophet was fighting against Arab tribalism and polytheism, and the early Muslims defended themselves through military force. Nevertheless, in the Arab city of Medina in 622, he promulgated a constitution that allowed Muslims, Jews, and Christians to live together in peace. Muhammad brought reconciliation and peace when he entered Mecca in 631. The Koran says in Sura 2 (*Al-Baqarah*), Verse 208: "All believers, all of you, enter in peace." Sura 8 (*Al-Anfal*), Verse 61, states: "If they move toward peace, then bow yourself toward peace and believe in God." And in Sura 2 (*Al-Baqarah*), Verse 143, the Koran reads, "Oh, God, you are peace and let us live in peace. He is the sovereign, the saint, the peace."

Peace is a name of God. The word *peace* is mentioned 136 times in the Koran, while the word *Harab* (or "war") is mentioned only six times. In this clearly articulated Islamic theological construction of *peace*, the term also means salvation. Peace is a cornerstone of belief and is linked with justice, tolerance, faith, and interreligious dialogue. Furthermore, the Koran instructs one to be fair and good to those who did not fight you for your faith or move you from your homes, and it makes clear that authentic Islam is a religion of peace, tolerance of debate, and moderation. The Arabic linguistic root "SLM" means "peace"—thus, *salaam*, or "peace." *Salama* is to put oneself into a state of peace; *Islam* is to be confident and submit oneself to God in order to stop a conflict and be at peace. Sura 2, verse 143 of the Koran states, "We made of you a bal-

anced community so you can be the witnesses of man." The "balanced community" is a community of Islam, and is far removed from the forms of extremist Islam that we see in some parts of the Muslim world today.

Islam was at its most prosperous and influential during its periods of moderation and open religious thought. During the era of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad (the second of two major Sunni dynasties of the Arab Empires), the traditions of science and philosophy inherited from ancient Greece flourished. The House of Wisdom—a library in Abbasid-era Baghdad—flourished during the ninth century, fortified by the most rationalist of all the caliphs, Al Ma'mun. Unfortunately, the days of wise and rationalist Islam in ninth-century Baghdad and twelfth-century Andalusia were repressed by the fundamentalist reaction of the fourth school of religious law within Sunni Islam, the *Hanbali*, from which the puritanical Wahhabi form of Islam would be born in the eighteenth century in what is now Saudi Arabia. This foreclosure of critical thought had several drastic consequences, including the stagnation of classical Islam in the fourteenth century; the weakening of the creative talent of the Muslim people (which has lasted until today); and the supplanting of critical thinking by severe, traditional thought. Political problems linked to decolonization and underdevelopment and to the unending conflict between Israelis and Palestinians can be traced to this reaction as well. The shortcomings of democratization in Muslim countries and their oppressive dictatorships combine to create despair among the Muslim masses and rob the youth of the Middle East of any semblance of a promising future.

This smothering of critical thought has, among other consequences, led to the emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has put religion firmly back in power in all areas of public life. Nothing contradicts the philosophy of Islam more than this conception of politics, which creates a totalitarian regime that is intolerant of non-Muslims and threatens world peace.

Attacks in Madrid, Istanbul, Bali, London, and Sharm al-Sheikh and Dahab in Egypt followed the catastrophe 9/11. It is likely that the Al Qaeda "brand" represents a network of organizations without any centralized structure. Nevertheless, these extremist and terrorist acts have succeeded in frightening the Western world. The media, feeding the psychosis of terrorism, do not stop talking about Islamist terrorism, and it is not surprising to see Islamophobic rhetoric taking root across Europe. This rhetoric targets moderate Muslims as well as radical Islamists. It is important to distinguish between Muslims and Islamists. For the majority of Muslims, Islamist activism does not represent true Islam. The West must support Islamic moderates in Europe and encourage their integration into the modern, secular Western world. Both moderate Muslims and their Western supporters should promote influences that foster an adaptive reading of the sacred texts. On the other hand, religious symbols must be respected and understood as a foundation for moral civilization. The cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that sparked such outrage in early 2006 cleverly exploited the legitimate emotions of believing Muslims. But today, at a time when the modern world in general is losing touch with religious faith, we must take symbols of religion seriously and foster attitudes that will respect the beliefs of the faithful.

To be frank, Islamic fundamentalism represents the failure of Muslim theologians, who are restrained by their conservatism and did not anticipate the integration of these ideas and their promotion of violence into the mainstream of Muslim belief. Despite the fact that the violence is contrary to the principles of Islam, these Muslim theologians have done nothing to prevent the distortions of Islamic ethics that allow terrorism to flourish. They have ignored murder, massacres, the persecutions of non-Muslims in some countries of Africa, intolerance, and polygamy, a practice that is practically rejected in the Koran. They refused to act against extremism and fanaticism, which violate Islam's principles of moderation and justice. This backward-looking approach, especially attractive to adherents of Wahhabi beliefs, has won many supporters in the Third World and Europe. Such converts reject progress, science, and the necessity to live in the present.

Both Western and Muslim countries that served as a base for radical Islamist terrorists and provided refuge for these people who were chased out of their own homelands—for example, the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and the FIS terrorists of Algeria—have made a grave mistake. This lax Western approach has led to a certain apathy, an inability to act in the face of a threat. Islamists have seized on the freedom to organize offered by liberal Western societies as opportunity to mobilize and to cooperatively attack the Muslim and Western states that sheltered them, states that thought they were safe because they had welcomed Islamists. This was a fatal mistake. Today, we must review these irresponsible attitudes, but we must also refrain from catapulting ourselves into a useless form of Islamophobia or some other form of unfair prejudice. Fundamentalist Muslims would simply respond in kind. Moderate Muslims must think clearly in order to find ways to protect ourselves from Islamism and fight against militancy—against Wahhabi and Salafi ideology and the theories of the Muslim Brotherhood, which are spreading to Muslims in Europe. Finally, and above all, we need to provide more opportunities to Islamic moderates and enable them to act to promote tolerance and peace.

In a world in flux, making changes will depend upon cultural cooperation, not a clash of civilizations. Substantial differences separate Islam and the West. People of good will on both sides need to work together to eliminate confusion and false alliances. Moderate Muslims need to defend the West with passion, and we need to promote tolerant Islam, which will help undermine Islamist and fundamentalist thinking. In the ideological realm, we need to promote moderation to counter fanaticism. In the more practical sphere, we need to be sure that extremists do not profit from globalization and globalized communications—violence and finance have become globalized, and provide opportunities that extremists can exploit.

Considering the West's current difficulties in relating to the Muslim world, it is clear that it needs to develop relationships and work with European Muslims to counteract Islamism's three challenges: secularism, modernity, and fundamentalism. Within Islam, we need to combat the politicization of religion. We must take up the struggle against backward-looking Islamism and archaic ideas, and to ensure that religion becomes a form of personal spirituality and conviction rather than a framework for governing a state. We also need to ensure that women take their proper place within Islam,

and that Muslim women play a prominent and constructive role in the West. We must encourage a symbolic, not literal, reading of religious texts.

Finally, Western nations need to foster fair policies that will address some of the major problems facing Muslim countries. Governments in Western states need to promote the intellectual segments of Muslim society and encourage education for all. These nations need to work together to solve festering problems in the Muslim world, such as the situation in Palestine and the issue of Iraq. The world community also needs to confront the issue of underdevelopment and the major problems of poverty and unequal distribution of resources, which affect many Muslims. As a result of this kind of inequity, the world now faces eighty conflicts that are based on religion—and often Islam is involved in these conflicts.

Finally, what should be done in Europe? The large majority of Muslims respect the laws and institutions of their European host countries. However, European Muslims and European Islam must create their own organizations and begin to represent themselves as a distinct voice within the Muslim world. The French Council of Muslim Faith is working to forge connections with French public authorities and government organizations that will give French Muslims a fruitful, peaceful, and representative relationship with the government, and will open new channels that could solve problems that French Muslims face in France.

Today, young French Muslims suffer from many social ills. These problems are not linked to Islam. We often hear that the suburbs of Paris erupted in riots and flames because of Islam. That is not true. Having visited these suburbs, it was clear that the problems are related to economic issues, to discrimination, to a lack of opportunities in training and education. We in France must work together to tackle these forms of discrimination and abolish them. This will help the Muslim community within France and within Europe—after all, with eighteen million Muslims in Europe, Islam is the second largest religion on the continent. All of us must work together to build respect and understanding and foster relationships that will strengthen our ties with each other.