Editorial: Looking Beyond Islamophobia: Three Case Studies

By M. Ali Lakhani

> Indeed this community of yours is [but] a single community, and I am the Lord of you all: be then conscious of Me! Yet they fragmented their religion, each group exulting in their own [tenets]. But leave them alone, lost in their ignorance, until a [future] time [when they will be shown the error of their ways].
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> *Koran 23:53-55*

> Beware! Whoever is cruel and hard on a non-Muslim minority, or curtails their rights, or burdens them with more than they can bear, or takes anything from them against their free will; I [Prophet Muhammad] will complain against that person on the Day of Judgment.
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> *Hadith*

In the wake of the "9/11" and "7/7" attacks in the USA and Britain, the recent attacks in Paris, and the spate of barbaric attacks conducted by avowedly "Muslim" killers and theocratizing terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab and the so-called "Islamic State", there is a deep suspicion about Islam and a fear of Muslims in the West. The suspicion and fear are driven in part by academic and intellectual arguments such as the Lewis-Huntington thesis of "A Clash of Civilizations", but mostly by events and images in the news—'suicide bombings', public stabbings, beheadings and immolations; the destruction of antiquities from the patrimony of humankind—acts, often carried out in the name of Islam, that are clearly beyond the pale of all civilized norms.

In such a combustible climate, when it is easier to misjudge and condemn a whole faith for the misdeeds and defamatory acts of a

minority than it is to distinguish them, there is a greater need than ever for responsible communication and public education that fosters an understanding about a faith whose very name (*Islam*) signifies peace (*Salam*) and which is the inspiration for some of the world's greatest civilizations. Muslims themselves must shoulder this responsibility to learn about their faith and history, and to correct misperceptions about Islam. But they need to be aided in this by politicians, educators, and by a responsible media. It is vital for these groups to be able to distinguish Islam from its counterfeits, the fundamentals of the faith from its so-called fundamentalist expressions, religious from political issues, faith from culture, and to look beyond the simplistic and superficial lens of outward forms to understand the spirit of one of history's most important living religions—and thereby to engage with a deeper understanding of the principles and values that connect us all.

Though such an approach is needed, it is not always pursued. Consider some of the recently reported responses to perceived Islamic threats in the West. The following three examples—from Europe, the USA, and Canada, respectively—are controversial and particularly revealing. They disclose various false assumptions about Islam, even distortions, which, when fed to an uncritical public by an equally uncritical media, are inflammatory and capable of causing disaffection.

In the case of Europe, we have recently been witnessing a mass migration of refugees from war-torn Syria and other countries ravaged by strife, in numbers unprecedented in our lifetimes. Many, if not most, of these refugees are from Muslim regions. While neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, have absorbed most of these refugees, there has also been a large influx into Europe. While some countries, notably Germany, have acted in a welcoming and neighborly manner, others—especially in Eastern Europe—have been threatened by the prospect of having to accommodate large numbers of Muslims within their societies. The Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, in a commentary published in September in the German newspaper, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, wrote that it was important to secure his country from the mainly Muslim migrants "to keep Europe Christian." He wrote:

> Let us not forget, however, that those arriving have been raised in another religion, and represent a radically different culture. Most of them are not Christians, but Muslims. This is an important question, because Europe and European identity is rooted in Christianity. Is it not worrying in itself that European Christianity is now barely able to keep Europe Christian? If we lose sight of this, the idea of Europe could become a minority interest in its own continent.

The underlying assumption is that there is no shared basis of co-existence between Christians and Muslims because the latter "have been raised in another religion, and represent a radically different culture". Such a statement reveals a profound ignorance about Islam, both as a faith and ethos. To pit Islam against Christianity ignores the fact that Islam is an Abrahamic monotheistic faith, rooted deep in the soil of the Judeo-Christian tradition, with a commonly shared ethos (the love of God and, in consequence, the love of the neighbor), and that it regards both Jews and Christians as "People of the Book". It is to ignore the pluralistic ethos of Islam premised on a vision of diverse cultural groups coexisting on the basis of mutual respect and tolerance.

The claim that Muslims and Christians have radically different cultures ignores not only the cultural pluralism of both Christians and Muslims but also ignores the common civilizational heritage and history of these groups in Europe. Despite the "Islamist" rhetoric of certain extreme groups (who in fact are killing mostly other Muslims and creating the conditions that have resulted in the mass migrations into Europe), Muslims have contributed enormously to European cultures, and they have a proven record of peaceful coexistence with both Jews and Christians, particularly in Europe. The term "*La Convivencia*" ("the Coexistence"), for example, famously refers to a period of some seven centuries of amicable relations among Jews, Christians and Muslims under Muslim rule in Spain. This example from European history emulates the pluralistic ethos exemplified by Islam's founder, Prophet Muhammad, in his establishment of the first Muslim Constitution—the Constitution of Medina of 622—in which he vouchsafed to non-Muslims, including Jews and Christians, the rights of peaceful co-existence and religious freedom.

The pluralistic ethos is also derived from the Koran itself, both doctrinally and through its scriptural ethos. The Koran's central doctrine (*tawhid*) is that of intrinsic and integral unity—precisely the shared

basis of human co-existence that transcends sectarian differences, which the Hungarian Prime Minister's commentary apparently fails to appreciate. The Koranic ethos also protects each separate community of believers, allowing them their respective expressions of faith and recognizing the diverse communities as constituting a single community of believers, "created from a single Soul" (4:1). In fact, it is this pluralistic conception of the community of believers—those who have submitted themselves to God—that the Koran repeatedly refers to as "Muslim", not the theologically exclusivist group that many conventionally understand them to be. That is why Jewish and Christian believers—those who have submitted to God through their faith and good works—are referred to in the Koran as "Muslims", as too are the ancient prophets of the Jews and Christians, including Abraham (or Ibrahim in the Koran) who is explicitly referred to as a "Muslim" (3:67).

From the Muslim perspective, there are no fundamental incompatibilities between the "People of the Book" nor distinctions between their prophets (including Muhammad), all of whom are presumed to have submitted to the same God, each worshipping according to their respective traditions. To assert such an incompatibility or to attribute it to Islam is either to misunderstand Islam or to invoke religious differences for other (often politically motivated) ends—something that not only certain non-Muslims, but also certain Muslims, are guilty of. While there are undoubtedly some "Muslim" groups—often militant and violent—that espouse non-pluralistic agendas, seeking to impose an exclusivist, literalist and formalistic brand of Islam on other Muslims, and to coercively subjugate non-Muslims, these extremists represent a minority within Islam. By failing to distinguish their views from those of the moderate majority—a conflation implicit within Prime Minister Orbán's statement—one risks empowering the extremists and undermining moderate Muslims. One also risks misleading Western audiences about the tolerant message of Islam.

The Koran promotes a pluralistic conception of faith and community. An oft-cited passage, supporting this conception, is the following verse: "… For each [among you] We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you [He hath made you as ye are]. So vie one with another in good works. Unto Allah ye will

all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ." (5:48) The logical rejection of this pluralistic conception—which rejection is contrary not only to Islam but to the shared Christian ethos of "loving one's neighbor"—is a society based on segregation and apartheid. This is precisely the lamentable conclusion advocated by the Hungarian Prime Minister in his statement: "we have no option but to defend our borders." Decent people of all faiths can respectfully disagree with this vision of a closed society, fearful of religious and cultural diversity, and with its ethical implications. Surely, with reasonable allowances for security and public safety, there is an alternative to closing one's borders to one's neighbors seeking refuge in a time of crisis: it is to open one's hearts and minds—an invitation that is central to Islam and indeed all the great faith traditions.

A second example is from the current presidential campaign in the USA, where one of the candidates for the Republican party's nomination, Dr Ben Carson, has claimed that Islam is not compatible with the US Constitution and that therefore any Muslim presidential candidate would have to "subjugate" some aspects of his or her faith, including Sharia law, before being elected to the White House. Quite apart from the legal objections to this statement (Article VI of the US constitution states, "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States", and the First Amendment expressly prevents Congress from enacting a law that would prohibit the free exercise of religion), the view expressed by Dr Carson contains certain erroneous assumptions about "Sharia law". His views are reminiscent of those expressed in 2005 by a group of Canadians (led by the author Margaret Atwood), who, citing media reports of the fear of "Sharia law in Ontario", wrote an open letter to then Ontario premier, Dalton McGuinty, to object to community-based religious arbitration in that Province because it was allegedly incompatible with the principle of "the formal separation of all religious matters from the business of the state".

Underlying both these views is a fundamental misconception about what is referred to as "Sharia law". The term "Sharia", though it is conventionally understood to refer to a corpus of canonical law, often mistakenly assumed to be codified as in the case of the Napoleonic Code, refers in a general sense—with due allowance made for the pluralism of religious practices within the framework of Islam—to those forms of

conduct that have the prescriptive and binding force of law inasmuch as they reflect inner norms. These forms of conduct may vary in different contexts, and there are therefore diverse specific expressions of Sharia law. While the term "Tariqa" refers to the inner way of groups who share certain outward forms of worship within Islam, the term "Sharia" refers to the outer expressions of this inner way. Etymologically, "Sharia" refers to "a pathway", similar to the Hebrew term "Halakhah", and denotes the divine law in the sense of living in accord with the principle of "On Earth as it is in Heaven".

The basic premise of Sharia, as with any form of religious law, is that human legislative authority is subordinate to and derived from God—that is, laws are expressions of divine principles, of objective criteria that surpass mere subjective preferences. Because laws cannot be merely a matter of fashion, they must be guided by legitimate forms of authority. And because authority is capable of being abused, therefore they must also be subject to intellectual rigor and conscience. All lawmakers seek legitimacy for their authority beyond brute instruments of coercion. While Muslims will turn to the Koran and the Prophetic model (through the Sunna and Hadith) to guide them as to the Law or Way, there are nevertheless diverse interpretations of both scriptural and prophetic norms. As in the case of any jurisprudential culture, there can be a tension between "the Spirit" and "the Letter". This tension gives rise to a contest that is not peculiar to Islam or Muslims but exists in all faith traditions, and even within the context of secular law. In the religious context, the interpretive quest is a spiritually-guided quest for the Heavenly criterion, in short, for the Sacred—for conduct that is 'holy', possessing an integrity that accords with the Absolute, the sense of the Whole.

While certain elements within Islam have sought to theocratize politics and to govern based on a rigid code which they term "Sharia", many Muslims nevertheless regard Sharia very differently. Sharia represents for them an intellectual quest, guided by a combination of spiritual authority and conscience, for principles and values that are compatible with, in the broadest sense, faith and community. What is important is not the rigid adherence to a code as much as conforming to the underlying spiritual integrity that connects human beings to God and to all creatures. Beyond the basic principles shared by all Muslims, there are many interpretive approaches to the Koran and to the Prophet's

words and conduct, especially with regard to temporal matters. For example, many Muslims do not regard tribal customs or edicts peculiar to seventh century Arabia as having the force of law in the twenty first century. In the face of changing contexts, therefore, the quest for the "Law" and the "Way" becomes increasingly a search for the *ratio legis*, for the governing principles of faith and community.

Sharia, in this sense, does not mandate the theocratization of politics. Rather, it allows that there must be a balance between faith and life, between the spiritual and material worlds. This conception is inherently compatible with the formal separation of religion and politics, understood in the classical secular sense of the separation of Church and State. Admittedly, there are certain Muslim societies and cultures which prefer to view Sharia in terms of literalistic interpretations of scripture, of edicts (or *fatwas*) that pit coercive clerical authority and tribal customs against principial standards and a respect for conscience. When one hears in the news that radical Muslim groups plan to create an "Islamic state" and to impose "Sharia law" on their citizens, or to persecute other faiths in the name of Islam, a defensive response against this coercive view of Sharia is entirely understandable. It is this strain of Sharia law that evokes a reactionary response in the West. However, one needs to distinguish this formalistic and exclusivist view of the law from the spirit of Islam, and to regard it as merely one view within a spectrum of possible interpretations, a spectrum that exists in other faiths no less than in Islam. Because an extreme strain of Sharia law exists in some Muslim countries, and receives much press from both its promoters and its detractors, the specter of its importation into Western law is viewed as a threat among the vast majority of the Western public. In reality, though, Sharia law does not truly pose a threat to Western democratic cultures, whose secular jurisprudential systems have long accommodated or dealt with religious laws and practices—such as Christian canonic laws administered through ecclesiastic courts, traditional Jewish laws administered by rabbinical courts, and customary personal law concepts such as the Jewish "*Get*" or the Muslim "*Mahr*"—within the framework of the Constitution, of public policy bulwarks, and Charter of Rights protections. Extreme Sharia interpretations would no doubt be struck down as illegal if they were to transgress these bounds, as would extreme interpretations of the laws of other (non-Muslim) religious communities.

One must also remember that the fundamentalist conception of Islam is a minority view within Islam and is challenged by the vast majority of Muslim groups as being contrary to the Koranic principles of rigorous anti-reductionism (in the oft-stated prohibition against ***shirk***), of "no compulsion in matters of faith" (2:256) and of religious tolerance. It is not accepted by moderate Muslims as representative of their faith. It is not Sharia law that is oppressive, but a fundamentalist view of the law—one that undermines principle, intellect, and the freedom of conscience, subjugating these to coercive political and clerical authority. Similarly, there is nothing inherently oppressive in Islam as a faith, as some erroneously maintain. Rather, it is Islam's pluralistic spirit of tolerance that is being ignored and undermined by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It is this spirit that needs to be rediscovered and revived in order to counter the misperceptions about the faith.

A third example, related to the second, is from a Canadian context where former Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated during his electoral campaign that the *niqab*—the full face veil worn by some (usually Muslim) women—was contrary to Canadian values. He stated:

> We do not allow people to cover their faces during citizenship ceremonies. Why would Canadians, contrary to our own values, embrace a practice at that time that is not transparent, that is not open and frankly is rooted in a culture that is anti-women. That is unacceptable to Canadians, unacceptable to Canadian women.

The Canadian government sought to legally prevent Muslim women—who had already appeared unveiled before a judge at a formal citizenship interview—to appear unveiled at the merely ceremonial portion of the citizenship ceremony. In an action brought by a Muslim woman to allow her to wear the *niqab* at the ceremony, the court upheld her right. The government's position was reminiscent of that adopted by the Quebec township of Hérouxville in its 2007 charter of conduct that required immigrants to assimilate in ways that were in some cases uncontroversial (for example, banning the stoning or burning of women) but in others deemed oppressive by religious minorities (for example, banning religious insignia such as ***hijabs*** or turbans, or the Sikh ***kirpan***).

What these examples demonstrate is the tension between assimilation and accommodation, between integration and diversity. They also point

to a potential confusion between religious and cultural norms, and to the power of politics to alienate minorities by requiring them to subordinate their diverse expressions of religion or culture to homogenizing norms of the dominant majority. Neither the *niqab* nor the *hijab* are religiously mandated costumes. Quite apart from the question of what role the State should have in prescribing what one wears, there is an underlying question of whether fundamental values can be reduced to forms or uniforms. Not everyone who has a beard or wears a turban is a terrorist. Most of the "9/11" and "7/7" attackers were outwardly "Westernized". Not everyone who wears the *niqab* or *hijab* is oppressed. On the contrary, there are many Muslim women who proudly choose to assert their identity precisely through this form of dress. And in many cases the identity they embrace is cultural, not religious. It is dangerous to "profile" people, to judge them by their appearances. It is as wrong for a Canadian politician to dictate what women should wear in our society as it is for a group like the Taliban to impose a uniform on women in theirs—even if this is done in the name of ostensibly laudable values, whether secular or religious. Beyond the political rhetoric, what is at stake here is an ability to respect outward differences and to strive to reach, through dialogue and empathy, for universally acceptable inward norms—for common principles and values of integrity and peaceful coexistence.

Because fear can be a symptom of ignorance, it is legitimate to ask whether Islamophobia is simply a matter of ignorance or if it is justified. The fear of terrorism should not be synonymous with the fear of Islam itself. What emerges from the three examples we have discussed is an understanding that the fear of Islam can be based on a failure to appreciate its integral, pluralistic and tolerant nature. Muslims have much more in common with each other and with non-Muslims than those who misperceive or misrepresent Islam will allow. But it is also useful to recognize that, whether it is viewed as faith or as ethos, Islam, in its expressions, is not a monolith. Its diversity is reflected in the range of populations that identify themselves as Muslim, the plurality of cultures they embrace, and the variety of religious practices, laws and customs that are found within the global Muslim community or *Ummah*. This diversity, in and of itself, should make one wary of any claim—whether made by Muslims or not—that seeks to reduce more than one and a

half billion Muslims and their faith to a stereotype, especially when characterized by such phobic phrases as "a violent faith" or "a barbaric civilization". One needs to develop the cultural sensitivity to look beyond this divisive stereotype of Islam for its pluralistic, unifying spirit and its shared values of compassion and community. It is these values that can promote the ethos of decency and justice in our communities, and can inculcate the willingness to dialogue across the divide of our differences. These are the civic values that distinguish "civilization" from the terrorists who capture the headlines and who thrive by feeding our fears.

It is a lamentable fact that at the same time as the West is confronted with a gulf of ignorance about Islam, it is also confronted with atrocities often carried out in its name. These heinous acts, though they are defamatory of the faith, evoke a lack of empathy towards Islam and Muslims. However, the misdeeds of certain extremist elements within Islam should not be visited on all Muslims. The divide is not between Muslims and the West but between civilization and barbarity. It is neither Islam nor religion that is the enemy of civilization. It is vitally important to recognize that the causes of many of the underlying conflicts are not religious. They may be political, tribal, ethnic, cultural, economic, or social—giving rise to differences which are then exploited in the name of religion. And it is equally critical to know that the spirit of Islam, which is compassionate and tolerant, is being misrepresented by the vile killers and oppressors who claim to act in its name. It is only through a better understanding about Islam itself that one can begin to look beyond Islamophobia. It is ignorance about Islam that we need to overcome, every bit as much as the terrorists who defame it.