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The Prophets as Bridges to Greater Understanding

“Where there is charity and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance.”

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226 AD)

1) Introduction

The recent (2009) Fort Hood massacre has only served to harden the image of Islam. Since September 2001, violent acts committed by Muslims have reinforced the (misplaced, as we shall see) perception that Islam promotes antisocial and destructive

behavior. In this troubled context, the Qur'an - to which all Muslims adhere - has been examined by Westerners to identify Suras (Chapters) and verses that supposedly encourage stupendous acts of violence and terror.

To the layperson, unfamiliar with history, politics and international affairs, such acts indeed befuddle, infuriate and may lead to retaliation and vigilante justice. One may well understand the motive and agenda of media provocateurs and political assassins. In the assault on Islam, social tolerance and accommodation have paid a weighty price.

That negative speech and even hate crimes perpetrated against Muslims in the US have skyrocketed is understandable albeit reprehensible. As recently as last week in Florida, a Greek Orthodox cleric was mistakenly identified as a Muslim, with the following result:

Headline: Marine reservist was charged with attacking a Greek Orthodox priest he mistook for a terrorist.

Jasen D. Bruce allegedly hit 29-year-old Alexios Marakis over the head with a tire iron and chased him for three blocks Monday evening before Tampa police officers intervened. Marakis, a Greek Orthodox priest visiting from Crete, told police he had stopped to ask the 28-year-old reservist for help after getting lost in downtown Tampa. He had just performed a blessing of another priest and accidentally got off the highway.

Marakis approached Bruce as he was unloading his dry-cleaning, police said. "Please, please help," Marakis said to Bruce in his limited English. Bruce pulled out a tire iron and attacked the priest, police said. He then called 911 as he chased Marakis, saying an Arabic man was trying to rob him. When officers arrived, Bruce told them the man was a terrorist.

Bruce also told police he heard Marakis yell, "Allahu akbar!" _ Arabic for "God is great," according to Tampa police spokeswoman Laura McElroy. Marakis, however, does

not speak Arabic, McElroy said. He speaks Greek. Police are working to determine if the offense meets the standard for a hate crime.

Areeb Nasser, legal counsel for The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), has reported a steady increase of attacks against Muslims since 2001. He is noted as saying that incidents of harassments range from vandalism and verbal assaults on the streets, to discrimination at the work pace.

However, what is unfortunate is the role that some Christian leaders have played in fueling antipathy toward Islam by resorting to inflammatory comments and remarks. For instance, influential Christian evangelist Pat Robertson asserted on Fox News Channel that the Prophet Muhammad was “an absolute wild-eyed fanatic, a robber....” (September 19, 2002). Three years later (July 14, 2005), he stated that “Islam, at the core, teaches violence.” A year later (March 13, 2006), he further claimed that Muslims are seeking world hegemony.

We must also mention events that took place the same year when Pope Benedict XVI, in an academic speech entitled “**Faith, Reason and the University: Memoires and Reflections**,” made reference to 14th century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus’ assessment of Islam which was as follows:

Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.

To the chagrin of many Muslims and proponents of interfaith dialogue, the Pope did not condemn the Emperor’s remarks but may have been perceived to endorse them. In an extremely charge global atmosphere, this speech caused violence and anger in several countries, thus polarizing the situation.

Before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, many Americans knew very little about the teachings of Islam. In a report by Heather Morton of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “the number of Americans who believe they know “some” or “a great deal” about Islam has actually declined since shortly after the terrorist attacks of 2001.”

The article further reported that in mid-November 2001, 6 percent of Americans said they knew “a great deal” about Islam, while 32 percent said they knew “some,” and 61 percent knew “not very much” or “nothing at all.” In the most recent poll, only 4 percent said they knew “a great deal,” 27 percent knew “some” and 68 percent professed to know “not very much” or nothing at all” about Islam (September 2003).

Six years later, little progress has been made to bridge the gap between faiths, notably Christianity and Islam. Interestingly, a September Pew poll shows that 60 percent of Americans acknowledge that Muslims face more discrimination than any other ethnic or religious group.

This ongoing polarization must be attributed to five factors: 1) The cauldron of violence in Muslim countries; 2) Islamic attacks against US personnel and interests globally; 3) The climate of fear and suspicion fomented by influential voices in Western societies; 4) The ongoing arrests of sympathizers to the radical Islamic cause on US soil; and 5) The purported global threat of a nuclear armed Iran.

Responding to these challenges has led to contentious debates at all levels of society and governance. Certainly, the mass condemnation and collective punishment of a single group for acts perpetrated by aberrant followers only create larger problems.

Keeping in mind the complexity of the issues involved, this paper can only offer a limited approach to addressing this problem.

For starters, Muslims leaders must be forthright in presenting Islam as an integrative part of the Christian Judaic matrix. In other words, Islam is not a foreign doctrine, but rather an unfolding of religious ideals shared by Western civilization. Furthermore, Islam is not antagonistic to either Judaism or Christianity according to the precepts of the Qur'an. To state otherwise is misleading and may be an extension of a particular political agenda.

As it is, a greater understanding of Islam can only be realized when the commonality that it shares with the holy books of Judaism and Christianity is examined. We can perhaps encapsulate this approach with the expression: "Common Grounds are Holy Grounds." Only then can one realize that Islamic extremism, although clothed in religiosity, is in fact a radical political movement. With this understanding, the Suras themselves can be used by both Muslims and non-Muslims to counteract the propaganda of those who would spread and wreak terror.

Replete with references to Jews and Christians, the Qur'an contains many stories of the Judaic-Christian prophets in Suras *Anibiyaa*, *Maryam*, *Al Ma'ida*, *Al-Qasas*, *Ta-Ha* among others. Many who have castigated Islam and have cherry-picked particular *ayats* (verses) to support their interpretation of Islam can be likened to a man who asked the fourth Caliph, Imam Ali Ibn Abu Talib (600-661 AH) a difficult question to which he replied:

Ask in order to understand and do not ask in order to find fault, for surely the ignorant man who wants to learn resembles a man of knowledge and surely a man of knowledge who wants to be difficult resembles an ignorant man who wants to find fault.

The same Imam Ali is also reported to have said:

The man of knowledge is the one who recognizes that what is known is very little compared to what is not known, and as a result he considers himself ignorant, and accordingly he increases his efforts to know more by going out in search of knowledge.

Thus, it is only through enquiry and knowledge that a bridge of understanding between what are often called “Western religions” and Islam can be established.

This knowledge must first begin with the examination of the Qur’an and its promulgations of the prophets. Indeed, the prophets who are extolled and revered in the Qur’an are also at the epicenter of Judaic-Christian teachings. In Sura 21:48-92, the role of the prophets is detailed, and should be the key to forging tolerance and explore avenues of convergence and unity.

The verses make mention of Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses), Lut (Lot), Dawud (David), Sulaiman (Solomon), Ismail (Ishmael), Idris (Enoch), Zul-kifl (Isiah), and Zunnun (Jonah). It also gives credence to the core of Christian theology:

And remember Maryam (Mary) who safeguarded her chastity. We breathed into her from Our Spirit, and We made her and her son [by Isa (Jesus)] a Sign for all nations and peoples. Surely, this brotherhood of yours is a single brotherhood of prophets and I am your Lord and Cherisher.

Such verses (dealing with the prophets) are also found in Sura 6: 84-86.

Finally, in *Al-Ankabut*, Angel Djibril (Gabriel) instructs the last of the prophets (Muhammad) on how best to deal interfaith rivalry.

Say and recite what is revealed from the Book made known to you (O prophet Muhammad) and perform prayer regularly...And Allah knows all the acts that you do. And you do not argue with or dispute with the People of the Book (Jews and Christians), except with better ways (reasons and facts). Unless it is those of them who cause injustice or injury. But say to them “We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us, and that which came down to you: Our God (Allah) and your God is One. And it is to Him we bow, (29:46).

And in *Al-Baqara* 2:285, the text is unequivocal in respect to the messengers of Allah.

The Messenger Muhammad believes what was revealed to him, so do the men of faith. **We (Allah) make no distinction between one and another of His messengers.** And they say, “We hear and obey. We seek Your forgiveness our Lord and to You is the end of all journeys.”

Finally, the equanimity of the prophets in the eyes of Allah is again mentioned in Sura 3:84:

Surely it is intellectual naivety to promote that a familiarity with Holy Scriptures is the antidote to internecine conflicts, many of which are rooted in religious dogma.

Unquestionably, such local, regional and international conflicts – which are nothing new - are always riddled with complex nuances that involve ethnicity, race, class, gender issues, politics and economics.

However, ignorance and willful manipulation and misrepresentation of another's beliefs toward pernicious ends can only be defeated when scrolls of reason and truth are laid bare. Christian soteriology, which emphasizes the role of its Messiah in man's redemption, certainly differs from that offered by Islam. However, this divergence should not become a blueprint for hatred and violence.

Islam opens the doors of salvation to all beliefs and religious expressions as long as particulars are followed. Sura 5:69 is a telling example of Islam's all-embracing teachings:

Surely, those who believe in the Qur'an, and those who follow the Judaic scriptures, and the Sabians, and the Christians – Any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and people who work righteousness – Upon them there shall be no fear, and they shall not be in pain.

It may be that the road to healing is wrought with minefields, but acquainting oneself with some of the teachings of the Qur'an and not allowing oneself to be unreservedly swayed by the propaganda of Muslim and non-Muslim political peddlers is certainly a good place to start.

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