

Reconciliation and the Tenth Anniversary of 9/11

by Safi Kaskas

Religion is supposed to provide guidance for human beings so they can better honor and glorify God and live peacefully with others, especially with those who share our belief in The Lord our Creator. But the percentage of those among the followers of the three Abrahamic religions who seem to resent or flat out hate each other is much higher than those who understand religion to be a tool for deeper understanding and peaceful cooperation. Religion is thought to have failed to accomplish its purpose, which raises the question whether its role and practice need rehabilitation.

The 9/11 attacks were a test for American and Christian tolerance, diversity, and pluralism. The last ten years have been a cross for Muslims to bear. The attacks were carried out by men who claimed to be acting in the name of Islam against symbols of a Judeo-Christian civilization, as if they were trying to prove Huntington's clash of civilizations. The 9/11 attacks never served the interest of any Muslims, especially the Muslims of the United States. They brought Muslims nothing but misery, hatred, and suspicion. Al Qa'ida's hatred of everything it thought the West represents led the Islamophobes to spread the same kind of hatred toward Islam and Muslims.

Prior to that infamous event not many Americans gave much thought to Islam and did not particularly consider their Muslim neighbors threatening. The majority of American Muslims were quietly living their lives and comfortably trying to pursue the American dream.

Suddenly 9/11 rudely awakened American Muslims to discover that their future and that of their children can be a real nightmare. Their first reaction was condemnation of the attacks. But this was never satisfying to some who went on TV complaining that Muslims in the United States were not condemning the attacks and terrorism loudly enough. This was followed by the Patriot Act and the war on terror, which was said to target Muslim radicals rather than Islam but resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Later we witnessed some evangelical leaders calling Islam an evil and wicked religion. They demonized all Muslims and later accused American Muslims of conspiring to impose a grossly distorted version of Shari'ah law on the entire United States.

With the ten-year anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy nearing, the place of Islam in the American public sphere took another turn. A concerted effort by some conservative activists exploited the now ubiquitous terms "9/11" and "Ground Zero" as a rallying cry ultimately to purge Muslims and even all immigrants from the United States. The main dispute started with the proposed construction of a cultural center, including an Islamic prayer space, near Ground Zero. This escalated when the owner of the building, Park 51, banned the originator of the concept, Shaykh Feisal Abdul Ra'uf, from holding an interfaith celebration of Thanksgiving Day. The

owner fired Shaykh Abdul Ra'uf, appointed a radicalized new imam in his place, and talked about establishing his own version of a mosque in Park 51.

The contentious debate among Muslims and others sparked a strange furor across the United States that targeted, of all people, Shaykh Abdul Ra'uf. Should any people of the Islamic faith be allowed to build a place of worship so close to the site of a national tragedy? Is Ground Zero hallowed ground? For whom is this place sacred, and is the United States really a country of even minimal tolerance. Do we really go beyond this to respect diversity and even pluralist recognition that we all have so much to offer each other?

In addition to this strategy of homogenization by conflating and combining Islam and terrorism, the concept of sacred ground introduced a religious component to the debate. Yet, it was clear that the debate had morphed into the broader context of religious war and the conservative notion of a clash of civilizations. As the political argument ensued, demands continued for the primacy of Ground Zero as sacred ground that automatically excluded Islam—one need only recall the metal girder in the shape of the Christian cross left by workers in the World Trade Center debris—thus asserting that American religious values are exclusively Judeo-Christian.

Despite the multi-faith background of those who perished in the tragedy of 9/11, this debate pivoted on emotions that have come to the fore in the last decade, which has been widely dubbed the “Age of Terror”. By arguing that the site of Ground Zero is hallowed ground that must exclude the proximity of Islam and Muslims, the anti-Park51 activists are exploiting a sense of the necessary exclusion of Islam from public life in the United States. While high-profile Republican politicians have joined the opposition to the Park51 project as a symbol for religious exclusion, numerous politicians, including New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, have argued in favor of the Islamic centre as originally conceived by the Sufi shaykh, Abdul Ra'uf.

The sentiment of anti-Muslim exclusion is based on an overarching argument of religious difference—the notion that “they (Muslims) do not value what we (Americans) value”. In this argument for a religious clash, values and moral standards are imagined as hard-wired through social processes in which “they are simply not like us”. What appears as a religious war quickly becomes a race war”.¹

Americans need reconciliation.² They need to start from the common ground that they all share and accept. The two concepts that all Americans basically agree to are the Constitution³

¹ “More than Nothing: The Persistence of Islamophobia in ‘Post-Racial’ Racism”, by Junaid Rana, an associate professor of Asian American studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

<http://www.worlddialogue.org/content.php?id=482>

² See http://www.kaskas.com/uploads/Reconciliation_The_Choice_SH_20-01-10_1_1_.pdf

³ http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html

and Bill of Rights⁴ and the following two commandments from the Old Testament quoted by Jesus: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”. (Matthew 22:37-40 NIV) But do Muslims accept these two concepts? Or is there something in the Qur’an that prevents a Muslim from loving God and loving one’s neighbor?

For Muslims the Qur’an is the Word of God. Therefore it has the ultimate authority over all other teachings. In it God is ordering the Prophet Mohammad and consequently all his followers to choose peace if an adversary decides to follow a peaceful solution to a conflict. It says: “*If they lean toward peace, you too should choose peace and put your trust in God; the All Hearing, the All Knowing*”. (Surah al Anfal 8:61) It also teaches the following: “*Good and evil cannot be equal. [Prophet], repel evil with what is better⁵ and your enemy will become as close as an old and valued friend*”. (Surah al Fussilat 41:34)

The argument that for American Muslims the shari’ah trumps the Constitution and the Bill of Rights is a red herring. To begin with all the classical Islamic scholars taught that the laws of the land wherever Muslims live must govern unless specific laws violate the essence of Islam. This has been enshrined in a well-developed branch of the shari’ah, which is known as the fiqh al ‘aqaliyat (Islamic jurisprudence for minorities), and is explained in the equivalent of a fatwa by Shaykh Taha Jabir al Alwani, entitled “Toward a Fiqh⁶ for Minorities”, who chaired the Fiqh Council of North America and is a member of the World Fiqh Council in Makkah.

Unfortunately, the term *shari’ah* is an abused term that has come to symbolize all that the professional Islamophobes assert is the essence of Islam. The meaning of shari’ah has been debated among Muslims for more than a millennium and always will be debated, because the strong consensus has always been to distinguish between the universal principles of human responsibilities and rights, known as the maqasid al shari’ah, and the practice of applying them, known as the fiqh. Whenever a judge or qadi decrees something that violates these basic human rights, his decree is null and void. The clearest example of many un-Islamic *fiqh* rulings is stoning adulteresses, which is the law of the land in six Muslim countries but has no basis whatsoever in the Qur’an or in any ahadith or sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad. This abhorrent practice violates at least two of the basic principles of the shari’ah, namely respect for dignity (*haqq al karama*) and respect for life (*haqq al haya*).

⁴ <http://www.ratical.com/co-globalize/BillOfRights.html>

⁵ Kindness, forgiveness, good manners, honesty, transparency, integrity etc...

⁶ Jurisprudence

Personally, I find that my constitutional rights and those of all Americans are better protected under the U.S. Constitution than by any other known document that is in existence today. If the self proclaimed patriots among the right wing Islamophobes and radical Evangelicals truly cared about the future of the United States and their own self proclaimed beliefs in Jesus' teachings, they would have used a reasonable approach to distinguish between fanatics and true believers among their Muslim neighbors. Instead, they themselves are the worst examples of the fanaticism, racism, and bigotry that mark the Beasts of the Antichrist.

Thank God, however, ten years of working for reconciliation are not without positive results. Many evangelical friends, true followers of Jesus, have expressed themselves in loving words that truly reflect Jesus teachings. They taught me to really love Jesus and to really appreciate his followers. A trusted evangelical friend was trying to console me recently and said:

"I think the US Constitution (and Bill of Rights) was intended to protect freedom of religion, belief, and expression from curtailment by governments and authorities. It has not protected people from prejudice and from the ethnic/racial/religious antagonism of other people. In the nineteenth century Irishmen were persecuted, and Catholics were second-class citizens. Africans and Chinamen were marginalized. That has largely disappeared. One does not see signs on cafes saying "No Dogs or Irish" and no signs on businesses saying "No Irish Need Apply".

Conflict breeds fear, suspicion, and prejudice. During World War I, the millions of German immigrants in the United States felt compelled to stop speaking German or celebrating German culture. If I am not mistaken, it was illegal to speak German on the phone during the war. As a result, German ceased to be used as a second language in America. During World II, Japanese Americans were under scrutiny and were often despised by their neighbors. Those on the West Coast were interned in camps.

Muslim Americans are not suffering that degree of prejudice, but I don't see an end to the present situation until there is an end to the widespread sense among Americans that they are under attack from Muslims, and the sense among Muslims overseas that the Muslim world is under attack from America. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been a catalyst for much of this, and one could wish that "compromise" was not regarded by both sides as dishonorable.⁷

What my friend is trying to tell me is that other minorities went through the same baptism rites before they were accepted as fully fledged Americans. He is also gently showing empathy while proposing reconciliation.

⁷ Rick Brown

Reconciliation⁸ becomes necessary, because religion apparently will not go away any time soon. We as human beings apparently have a need to identify with a system of beliefs, known as religion, to identify with others who share or identify with the same beliefs and to see ourselves as part of a community of believers, raising their banners, chanting their chant, worshipping with them, and defending their culture. This seems to be the result of our deep desire to satisfy a deeper need; the search for meaning in our existence on earth. Unfortunately, only those that truly believe that their journey will end in a return to their Creator for judgment seem to have a genuine interest in loving their neighbors. Others might put their own interest or maybe that of their clan or party ahead of everyone else. So, religion, which started as a path toward God through serving others, can become a privilege for members while others are excluded, which results in a conflict of interests with others regardless of what religion teaches.

Even when religions offer similar answers to a question, however, the answer can be perceived by some as the source of conflict. Hence the need for a few courageous people among the followers of Judaism, Christianity,, and Islam to take steps toward each other and to engage in a search for common ground in order to bring Americans of different convictions closer together.

Reconciliation by definition is our ability to talk to others about their faith and ours and to be willing to emphasize commonalities while understanding and respecting areas of difference. A prerequisite for this is to know our own religion and to strive to know more about our neighbor's.

Islamophobes accuse all Muslims of being evil. Hence we must invite all Americans of good will to get to know their Muslim neighbors and to discover for themselves the truth about Muslims. I dream of a day when members of various communities around the United States will visit their neighbors and get to know them. You will find that the majority of Muslims believe in one God, in a day of judgment, and in heaven and hell. They are generally conservative, believing in the sanctity of marriage and they define it as a relationship between a man and a woman. They are required by their religion to believe in the right to life and reject abortion. Despite all their cultural diversity, they are family oriented. The majority came to the United States to find a better life for their children and because of the freedom guaranteed to all citizens through the constitution. These are your Muslim neighbors; please get to know them. Once you know them, you will feel better about them and become less fearful. We used to be a country of neighbors and we need to go back to practicing this great value.

Muslims also need to do a lot to change the negative way they are perceived in America. This change can happen only if American Muslims decide to start integrating in the larger society,

⁸ The reconciliation trilogy by Safi Kaskas.

not in the sense of dissolving their identity but in the sense of sharing in the national consensus on agenda formation by participating in American life. Equal proportions of Christians and Muslims, about 70%, consider that their religious identity comes first, before their national identity. But Muslims must realize that Islam is not a nationality, whereas being American is. Muslims who are not a homogeneous group need out of necessity to unite and to choose a visionary leadership that calls for freedom, prosperity and compassionate justice for all through interfaith reconciliation. This leadership should be capable of leading through paradigm management, but only if the paradigm to be managed remains American in nature and purpose.

Muslims can change the perception of their relevance to America by getting involved in mainstream American life, making America's problems theirs, for example, by building think tanks that can offer relevant solutions to the problems of unemployment, debt reduction, and the growing wealth gap within and among nations, as well as by encouraging their academic leaders to engage seriously and courageously in a critical new reading of their holy scriptures and to reexamine what has been held sacrosanct in Islamic theology and jurisprudence for so many centuries since creative thought became moribund six hundred years ago.

Such new interpretation is badly needed to rejuvenate the faith of our children and grandchildren, but it requires an appropriate methodology. American Muslims also need to contribute to the repatriation of businesses back to the United States and to bring new investments to local communities.

But can American Muslims do all of this? Yes they can. The community is diversified and very successful in many ways. Finally, if they decide through a visionary leadership to do this, they must form a professional lobby that will make their contributions known to members of congress and to the media. Lobbying for Muslim interests alone will not spread better understanding of Islam, even though such lobbying is necessary. "Policymakers and their advisers will listen to Muslims only if Muslims can contribute to pursuing what is best for America's enlightened interests. They can best do so by working with visionary American leaders to carry out their visions".⁹

On the other hand, American Muslims need to feel welcome in their own country. They need to feel as secure and trusted as any other American minority. They need assurances that they will not be harassed once they invest all they have into the system. They need to be loved by

⁹ See *Essence and Perception: Changing the Perception of Islam in the West by Rehabilitating the Understanding and Practice of Religion*, by Robert D. Crane and Safi Kaskas.

their neighbors not in words but in deeds. Love expressed in a social context is justice. Even today, the majority of American Muslims are ready to defend the constitution with their lives. I have relatives in the Marines. All you need to do is to check the number of Muslims that have enlisted to serve in various branches of government to keep United States safe for the last ten years. It is perhaps our collective vigilance that kept us safe, but without the contribution of American Muslims, the job would have been impossible. It should make sense for Americans to be an example to the rest of the world in neighborly love and Justice when the Gospel requires it and the constitution protects it.

End