

Islam and Human Values

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This booklet is being written to reach out to all Americans to express our support for the fundamental values of pluralism, tolerance, freedom, and human dignity. We unequivocally condemn terrorism in all forms, support freedom of conscience, and wish to make a positive contribution to American society. As a nation and as a human race we face many complex challenges. We cannot afford to misunderstand each other or be unnecessarily divided.

Why is a message like this necessary at this time?

It is essential at this time in history that we establish a genuine dialogue, not as Muslims speaking to Americans, but as Americans speaking with Americans.

We believe that what Islam really teaches has been misunderstood and quite often distorted. If the word “Islam” gives rise to fear or mistrust today, it is urgent that American Muslims clarify what we believe Islam stands for in order to dispel the idea that there is a fundamental conflict between the best values of Western civilization and the essential values of Islam.

We hope to demonstrate that the idea of a “clash of civilizations” cannot be supported on the basis of any inherent tension or conflict with Islam. Islamic civilization, which developed out of the revelation of the Qur’an in the seventh century, affirms the truth of previous

revelations, affirms religious pluralism, cultural diversity, and human rights, and recognizes the value of reason and individual conscience.

This text is written for the general public which has a limited amount of time to consider these issues. We also hope to offer a more in depth analysis of these issues through a website, and, eventually, a full length book.

Stories in the news or media that portray problems and injustices in the Muslim world may give the impression that these problems are inherently associated with Islam. Injustices toward women, for instance, may and do exist and may even be given a religious justification. A superficial understanding of the situation might lead one to condemn religion itself, unaware that women in the Muslim world are working to retrieve certain rights and correct injustices using Islamic scriptural sources.

Another example is the problem of violence. When any act of violence, especially terrorism, is given a religious justification, it is necessary to distinguish whether the violence is inherent in the religion or ideology, or whether the religion is being distorted to justify the violence for political purposes. If the latter is the case, then it is the obligation of the larger community to condemn the use of religion to justify immoral or criminal acts. Thousands of Muslim institutions and leaders, the great majority of the world's billion or more Muslims, have unequivocally condemned the hateful and violent ideologies that kill innocents and violate the dignity of all humanity.

Finally, any law or punishment that results in cruelty or injustice cannot be inherently Islamic even if it may be justified by someone's conception of Shariah. Shariah is not a fixed code of law, nor is it divinely revealed. Rather, it is a body of human formulations that draw from scriptural sources, but cannot be guaranteed to be free of human error, prejudice, or distortion. Shariah is more a set of

principles, rather than a strict, monolithic code. Consequently, it is not above criticism in its particulars and, especially in its application.

Who has the right to speak about Islam? If Islam has no Pope and no central authority, are there any criteria to determine what is authentically Islamic?

All Muslims accept the Qur'an as their reference point. Historically there has been considerable agreement on the general principles of morality, social justice, and Divine benevolence.

The Qur'an is analogous in the religious sphere of Islam to the Constitution in the American political system. Although to avoid one possible understanding, we should clarify that the Qur'an does not provide a detailed political system. It does, however, offer a comprehensive framework for morality and justice, as well as providing spiritual inspiration. All Muslims of all schools refer to the Qur'an as Islam's final authority. While there may be some differences of interpretation, we believe we can demonstrate that traditional Islam has respected religious diversity and freedom, human rights, and freedom of conscience.

Islamic civilizations have a long history of encouraging religious tolerance and guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities. The reason for this is that the Qur'an explicitly acknowledges that the diversity of religions is part of the Divine Plan and no religion has a monopoly on truth or virtue.

Islamic societies, with few exceptions, have accepted religious pluralism and protected religious minorities.

Why should I believe that what I read here represents what a broad consensus of Muslims really believes and thinks?

First, we can refer to history to demonstrate that traditional Islam has respected human rights and religious freedom. Jerusalem under

almost continuous Islamic rule for nearly fourteen centuries has been a place where Christians and Jews have lived side by side with Muslims, their holy sites and religious freedom preserved. Medieval Spain also created a high level of civilization as a multi-cultural society under Islamic rule for several centuries. The Ottoman Empire, the longest lived in history, for the more than six centuries of its existence encouraged ethnic and religious minorities to participate in and contribute to society. It was the Ottoman sultan who gave sanctuary to the Jews expelled from Catholic Spain. India was governed for centuries by Muslims, even while the majority of its people practiced Hinduism. We can also show that Muslim religious leaders stood up against political authorities that wished to deprive people, including minorities, of their rights.

Second, the support of major Islamic organizations and leaders testifies to the fact that what is expressed here represents a broad consensus of Muslims.

Relationship with other religions.

We have the impression that Islam was spread by military conquest.

While it is true that during the early period of its expansion its adherents established an empire and civilization that stretched over a large part of the known world, Islamic Law also granted self-determination to Christians, Jews, and other religions. The establishment of Islamic rule was not synonymous with the imposition of the Islamic religion on the people within its jurisdiction. Many Christian sects, for instance, received greater freedom under Islamic rule than they had known under Byzantine Christian rule. These non-Muslim communities received the status of “protected

peoples” and exemption from military service in exchange for a small tax.

We can still read today a copy of a letter written by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, to the Monastery of Saint Catherine in the Sinai Desert of Egypt, granting protection to this monastic community even while monasticism was not accepted within Islamic practice.

Does Islam permit forced conversion?

No, the acceptance of Islam must be an act of free will. Conversion by any kind of coercion was universally condemned by Islamic scholars. Obviously, a coerced conversion would have little value to the converted and no value in the eyes of God.

Is it true that apostasy from Islam is punishable by death?

There were some examples in the earliest years of Islam when apostasy amounted to betrayal and sedition. In such cases the “apostates” had turned against the Muslim community and actively sided with the forces that were seeking to destroy the infant Muslim community.

The view that the punishment for apostasy should be death may be held by a small minority of Muslims, but the great majority of Muslims maintain that it is a grievous misinterpretation to exact a punishment of death for apostates. Even among those jurists who might believe that there is sometimes a case to be made for this action, the death penalty would have to be ordered by a legitimate legal authority—not carried out in vigilante fashion.

It is known, for instance, that during the lifetime of the Prophet, when he was aware of people who had left Islam after converting, he did not prescribe a punishment. In actual practice over the centuries,

people within Islamic societies have rarely faced reprisal for following their consciences.

Finally, we, as American Muslims, wish to state unequivocally that we accept the right of people to follow their conscience in matters of faith.

Is the goal of Islam to establish an Islamic theocratic state wherever Muslims become a majority?

Some critics of Islam have claimed that in Islam there is no distinction between religious and political authority. This is a grave misunderstanding based in ignorance and false assumptions. In the fourteen centuries of Islamic history political and religious authority have rarely been combined.

The Qur'an does not describe a political system, nor does it propose that religious authority should govern. In fact, it does not even propose that there should be a religious clerical class. In the absence of a defined religious authority, or clerical establishment, people should be free to shape their own government as they wish.

Even when the majority of citizens are Muslim, they are not free to impose their own religious beliefs on others. Historically, Islamic Law has allowed religious minorities to live under the own religious precepts, even when those allowed some behaviors that were forbidden to Muslims. The drinking of alcoholic beverages was, for instance, permitted to Christians and Jews within Islamically governed societies.

Historically, there has almost always been a separation between political and religious authority in Islamic societies. The modern state of Iran, which is in the forefront of many people's minds today, is one of the very rare instances in which religious and political rule are vested in the same authority.

A more typical historical example would be the Ottoman Empire, which was ruled by a Sultan, while religious authority was held by a Shaikh-ul Islam who would have been appointed by a community of religious scholars. The Sultan would ultimately be held to account for transgressions against the religious law.

Islam does not require political power or control, and there is nothing in the Qur'an to suggest that it does. In today's world there are extremists who dream of a unified political and religious authority. Such dreams, however, are not those of the vast majority of Muslims who would realistically prefer to live under systems that simply guarantee freedom of religion.

What is Islam's relationship to other religions?

There are many verses in the Qur'an that affirm the actuality and even the necessity of diversity in ways of life and religious belief:

O mankind, truly We¹ have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Truly the most noble of you, in the sight of God, is the most God-conscious. [49:13]

For every community (of faith) We have appointed ways of worship, which they ought to observe. Hence, do not let those (who follow other ways) draw you into dispute on this score, but summon them to their Sustainer: for you are on the right way. And if they argue with you, say: God knows best what you are doing. He will judge among you on the Day of Resurrection regarding those matters in which you differ. [22:67-69]

¹ In the Qur'an God sometimes speaks as the Divine "We."

Truly those who believe (Muslims), and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabaeans² — whoever believes in God and the Last Day and performs virtuous deeds — surely their reward is with their Sustainer, and no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve. [2:62]

When the Qur’an refers to “believers” and “unbelievers,” what does it mean?

When the Qur’an was first translated into English, a Biblical vocabulary was used, but in some cases this has led to misunderstandings. The word for “believer” is “mumin”: someone who is faithful and trusts that there is a spiritual meaning to life. The word for “unbeliever” is “kafir,” and it literally means to be in denial, and to be arrogant and ungrateful. These words do not refer to non-Muslims per se.

During some of the years when the Qur’an was being revealed to Muhammad, the community of Muslims was under assault by the Meccan Arabs who had driven them out of their homes and land. So the revelations that came during that time refer to the Meccans waging war against them as infidels (kafirs) and idol-worshippers (mushrikeen). During this time, a group of Muslims found refuge with a righteous Christian King in Ethiopia—a fact which virtually every Muslim would know. In Medina, where the Muslims had taken refuge, Muhammad also forged a treaty of mutual support with Jewish tribes living there. Therefore the kafirs (unbelievers, infidels) referred to were not Jews or Christians, but the Arabs of Mecca who were attacking them.

² A symbol for all other divinely revealed traditions, known and unknown.

What is Islam's relationship with Christianity and Judaism?

The Qur'an honors all the prophets of the Abrahamic tradition and implicitly acknowledges that prophets have been sent to all of humanity through the course of human history. In the Qur'an the Prophet of Islam is told to inform "the people of the Book" (Jews, Christians, and others with a sacred scripture): *"Come to a common principle between us and you: That we worship none but God; that we associate no equals with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than God."* (3:64)

In at least sixteen verses, the Qur'an confirms the truth of the previous scriptures and tells Muhammad, *"To you We³ sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety."* [5:48]

The Qur'an makes it clear that if Jews and Christians would follow the revelations that have been given to them, namely the Torah and the Gospel, they would "indeed partake of the blessings of heaven and earth":

If the followers of the Bible would but attain to faith and God-consciousness, We should indeed efface their [previous] bad deeds, and indeed bring them into gardens of bliss; and if they would but truly observe the Torah and the Gospel and all [the revelation] that has been bestowed from on high upon them by their Sustainer, they would indeed partake of all the blessings of heaven and earth. . . Say: "O followers of the Bible! You have no valid ground for your beliefs unless you observe the Torah and the Gospel, and all that has been bestowed from on high upon you by your Sustainer!" [5:65,66,68]

Regarding Judaism and its Prophets:

³ A Divine We, referring to a singular Divinity.

The Divine voice that speaks in the Qur'an not only approves the truth of the Jewish Scriptures, but even claims to be the very same source of revelation: *It was We who revealed the Torah; therein was guidance and light. By its standard the Jewish people have been judged by the Prophets who surrendered to God's will, as well as by the Rabbis and the doctors of Law, for to them the protection of God's book was entrusted: If any do fail to judge by what God has revealed (including the Torah), they are (no better than) unbelievers.* [5:44]

We ordained for the Children of Israel that if anyone slew a person unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land, it would be as if he slew all of humanity: and if anyone saved a life it would be as if he saved the life of all of humanity. [5:32]

We ordained therein for them: "A life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth and equivalence in harm done." But if anyone by way of charity foregoes that retaliation, it is an act of atonement for himself. And if any fail to judge by what God has revealed, they are wrongdoers. [5:45]

Likewise, Jesus, too, is given full respect as a Prophet, and is even referred to as “a Word from God”:

God gives you good tidings of a Word from Him who shall be called the Messiah. [3:45] And in their footsteps We sent Jesus the son of Mary confirming the Law that had come before him: We sent him the Gospel: and therein was guidance and light and confirmation of the Law that had come before him: a guidance and an admonition to those who are conscious of God. [5:45-46] To Jesus the son of Mary We gave clear signs and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit. [2:253]

Finally, respect for all sincere religious communities is enjoined upon Muslims: *O you who keep the faith! When you go abroad in the way of God, be clear and circumspect and say not to anyone who offers you a greeting of peace: "You are not a believer!"* [4:94] *To each community among you We have prescribed a Law and a way of life. If God had so willed He would have made you a single people, but His plan is to test you in what He has given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you differ.* [5:48]

The followers of earlier revelation are not all alike: among them there are upright people, who recite God's verses throughout the night, and prostrate themselves before Him. They believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and vie with one another in doing good works--and they are among the righteous. And whatever good they do, they shall never be denied the reward thereof: for, God has full knowledge of those who are conscious of Him. [3:113-115]

The Qur'an instructs Muslims to clearly declare that: *We believe in God, and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in what was given to Moses, Jesus, and the Prophets, from their Lord: We make no distinction between one and another among them, and to God do we bow our will.* [3:84]

Relationships with the followers of other traditions should be characterized by more than mere tolerance, but rather by respect, compassion, peace and the fostering of coexistence and cooperation. The Qur'an instructs Muslims to show respect to the religious people of previous traditions and says: *Amongst these are people devoted to learning and people who have renounced the world and are not arrogant*"[5:82]

The Qur'an calls for impartiality and fairness in relations with people of other faiths. It undermines any sense of religious superiority by declaring that heaven is not the exclusive domain of Muslims. It clearly states, *“Verily, those who have attained to faith, as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians--all who believe in God and the last day and do righteous deeds, shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve.”* [2:62, 5:69]

In many verses, the Qur'an even asks Muslims to join in fellowship with the followers of other traditions by refraining from discussing subjects that cause division and instead put the emphasis on common themes. *And do not argue with the followers of earlier revelations except in the most beautiful (or gentle) manner.* [29:46] *But do not revile those whom they invoke instead of God, lest they revile God out of spite, and in ignorance: for We have made the deeds of every people seem fair to them. In time, they must return to their Lord, and then He will make them understand what they have done.* [6:108]

Imam Bazargan, who resides in Hollywood, California, has offered the following statistics and examples that help to establish “a keener understanding of the respectful views of the Qur'an toward the Prophets, scriptures and the righteous followers of previous traditions”:

While the Qur'an mentions Prophet Moses' name one hundred and thirty-six times, Prophet Abraham's name sixty-nine times and Prophet Jesus and Mary's names seventy times (collectively), it mentions the name of the Prophet of Islam who is the messenger of this religion only four times.

This wide spectrum of inclusiveness and the fact that the Qur'an repeatedly reminds Muslims of the noble characters in other traditions are further signs of the peaceful nature of Islam.

The third chapter of the Qur'an, Al-Imran (The family of Imran), is named in honor of the ancestral roots of Jesus Christ (Hannah, Holy Mary, Zachariah, John the Baptist etc.), however, there is no chapter in the Qur'an entitled Al-Mohammad (The family of Mohammad).

The nineteenth chapter of the Qur'an, Maryam (Mary), is named after Holy Mary but there are no chapters in the Qur'an named after Fatimeh, the honorable daughter of Prophet Mohammad. Likewise, there are no chapters that are named after Prophet Mohammad's mother or Khadija, Prophet Mohammad's honorable wife.

The seventeenth chapter in the Qur'an is named Bani Isra'il (The Children of Israel), however, there is no chapter in the Qur'an that is called Bani Hashim (The Children of Prophet Mohammad). This is due to the fact that Muslims consider themselves the cousins of the children of Israel (Jacob) from the lineage of Ishmael.

The greater part of some of the longest chapters of the Qur'an (Chapters two, three and five), and a big portion of some of the medium and smaller length chapters of the Qur'an are dedicated to the history of the trials and tribulations of the children of Israel.

Why then do some Islamic governments, such as Saudi Arabia or Iran, restrict religious freedom?

The Qur'an declares in no uncertain terms: *There shall be no compulsion in religion* [2:256]. This assures that people should have the freedom to choose their faith and spiritual destiny. The Prophet set an example for his community to handle the fact of diversity of faiths, requiring Muslims to recognize and respect God's decision in

the matter of allowing various faith communities to exist with each other and even with those who choose not to believe in God at all. (contribution by Sachedina)

Does Islam claim a monopoly on truth or virtue?

It is quite clear from many verses of the Qur'an that righteousness, morality, and one's relationship with the Divine are not the exclusive possession of Muslims. Thus there seems to be a necessity to the diversity of religions and this diversity may help us to understand our humanity and our relationship to God:

If your Lord had so willed, He would have made mankind one community, but they continue to remain divided. [1:118]

For each one of you [several communities] We have appointed a Law and a Way of Conduct [while the essence of religion is identical]. If God had so willed, He would have made all of you one community, but He has not done so that He may test you in what He has given you; so compete in goodness. To God shall you all return and He will tell you [the Truth] about what you have been disputing. [5:48]

What is the Islamic teaching on the use of force?

Does Islam justify violence in achieving its goals? When is the use of force justified?

In general, war is forbidden in Islam, except in cases of self-defense in response to explicit aggression. If there is a situation where injustice is being perpetrated or if the community is being invaded, then on a temporary basis permission is given to defend oneself. This principle is explained in the following verses:

Permission [to fight] is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged – and, verily, God has indeed the power to succor them – those who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, “Our Sustainer is God!” For, if God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, [all] monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques – in which God’s name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed before now. [22:39-40]

The highest justification for a defensive war is for the purpose of defending religious freedom and human rights. This verse also acknowledges Christian and Jewish places of worship as equally worthy of defense because these are places in which “God’s name is abundantly extolled.”

All relevant authorities show that this is the earliest Qur’anic reference to the problem of war as such. It was revealed immediately after the Prophet left Mecca for Medina. The principle of war in self-defense has been further elaborated in the following verses which were revealed about a year later:

And fight in God’s cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression – for, verily, God does not love aggressors. And slay them wherever you may come upon them, and

drive them away from wherever they drove you away – for oppression (fitnah) is even worse than killing. [2:190-191]

The phrase “slay them where you find them” obviously refers to a situation in which a community has already been attacked and is responding defensively. Thus war is permitted when it is defensive in nature. War can only be continued to repel the enemy and must be stopped immediately after the enemy retreats.

Chapter Nine (Surah Tawba) is the most authoritative chapter on the concept of war in the Qur'an and is one that is abused by both extremist Muslims and those who allege that Islam is a violent religion. However, in verses four and seven of this chapter it is clearly stated that Muslims can only declare war with people who have broken their treaty with them or who have resorted to enmity first.

It is also emphasized in this chapter that Muslims must stay loyal to their commitments and never break them, and this applies to all commitments and treaties, not merely to those with other Muslims.

It is further stated that *if they incline to peace, incline to it as well, and place your trust in God: indeed, He alone is all hearing, all knowing!* [8:61]

It has sometimes been asserted that Muslims cannot enter into friendly relationships and alliances with non-Muslims. What is the truth of this?

This assertion is based on a misunderstanding of a verse that tells the Muslims of Muhammad's time not to take as allies those who oppose their religion.

The general principle established throughout the Qur'an is that the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims should be based on peace and fairness. So that there is no ambiguity it clearly and unequivocally states: *Allah does not forbid you from dealing kindly*

and justly with those who do not fight you for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes: for Allah loves those who are just. [60:8]

The Qur'an only restricts relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims as follows: *Allah only forbids you, with regard to those who fight you for (your) Faith, and drive you out of your homes, and support others in driving you out, from turning to them (for friendship and protection). It is such as turn to them (in these circumstances), that do wrong. [60:9]*

To Summarize:

In short, the Islamic principle of “jihad” is purely defensive in nature and is not a mechanism to settle a score or for revenge. While the principle of "eye for an eye" is allowed in Islam, it is always suggested that it should be tempered with fairness and compassion and, better yet, it is always recommended that one should forgive one's enemies.

The Qur'an sets a very high standard for the just defense of human communities and religious freedom. If some Muslims or their governments have not lived up to these principles, it is not sufficient reason to condemn the religion itself. But it is the responsibility of Muslims to oppose those governments or ideologies that violate these principles.

The use of physical force in Islam is permitted only to defend human rights against aggressors or armed occupiers. The requirements for the legitimate use of force in either internal revolution or external war are strict and are clearly spelled out in the Qur'an, the saying of the Prophet (hadith), and legal texts.

Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits. [2:190; 4:175, 5:9; 6:151, 22:39-40; 42:41-43]

If anyone slew a person – unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it would be as if he slew the whole people. [5:35]

Do not kill women or children or non-combatants.(Words of the Prophet Muhammad)

The use of non-violence as a strategy to combat evil has been employed in the appropriate circumstances by some of Islam's greatest leaders. The following verse can certainly justify the strategy of non-violence: *Nor can goodness and evil be equal. Repel evil with what is better. ... And no one will be granted such goodness except those who exercise patience and self-restraint, none but persons of the greatest spiritual blessing. [41:34-35]*

Then why does Islam seem to be associated with terrorists and suicide bombers?

Certain historical and political factors have led to an increase in extremism in the Muslim world and elsewhere, particularly in recent decades. This is not the place to present an historical analysis, but it should be acknowledged that an intolerant ideology has been unleashed. A small minority of the world's one and a half billion Muslims has misconstrued the teachings of Islam to justify their misguided and immoral actions. It is most critical at this time for Muslims to condemn such extreme ideologies and their manifestations. It is equally important that non-Muslims understand that this ideology violates the fundamental moral principles of Islam and is repugnant to the vast majority of Muslims in the world.

Risking one's life in the course of either legitimate violence or non-violence is permitted, even if the probability of death is very high, but deliberately ending one's life is "suicide" and is never

permitted under Islamic law in any circumstances. So-called “suicide-bombers” did not appear until the mid-nineteen-nineties. Such strategies have no precedent in Islamic history. The Qur’an says quite explicitly: *Do not kill yourselves*. [4:29]

Why have not more Muslims condemned those who supposedly “hijacked” Islam?

It is an all too prevalent myth that Muslims have not protested and condemned those who have violated Islam’s moral principles for the sake of their political goals. Not only have the statements and demonstrations against terrorism gone under-reported, in some cases misleading stories have been publicized. Ask any Muslim how he or she felt in the days following 9/11 and you will hear stories of grief, shame, and deep sorrow.

Is the morality of Islam suitable for the modern world?

Some Islamic punishments seem barbaric: cutting off the hands of thieves, the lashing or stoning of adulterers, etc.

The Qur’an was revealed in Arabia to a people who had received no revelation and were barely aware of the great religious traditions. Before Islam, tribal vengeance was the common law. The legal pronouncements of Islam came at a time when there was neither a legal system nor prisons. Eventually Islamic Law grew into a highly developed system of justice whose primary aim was to secure the well-being and dignity of humanity. Within 150 years Islam had developed into a major civilization.

While in a few cases punishment for crimes is specified in the Qur’an, these punishments represent the maximum penalty to be

imposed, and considerable latitude is left for mercy, mitigating circumstances, and the uniqueness of each case. Islamic Law was never meant to be applied in a rigidly mechanical way. While the Western media has sometimes sensationalized certain cases in particular countries, if one looks at the history of Islamic justice, one will find a history of subtle reasoning aimed at fairness and mercy.

Islamic Law is, moreover, a system fully capable of adapting itself to contemporary circumstances. Islamic jurists, informed by the abiding values of Islam and exercising the power of their reason, may interpret Islamic law in ways they consider merciful, appropriate, and just.

Most importantly, Muslims living in pluralistic societies have no religious reasons to oppose the laws of their own societies as long as they are just, but rather are encouraged to uphold the duly constituted laws of their own societies.

Can Islam be reconciled with American democracy?

The Constitution of the United States of America is based on universal values taught by all religions, including Christianity and Islam. The American Constitution is as much Islamic, as it is Christian, and we as Muslim Americans are proud of our Constitution and our democracy. Islam and democracy are compatible and can coexist because Islam organizes humanity on the basis of the rule of law and human dignity. Consider the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence: *“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”* There is no need to quote from the Qur’an; any Muslim will recognize that these principles pervade the whole of the Qur’an.

The first four successors to the Prophet Muhammad were chosen by the community through consultation, i.e. a representative democracy. The only principle of political governance expressed in the Qur'an is the principle of Consultation (Shura), which holds that communities will "*rule themselves by means of mutual consultation*" [42:38].

Then why is democracy so rare in the Middle East?

Whenever contemporary governments anywhere in the world, in order to remain in power and exercise absolute control over the financial and other resources of their respective countries, have abandoned the principles of democratic governance and accountability to law, this is a matter of politics, not religion. When such regimes claim to be Islamic, their claims can be disputed. These regimes may actually be driven by secular and even anti-Islamic ideologies.

Islam does not prescribe a form of government; but it does prescribe certain principles of justice and morality, as we have described. Fortunately, the times are changing and the awakening of non-violent, democratic movements in the Arab world and other Muslim countries is evidence of the values we have been describing in this article.

Can Muslims cooperate with others to achieve common goals?

Following the principles of the Qur'an, Muslims are encouraged to cooperate for the well-being of all. The Qur'an emphasizes three qualities above all others: peace, compassion, and mercy. The standard greeting in Islam is "As-Salam alaykum (Peace be with you)." According to Muhammad Asad, a convert to Islam from Judaism and one of the greatest Muslim intellectuals of the Twentieth

Century: “The ‘peace’ referred to in the above expression has a spiritual connotation comprising the concepts of ethical soundness, security from all that is evil and, therefore, freedom from all moral conflict and disquiet.”

In the Qur’an it is said that God has prescribed mercy for Himself: *“Your Sustainer has willed upon Himself the law of Compassion and Mercy – so that if any of you does a bad deed out of ignorance, and thereafter repents and lives righteously, He shall be [found] much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace.”* [6:54]

Muslims who observe the recommended prayers repeat the phrase “the Compassionate, the Merciful” at least seventeen times a day. If “compassion and mercy” cannot translate into love then they are but abstractions without meaning or application.

An American Muslim scholar, Abdul Aziz Sachedina, expresses it this way: “Muslims believe that they live under the God of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. That God is a Trustworthy, Merciful, Compassionate and Loving God who cares for all human beings more than their own mother. Islam does not encourage turning God into a political statement since humans cannot possess God. They can simply relate themselves to God by emulating God’s compassion and forgiveness.”

Is there a contradiction between revelation and reason? Does Islam encourage or discourage the use of reason?

Faith and reason need not be in conflict with each other. Remarkably, there is nothing in the Qur’an that essentially contradicts reason or science—nothing, for instance, that is the product of the limited scientific awareness of seventh century Arabia. In the sayings of the Prophet, himself, we may sometimes find remnants of the conventional beliefs and unscientific opinions of his day, but

Muhammad advised his followers to heed his spiritual guidance and to remember that his opinions in worldly matters were not sacrosanct.

The Qur'an proposes no theology that runs counter to reason. Within the religion of Islam faith is not an irrational position; rather, faith is the conviction that we live in a spiritual universe characterized by purposefulness, meaning, and mercy. Furthermore divinely inspired messengers and prophets have been found in every human community, and, finally, that the person who reflects on "God's signs," both in nature and in one's own inner being [Qur'an 41:53], will find faith reasonable.

Repeatedly the Qur'an urges human beings to "reflect" (tafakkur) and "use their intelligence" ('aqla). Altogether in nearly eighty instances it mentions the importance of reason and reflection [2:219; 3:191; 30:8; 45:5], one example of which is "*are the blind and the seeing man equal? Will you not reflect?*" [6:50].

Does Islam offer one fixed and unchanging truth for all time or is it flexible and open to change?

It is important to distinguish timeless spiritual principles from certain verses in the Qur'an that may have a particular historic context.

The Qur'an takes a realistic view of human life and attempts to improve it. Slavery, for example, which existed at the time of the Qur'an's revelation was not immediately forbidden, but the rights of slaves were established: they must be fed, clothed, not overworked, or treated cruelly, and there must be a way for them to earn their freedom. The Prophet and his companions gave much of their own resources for buying the freedom of slaves. Through their own example they set in motion the process of mitigating the evils and ultimately dismantling the institution of slavery.

Other seemingly harsh punishments that are mentioned in the Qur'an can be understood as maximum punishments and over time have been interpreted with a spirit of Mercy by the Islamic legal system. The foremost goal of Islamic Law is not to punish but to establish a fair and just social order and ultimately to further human dignity.

What is the status of women? It seems that women are second class citizens under Islam. What are women's rights in Islamic teaching?

The equality of men and women has been recognized and sanctioned by the Qur'an. This equality is based on the different but complimentary natures of men and women, at one level, and the recognition that both, as souls, are essentially the same in the eyes of God.

In fact no document in the history of mankind has done more to secure the rights and privileges of women than the Qur'an. Fourteen centuries ago it established for women a position of affection and respect, the recognition of spiritual equality, the right to own their own property, their rights within marriage and divorce, and their right to participate in business and political life.

The faithful, men and women, are helpers and supports for one another. [9:71]

For men is a share in accordance with what they earned and for women is a share in accordance with what they earned. [4:32]

One of the central verses of the Qur'an on the relationship of men and women, illustrates the subtle and comprehensive nature of Qur'anic vocabulary. *Men are the supporters (or guardians) of women in accordance with the favors God has bestowed upon some over others and with the wealth they spend to provide for others. [4:34]* The operative word here is "qawwamun" which can mean

either supporter, or guardian, servant or master. But the essential point being made here is that the word can mean different function “in accordance with the favors God bestows and with the wealth they spend.” So the verse describes various possible circumstances but does not give a blanket authority to men because they are men.

At the time the Qur’an was revealed, women within Arabian society had no guaranteed property rights, could be divorced on a whim, and could be inherited by the brothers of their deceased husbands. Female infants were even routinely killed in the hope the next child born would be a male. The Qur’an established guidelines that reformed conditions that were unfair and oppressive toward women and established the principle that women are autonomous beings with rights equal to men. Women not only had the right to their own property (a right which would not be attained in the West until recently), they also were entitled to a dowry presented by the man, which would remain her possession providing some insurance in case of divorce. It made clear that Islamic morality cannot condone abusive and demeaning conditions for women, or, indeed for any human beings.

Up until the sixteenth century thousands of women taught in the universities of Islam, in Medina, Cairo, and Damascus. They were respected as jurists and legal scholars and even had men as their students.

Sadly, that this liberation of women was eroded over time cannot be denied or defended. Yet while religion may have been used as a justification for this erosion, the real explanation for the distortion of male/female relations that we have seen in some cultures can be attributed to certain patriarchal influences, which until recently have characterized most human societies. These are not, however, intrinsic to Islam and can even be challenged on an Islamic basis.

Finally, the value of family life has been strongly emphasized, encouraging men to love their wives, daughters, and mothers, and giving women a relatively secure and honored position. Today, women all over the world are working to regain the equity they deserve by referring to the Qur'an and the example of Muhammad.

What kind of example did Muhammad, himself, set?

In fact Muhammad is an important model for Muslim men. Muhammad's first marriage was to an independent business woman, Khadija, who was perhaps fifteen years older than him. This was a loving, monogamous relationship that only ended when Khadija died as a result of the harsh conditions inflicted upon the early Muslim community in Mecca.

Muhammad's next wife, Aisha, was the daughter of his dear friend, Abu Bakr. As was not uncommon in those times, she was betrothed to him at an early age, although the marriage would not have been consummated before the age of puberty. Aisha was another independent and even feisty woman who did not fear to speak her mind to Muhammad and remained his lifelong devoted wife. Afterwards she was known as one of the most learned people of the community, a wise woman in her own right, transmitting approximately two thousand sayings of the Prophet.

Muhammad also married other wives in the following years—they were mature women, most previously married, often widows. Even in his later years when Islam had finally acquired some resources and strength, he lived a spare and frugal life, but there is no doubt that Muhammad loved and respected women deeply, and he was never known to strike a woman.

The militant puritans of today often justify their extreme positions regarding women with sayings of the Prophet that cannot be authenticated and are likely forgeries from earlier times, when it is

known that many Prophetic sayings were fabricated for political purposes. The Qur'an lays down principles of equality and many of the Prophet's own statements broke the mold and conventional expectations of a patriarchal, tribal order. When analyzing the authenticity of a Prophetic saying, are we to give more credence to statements that seem to defend and justify an unjust patriarchal order or those that establish respect and fairness towards women? The answer is obvious: the core principles of the Prophet's teachings brought unprecedented fairness and justice to the lives of Arab women.

One saying of his that comes down to us is: "Any man who educates his daughters will be guaranteed paradise." Another, much beloved in the deepest spiritual circles of Islam is: "Three things have been made beloved to me in this world: women, fragrance, and prayer, in which is the delight of my eyes."

Conclusion:

Most Muslims, even those who may not be observant, love their religion and want it to be respected, and, at the least, not despised or feared. If we have not answered all the questions that might be asked, we hope we have addressed the most urgent ones.

Islam is not an alien religion. It does not claim a monopoly on virtue or truth. It follows in the Way of previous spiritual traditions that recognized One Spirit operating within nature and human life. It continues on the Way of the great Prophets and Messengers of all sacred traditions.

We are reaching out with hands of friendship. We wish to be seen as allies in attaining goals that are common to all humanity: social justice, ecological sanity, world peace, and human dignity.

Salam.

