

Is Islam Compatible with Western Civilization?

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Abstract: Vague hopes and generalizations are insufficient with regard to the compatibility of Islam with Western civilization and its institutions, one of the most crucial theological questions of our time. Careful research makes it possible to articulate definitions and distinctions which give clear and differentiated answers. A Sharia-based type of Islam is not compatible with Western civilization because it is not compatible with democracy, whereas a type of Islam as religion and ethical system that is not Sharia-based is compatible with democracy and Western definitions of human rights and civil liberties. This claim will be articulated in six theses and a conclusion.

1. The types of Islam which reject the social and political claims of the Sharia law are compatible with democracy and with the institutions of Western civilization.

Those Muslims who believe that the foundational principles of our legal and political system do not need to be configured on the basis of Sharia law are following a type of Islam that is compatible with democracy in Germany and in the rest of the free world. A good example of this type of Islam would be the Alawites. Muslims who reject the political and legal claims of Sharia law can honestly affirm democracy without internal reservations; they do not believe they have to make a decision either to follow their faith or to follow the principles of democracy. Rules regulating fasting and prayer are formally part of the Sharia, but they do not comprise a

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political program. Although officially established Muslim theology does not accept a distinction between faith and rituals on one side and Sharia law on the other side, many Muslims practice such a distinction. The many Muslims who practice this distinction between following the rules of their religion and the application of the political part of Sharia law are true friends of democracy and sometimes become the most vocal supporters of democracy.

There are Muslim intellectuals, theologians, progressive thinkers, women's rights activists, and human rights activists who are appealing for a freedom-oriented Islam that does not apply Sharia law to society and politics. However, such people are reaping criticism and intimidation from those who do not want to give up the claims of Sharia law on European societies, with such intimidation extending all the way to death threats. These threats deserve our attention, and the recipients of such threats need our full support and solidarity. Threats can silence even tough-minded intellectuals, suffocating their reforming efforts. Such threats do not belong in an open society. If there cannot be a discussion about the future development of Islam within Europe and the rest of the free world in the twenty-first century, where is such a discussion possible?

A political Islam (which seeks to apply Sharia law to society and politics) which does not experience resistance will become more courageous in making increasingly explicit political demands on society and on the state, even to the extent that any resistance to such demands can begin to be branded as restraints on the religious freedom of Muslims. The state and public institutions must be careful about how partners are chosen from among non-state actors in an open society. Any organization that wants to abolish human rights and civil liberties for other religions should itself deserve resistance in the public square, not recognition by the state.

2. Whoever regards the political actions of Mohammed as establishing a permanent role model for Muslims today represents a type of Islam that is incompatible with Western civilization.

A type of Islam which follows Mohammed not only in his religion but also in his political activities, in his law giving, and even in his conduct of war (as the jihadist groups do) is not compatible with Western civilization. And even a type of Islam which does not call for violence but which uses purely political means to establish and enforce Islam while regarding all aspects of Sharia law as binding on the Muslim community and beyond as it is interpreted in classical Islamic theology is not compatible with Western civilization and law. The classical interpretation of Sharia law, as established in the very centers of Muslim theology, does not allow equal rights for women, prescribes the death sentence for people who are lapsed from Islam, and allows only an official second-class status as publicly subjugated for Jews and Christians.

This last point arises largely from Sura 9:29, where it is written about people who possess “the Scripture” (Jews and Christians): “Fight those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the latter day, nor do they prohibit what Allah and His Messenger have prohibited, nor follow the religion of truth, . . . until they pay the tax in acknowledgment of superiority and they are in a state of subjection” (Shakir translation).

Whoever accepts the theocracy established by Mohammed in Medina (622-632 AD) as an authoritative role model to be imitated in the present can only see democracy as a temporary emergency solution with which one might have to conclude a temporary truce, but which must be replaced, long-term, by an Islamic social order.

While in Medina, Mohammed led his people in multiple wars in which their fallen warriors were already promised paradise as a reward for their martyrdom. “So when you meet in battle those who disbelieve, smite the necks; then, when you have overcome them, make (them) prisoners, and afterwards (set them free) as a favor or for ransom till the war lay down its burdens. That (shall be so). And if Allah please, He would certainly exact retribution from them,

but that He may try some of you by means of others. And those who are slain in the way of Allah, He will never allow their deeds to perish. He will guide them and improve their condition. And make them enter the Garden, which He has made known to them” (Sura 47:4-6; Maulana Muhammad Ali translation). In light of the fact that these verses are still preached by some theologians as valid for today and quoted by extremists to justify their actions, it is simply false to claim that violence and terror in the name of Islam have nothing to do with Islam.

Sometimes it was argued in the past and is still argued today, that the use of force is legitimate in order to defend Islam. But then the question arises of *when* it is required to defend the Islamic community. Can force of arms be a legitimate response to the publication of cartoons of Mohammed? And the related question cannot be avoided: What *means* are legitimate in response to what type of threat?

Some movements would only affirm nonviolent protests as proportionate responses to cartoons, but others would affirm intimidation or even violence against non-Muslims. Some other groups promote violent attacks against cartoonists and artists. Though some groups condemn attacks against people who are not individually guilty, other groups regard everyone as guilty unless he or she belongs to the one “true” Islam. Some even regard police officers of non-Muslim countries as always being a legitimate target for a violent attack. As should be clear, how one interprets the defense of Islam is quite diverse among the various Islamic groups and movements, but this internal theological distinction among Muslims is quite important for everyone else in Western civilization. A protest march in response to a cartoon would be a normal part of democracy; a call for violence is a form of extremism and a violent attack terrorism.

3. Those types of Islam which accept the role of Mohammed as the lawgiver, and therefore accept the laws given by Mohammed as eternally binding, are not compatible with Western civilization.

Whoever accepts the system of laws given by Mohammed as commands of Allah as they were laid down in the Koran and Islamic tradition (as interpreted by the official theologians from

the seventh to tenth centuries A.D. forming Sharia law), as being irreplaceable and binding in all times and places is practicing a type of Islam that is not compatible with Western, democratic civilization. Sharia law requires amputation for theft, stoning for adultery, and beheading for apostasy; those who see these laws as unalterable commands of Allah will see democratically accepted laws as reprehensible human-made laws that must be replaced by the law of Allah. Voices of political Islam are claiming that democracy is a manmade system, rule by the people for the people which stands in contradiction to Islam whereas Sharia law comes from Allah, the Sublime and Almighty. Further, they claim, true Muslims are not allowed to accept laws from any human entity; the system of democracy is, therefore, a modern system of polytheism with laws coming from multiple sources.

Within this perspective, freedom of religion is a one-way street that can be used to allow for one's own propaganda, but freedom of religion will not be granted to others when Islam is the majority religion. And in societies where the Koran and tradition become the exclusive foundation and standard not only for faith but also for society, law, and politics, there can be neither a separation of powers nor the rule of law with an independent judiciary, the hallmarks of democracy. There will also be no room for freedom of speech, civil liberties, equality among genders and religions, or self-determination. Where Sharia law is implemented, there will be an end of the freedom of having no religion, as well as the loss of independent research, expressions of art and science.

4. The question of a form of Islam that is compatible with democracy is not really a question related to religion; it has to do with politics carried out in the name of a religion.

An absolute truth claim is to be found, in a certain sense, in all religions and worldviews, as well as in many political and secular movements. Peace in society does not arise when religions are totally restrained from participation in public life. And it is not truth claims that make a worldview radical; rather, it is the political enforcement of an absolute truth claim that is dangerous and radical. Threats and efforts to intimidate people of other opinions, so that one is

not allowed to criticize a religion or worldview and its representatives, are marks of a totalitarian manner of dealing with people, especially from political Islamic movements toward other Muslims who do not share the same perspective. Conservative piety is not a threat to our democratic institutions and way of life; but a claim to political and social domination in the name of Islam has to be considered as a threat to society.

5. Sharia-oriented Islam which is preached in mosques across Europe is an import from the Middle East. Conversely, there is no truly European Islam yet.

We must not think that Islam in Europe is having an influence in the Middle East in regard to varieties of Islam. On the contrary, Islam from the Middle East is having an immense influence in Europe by means of the people, funds, and key ideas which are coming through well-established organizations. As part of and because of these multiple dependencies on sources in the Middle East, the powers of Sharia-obligated Islam are leaving no stone unturned in their efforts to wipe out every tender root of a democracy-compatible Islamic theology in Europe. Threats, disparagements, and pressure are brought to bear against the few individual Muslim voices in Europe who dare to call for enlightenment or distance themselves from political Islam.

A freedom-oriented Islam simply cannot be expected to arise from the Middle East in our days, for such an interpretation of Islam is not taught at a single mosque or university there. Is it merely an accident that there is no freedom of speech or religion in the entire region? In the Middle East, turning away from Islam is punished with discrimination, persecution, and social death; in some lands, those who turn away from Islam receive the death penalty. Nowhere in the region does one find true political freedoms, such as freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, or the accompanying separation of religion and state. Even Turkey meanwhile seems to follow its Arab neighbors in important ways.

6. Freedom is a primary human good.

The millions of people coming to Europe are fleeing not only from war and terror, from nepotism and corruption, from economic stagnation and a lack of prospects for the future. They are also simply lacking the freedom to breathe. They are fleeing from autocratic regimes, from arbitrary and violent regimes, from all-powerful secret intelligence services, and from extremist threats.²

As freedom is necessary for human flourishing, the crisis in the Middle East is also a crisis of the lack of freedom. And one of the godfathers of this lack of freedom is a theology that takes the laws and form of government from Mohammed as the foundation for the social order today. This theology has become a functioning part of the apparatus of power in the Middle East. This theology teaches the complete validity and authority of Sharia law as divine law for the twenty-first century, even if only a few countries today were fully implementing Sharia law in its criminal law.

A part of Sharia law is that wives have a duty to obey their husbands, and husbands have the right to punish their wives if they disobey. Sura 4:34 says, “Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another, and for that they have expended of their property. Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God's guarding. And those you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches, and beat them” (Arberry translation). That husbands have this right to chastise their wives is still taught by established Islamic theology.

This same Sharia law teaches that the death penalty should be applied to people who fall away from Islam, basing this claim in part on the tradition that, according to Sahih Bukhari, comes from Mohammed himself: “Whoever changes his Islamic religion, kill him” (Hadith volume 9, book 84, number 57). Another prominent definition of the official tradition coming from Bukhari asserts that there are three situations in which it is allowed to shed the blood of

² Translator's note: while working on these paragraphs, I received a very frightening email from a human rights activist in Pakistan who had just received a death threat from Muslim extremists. Such an existential reality is hard for us in the West to fathom.

another Muslim: defection from Islam after accepting Islam, adultery, and committing a murder that is not a revenge killing.

Of course, there are different interpretations within Muslim theology. Nevertheless, in principle, traditional established theology affirms the right of husbands to punish their wives, the execution of people who commit apostasy, and physical punishment for adulterers, the unruly, thieves, rebels, and street criminals; these rights remain largely uncontested within established theology, even if the majority of Muslims worldwide do not opt for living in a country with full application of Sharia law. This established mainstream theology, which is taught on universities and mosques, at best ignores any attempt toward a more progressive theology; in the worst case, it condemns or persecutes anyone who thinks differently or affirms freedom. When this type of theology is imported into Europe, there are necessary and unavoidable conflicts with democracy, freedom, and the rule of law.

Conclusion

The real confrontation within Europe is not about the burqa or a veil over a woman's face. The real battle is about the minds, hearts, and ideas of people. Western societies should not be satisfied with a vague hope that all people can somehow on their own perform a balancing act between traditional Middle Eastern roles for women and equal opportunities and rights for women, or between a pre-modern Middle Eastern form of society and a secular democracy.

It is time for a new explanation of the foundations of democracy and its advantages, which we then communicate and teach. Representatives of all religions and worldviews must accept the rules of constitutional democracy. Whoever opposes the legal foundations of democracy opposes the state and cannot then, with any claim of moral consistency, make use of the freedom of religion, which is an essential part of the foundations of democracy. Imams and religious teachers who warn their followers not to accept the principles of a democratic society do not themselves fit into a democratic society.

It is only proper to expect all citizens to affirm and promote human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and the legal tolerance of other religions, along with equality of rights and opportunities for all. This is neither racism nor xenophobia, not to speak of Islamophobia; these are simply self-evident truths. A form of Islam that limits the application of Sharia law to matters of prayer and fasting is compatible with Western democracy; a form of Islam that demands the acceptance of and public application of Sharia law as god given is not compatible with Western civilization and its institutions.

Additional materials by Christine Schirmacher about Islam which are available online:

1. *The Islamic View of Major Christian Teachings* (WEA/VKW: 2008). Online: [Islam on Major Christian Teachings](#).
2. *Islam and Society: Sharia Law – Jihad – Women in Islam* (WEA/VKW: 2008). Online: [Islam and Society](#).
3. *Islam – An Introduction* (WEA/VKW: 2011). Online: [Islam Intro](#).
4. *The Sharia: Law and Order in Islam* (WEA/VKW: 2013). Online: [The Sharia](#).
5. *Political Islam: When Faith Turns Out to Be Politics* (WEA/VKW: 2016). Online: [Political Islam](#).

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