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Munir el-Kassem presents Islam and some of its leaders

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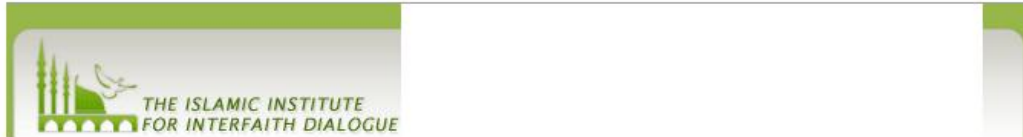
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Religious Responsibilities of Leaders in Times of Crises



This paper was supposed to be delivered at the Interfaith conference between Muslim Scholars and Catholic Bishops in Rome, Italy between March 27th and 29th, 2008. - Unfortunately, the conference was postponed

Genesis of Religious Leadership:

Islam offers a very generous concept of "community". The word "ummah" is peculiar to Islam because community members are united in both religious and political domains. According to Muhammad Hamidullah, in his book "The First Written Constitution in the World", the word "deen" seems to have been used, in the text drafted at the time of Muhammad (pbuh), to designate, indistinctly, "religion" and "government". For the Muslim, faith means submission to God and obedience to His divine, immutable, and eternal law. In other words, Islam to the faithful is "a life style" that transcends rituals to impact all aspects of a Muslim's life including behaviour, educational pursuit, economics, interaction with the environment, and even intellectual development.

From the Islamic perspective, the influence of religious law over all daily activities gives religion a more comprehensive meaning than the classical definition of the term. The application of religious values is expected to leave an imprint on the individual, the society and the entire world. Being a religion and culture, Islam asserts itself as an active and dynamic expression of the divine will which spontaneously flows into the collective will of the "ummah". The solidarity among members of the Muslim community is strongly affirmed by the Qur'an. It asserts itself as a quasi-judicial obligation engaging the responsibility of each person in the community all the way from the leader to the weakest member of the community. In his agreed-upon hadith, Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: "All of you are in a position to care for others (shepherds), and each one is responsible for those under his care." In fact, the Qur'an commands Muslims to form a community whose members, individually and collectively, enjoin the good and forbid the evil: "Let there arise out of you a community of people inviting to what is good, enjoining that which is known (by the revelation for the good of human kind, ma'arouf), and forbidding that which is detested, munkar (evil)" Surat Al-Imran,

Ayah 104. This clearly illustrates that the responsibilities of the leader are divinely enshrined and not temporally determined. This imperative duty to lead is more obligatory in Islam than in any other religious community. There are many prophetic traditions that praise the efforts of a leader who strives to spread justice and maintain equity among members of his community. It is inherent in the definition of Islamic leadership that the leader is responsible, directly and individually to God.

Religious Leader vs. Political Leader:

In its ideal form, Islamic leadership does not recognize the barrier between the religious and the political domains. The Arabic word "Imam" is used exchangeably to denote, as per modern thinking, both the religious as well as the political leader. The same person that heads the government is the one who leads the prayer and provides religious counseling. That does not imply that there may be people within the community who are more religiously knowledgeable. Such people are essential in providing the Imam with consultation "Shura". It is safe to say that Islam is a religion without priests creating a social and political community whose leader derives his power from the faith, even though, he may not be the highest religious authority. Therefore, one cannot look at the Muslim community as a theocracy as is often very improperly claimed in the West. No person or institution is entitled to modify or amend the revealed divine law which is the basis of governance. One reads in Surat Al-Ma'idah, Ayah 3: "Today have I completed your religion for you and perfected my favour upon you and chosen Islam as a deen (way of life) for you."

During the normative period of Islamic history, which spanned close to thirty years after the death of Muhammad (pbuh), the Rightly Guided Caliphs (Al-Khulafa'Al-Rashidoon), all four of whom were highly knowledgeable in all aspects of the Islamic faith, had no problem maintaining the dual role, so to speak, of religious and political leadership. There were all surrounded with men and women who were always available for consultation. Those were the companions of the Prophet who had witnessed the revelation first hand and many of whom were tutored directly by the Prophet. The Caliph's main task was only to oversee the just application of the Qur'anic teachings and prophetic traditions (Sunan) and to maintain the Islamic community. As the guarantor of Islamic identity, he exercised only a unifying function since he had no legislative power. Theoretically, he was only the agent and the representative of the law which he himself had to obey. The Caliph's religious leadership was recognized as long as he faithfully upheld the Qur'anic and Prophetic teachings as agreed upon by the learned companions of the Prophet.

With the establishment of dynasties, as represented by the Umayyads and the Abbasids, the role of the Muslim leader started to get polarized towards the political domain. Even though he still claimed religious leadership through the influence he exercised and the authority he maintained over Muslim Scholars, that leadership became more of a theory than an application. Members of the Muslim community started to congregate around spiritual symbols that resisted the transformation from the simplicity of life as preached by Muhammad (pbuh) and practiced by his companions to the luxury and pomp that characterized the Umayyad "monarchy" rule which was founded by Mu'awiyah. Power tempted those monarchs to attach more importance to worldly affairs than spiritual preoccupations. The ideals of the prophetic community were transformed from full application during the time of the Rightly Guided Caliphs to mere teachings being propagated by luminary scholars who were ready to sacrifice their own lives to uphold the truth they believed in. Those scholars formed the nucleus of a newly emerging religious leadership that would become over the years quite distinct from political leadership.

Rare indeed are those contemporary Muslim political leaders who fail to search for a type of legitimacy by evoking Islamic principles and creating religious institutions to provide guidance to the masses, albeit under close scrutiny. Religious leadership is rarely capable of exercising its responsibility to the full extent. There is always an element of a political watch dog that determines the format as well as the timing to execute such responsibility. Numerous states, born out of the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire or the casting off of European colonization, have formally adopted a form of religious leadership in the person of a Mufti or religious interpreter of Islamic teachings. The Mufti who enjoys the highest religious authority within a certain state may not deviate from the political philosophy maintained by the political leader of the state.

Levels of Religious Leadership:

Although Islam does not lend itself to the establishment of a formal religious hierarchy, the reality imposed on the ground gave way to different levels of religious leadership. There are those levels that are institutionalized by the political establishment and are recognized as integral parts of governments, like ministries of endowments (*Aweqaaf*) and jurisprudence councils (*Dur Al-Ifta'*). For example, in Egypt the Head (Shaikh) of Al-Azhar enjoys a political status equivalent to that of the prime minister. These religious institutions acquired their legitimacy as a result of increasing social and political complexities within Muslim communities, and became like governing councils for all levels of religious guidance. A decision passed by such institutions is binding on all citizens within a defined political entity. Rarely do we find coordination among religious institutions of different political entities. The most common perennial outcome of such lack of coordination is the determination of beginning and end of religious occasions as they are determined by the lunar calendar. This has resulted in the absence of a unified global religious leadership whose directive can be binding on Muslims all over the world.

The failure of official religious institutions, as defined by political entities, to unite on a global level, except for some nominal outbursts like the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) which is highly ineffective in providing meaningful religious leadership, led the scholarship of the Muslim Ummah to search for ways to fill such a void. Many international forums have been formed to provide Muslims with scholarly edicts in all aspects of life from jurisprudence to simple day to day guidance in spiritual pursuit. Representatives of these forms are organizations like the European Jurisprudence Council and the North American Council of Jurisprudence. These edicts from such scholarly forums fall short of meaningful religious leadership as they are not binding except in the moral sense, and only on selected groups within the global Muslim community. The historical realities that produced different religious schools of thought impose a well defined religious imprint on a particular international forum. That renders the decisions of any one forum potentially credible only to a segment of the international Muslim community that subscribes to that particular school of thought. There are moreover, international religious groups with political ambitions like Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimoon (the Muslim Brothers), Hizbul Tahreer (Liberation Party), etc...which claim eligibility to provide religious leadership.

In the midst of diversity in interpreting religious dogma, a few individual scholars and some international religious institutions like the World Islamic Call Society and the Muslim World League, acquired a momentum in representing the aspirations, so to speak, of a wider segment of the world Muslim community. Not fully immune to criticism for the leadership they provide, they remain quite significant in the undeclared influence they exert on the masses. In their own right, individuals as diverse in religious background as Shaikh Yousef Al-Qaradawi who is undeniably one of the worlds' foremost authorities on Islam and 'Amr Khalid who has no formal training in religious matters, are extremely influential in providing religious leadership for Muslims all over the world.

Apart from the international scene, Muslims look for guidance and leadership at different levels. There are regional institutions like Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR), Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC), Canadian Muslim Network (CMN), and many others that are trying very hard, especially during these times of crises involving Muslims all over the world, to provide the kind of leadership that will help us see the light at the end of the tunnel. Quite often, there is duplication in efforts and, due to shortage of financial support, the leadership is rendered ineffective. The challenges are immense and the resources are meagre in comparison. Most of the programs of the aforementioned institutions are run by volunteers and their efficacy is compromised.

Within local communities, Muslims seek guidance from their local Imam(s). These Imams may be graduates of a number of programs in Islamic studies or may have assumed the title by default due to the absence of a more qualified individual. The lack of a formal process of accreditation of Imams -since there is no such thing as ordination within the Islamic establishment- has created real challenges in running the affairs of Muslim communities, especially in the West. In the absence of a governing body, religious leadership becomes the outcome of individual preferences.

In the Muslim world today, there is no smooth flow of religious authority among the different levels of leadership that were eluded to. Thus it becomes a matter of how able an individual or a community is in determining the best course of action under existing circumstances. This unpleasant reality is not reflective of Islam's inability to lead the masses, but is rather a manifestation of interaction of several circumstances, some of which are imposed by complex world issues and some are of the making of the Muslims themselves.

It is not realistic, nor is it expected from an Islamic viewpoint, to establish a unified religious leadership. However, Muslim scholars should take bold steps to define realistic parameters of a practical form of leadership that could eliminate the chaos that Muslims are currently experiencing in this arena. This is not by any stretch of imagination an easy straight forward task. But we need to start the process and brainstorm to come up with a flexible plan that lends itself to necessary modifications as we go forward.

Inevitability of Crises:

Having painted a realistic portrait of the status of religious leadership among Muslims, let us gain some understanding of the significance or lack thereof of crises in developing the character of individuals and communities.

Crises and sedition, trials and tribulations are part of human existence. They are permanent and inevitable. All kinds of antagonism have increasingly torn the world apart ever since God created man. As in Ibn-Khaldoun's *Mouquaddima*, Islam's sociological doctrine sees several reasons for this. It is an innate part of human nature—the tendency toward aggression (Surat Yousuf, Ayah 53: "the inner self is inclined to do that which is bad."), love of power and fortune (Surat Al-'Aadiyat, Ayah 8: "and he has excessive love for wealth."), jealousy and rivalry of interests—as it is in the makeup of society: contestation and defense of central authority. Nevertheless, truth must triumph over error, good must vanquish evil, and justice must crush injustice. Antagonism between individuals, groups, and nations is unavoidable. In Surat Hud, Ayah 118, one reads: "If your Lord had so willed, He could have made humankind one people, but they will not cease to dispute." God explicitly indicates in Surat Al-Aa'raf, Ayah 24, and Surat Al-Baqara, Ayah 36, that human beings are enemies to each other. It was indeed Cane's (Qabeel) jealousy of Able (Habeel) that led him to commit the first crime ever in human history: "And recite unto them the true story of Adam's two sons, when each made an offering and it was accepted from one but not from the other. (As a result) he told his brother: I will kill you; (In response) he said: God only accepts from the righteous." Surat Al-Ma'idah, Ayah 27.

It is interesting to note that if the mistake made by Adam bore no consequences for the intrinsic nature of man, it did have a consequence for the mechanism of social relations. War, confrontations, crises, and all human tensions not only represent an inevitability but also a fundamental necessity for the harmonization of the world, by means of mutually neutralizing people: "If God did not check one set of people by another, the Earth would indeed be full of mischief. But God is full of bounty to all the worlds." Surat Al-Baqarah, Ayah 251. However, despite this divine theory of mutual neutralization of humans, God clearly defines the Islamic ruling concerning the manner of waging war, handling crises and coping with extenuating circumstances: "O you who believe, stand up firmly for God, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to the wrong and depart from justice." Surat Al-Ma'idah, Ayah 8. In the same Surah, Ayah 2, the Qur'an warns that hatred does not lead the believers to "an abuse of law."

Crises: An Islamic Historical Perspective:

Almost immediately after the death of Muhammad (pbuh), Muslims became inflicted with crises, both internal (choosing a leader to succeed the Prophet) and external (wars of the renegades). Had it not been for divine guarantee to protect the faith through preservation of the Qur'an, one would have expected the complete annihilation of the young Muslim community: "We are the One who sent down the Remembrance, and We are determined to protect it." Surat Al-Hijr, Ayah 9.

How was the divine guarantee manifested on the ground? Were those crises divinely orchestrated to test the firmness

of faith among the new Muslims? : "Did people think they would be allowed to claim having faith (in God) without being tested and tried? Verily We have similarly tested those before them so that God would demonstrate His knowledge of those who are telling the truth and those who are lying." Surat Al-Ankabut, Ayat 2&3. Did the crises unfold as a result of divinely formed human nature, as discussed earlier? Is a crisis an indication that something has simply gone wrong and requires human intervention without the need to give it any divine connotation? And if this is the case, are the crises throughout Islamic history a reflection of Islam's failure as a system or the Muslim's failure to properly live by their faith? Do crises help demonstrate the power of faith in living up to the challenges imposed by such crises? Do crises help bring to the fore leaders who would have otherwise stayed unnoticed and ineffective? In other words, can one look at crises as educational opportunities and at leaders as teachers who would use the crises as troughs of knowledge? Do crises help keep our faith in check and help boost our enthusiasm to "hold fast to the rope of God"? Finally, do crises maintain a dynamic outlook of a religion which would otherwise turn into a static set of boring dogmas?

A quick survey of Islamic history shows that the most influential religious figures produced their scholarly imprints during times of major crises. Since nothing in human history is a product of random occurrence, there must be a strong divine correlation between crises and the appearance of able religious leadership. There is ample historical evidence that the wealth of Islamic knowledge we are enjoying today is a direct result of great luminaries who knew how to translate seditions into a legacy of learning. Despite what seemed like insurmountable crises and challenges that could have eliminated the Ummah in its entirety -crises like the campaigns of the Crusaders and the onslaught of the Mongols- the wisdom, agility, dedication, deep faith in God, and great leadership skills of thousands of individuals helped establish a positive dimension to the pain and suffering that people endured during such tribulations. Those individuals taught us the true meaning of: "Fighting has been destined for you while you detest it, and you may detest something which is good for you and you may yearn for something which is bad for you, and God has the full scope of things while you do not." Surat Al-Baqara, Ayah 216.

Umar Ben Abdel-Aziz and the Crisis of Dwindling Spirituality:

Consider the example of Umar Ben Abdel-Aziz whose leadership, like that of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, spanned both the religious and the political domains. His short life in office (two years and five months) was a testimony to his immaculate leadership skills to the extent that historians considered him a miracle shaped by the Divine Will. The immensity of his achievements and the effectiveness of his methods in correcting the path of a community that became almost fully derailed from the true teachings of Qur'an and Sunnah by the irresponsible leadership of his Umayyad predecessors, are worthy of our attention and scholarly investigation.

Abu Ja'afar Muhammad Ben Jarir Al-Tabari in his famous book "The history of Nations and Royalties/Tareekh Al-Umam Wal-Mulook" said: "Al-Waleed's interest was in buildings, factories and real-estate and that was what all people used to talk about during his reign. When Sulaiman succeeded him, people's interest shifted to socializing, entertainment and cuisine. However, when Umar Ben Abdel-Aziz became the ruler, people started asking each other about how much they memorized of the Qur'an, when they would finish reciting the entire Qur'an and how many days they had fasted during the month."

Umar, a model of true Islamic leadership, demonstrated that religion was indispensable in leading the community out of misery, oppression, and chaos, which appeared as a direct result of abandonment of religious guidance, back into prosperity, justice and order which were the landmarks of the normative period of Islamic history, namely that of the first two of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs. Umar's leadership was so effective to the extent that people used to face difficulty in finding eligible recipients of their Zakat funds. Yehya Ben Sa'id said: "I was commissioned by Umar Ben Abdel-Aziz to manage Zakat funds among the Muslims of Africa. I encountered real difficulty in finding eligible recipients, so I used the funds to help people pay their debts. When I did not exhaust the funds that way, I tired helping young men get married." When Umar led by the Qur'an and Sunnah he excelled even within a short period of time, but when others led by their whims and desires they failed despite allowing themselves a lengthy period for recovery.

Shortly after the death of Umar Ben Abdel-Aziz, the Muslim community underwent a relapse as the leaders once again abandoned their religious responsibility. However, God continued to provide the community with reformers who would maintain people's interest in their faith and would be like shining torches to the masses who believed in their religious leadership. Examples of such luminaries include: Al-Hasan Al-Basri, Al-Fadl Ben 'Iyad, Ma'arouf Al-Karkhi, Ahmad Ben Hanbal, Abul-Hasan Al-Ash'ari, Abu Hamed Al-Ghazaali, Abdel-Qader Al-Jilani, Jalal Ad-Deen Al-Rumi, Jamal Ad-Deen Al-Afghaani, Muhammad Abdu, Rasheed Rida, Sayyed Qotb, Youssef Al-Qaradawi and a multitude of others in between.

Ahmad Ben Hanbal and the Crisis of the Creation of the Qur'an:

Another example of exceptional religious leadership is Ahmad Ben Hanbal whose perseverance brought a happy ending to what is referred to in Islamic history as simply

"the crisis". That was four months before the death of the Abbasid Caliph, Al-Ma'amoun who championed the line of thought of the Mu'tazilites. Those people declared that the Qur'an was to be viewed as a created product of God, not simply His revealed discourse. That philosophical engagement which was beyond what the average Muslim could comprehend, was rejected by the traditional scholars "Ahl-As-Sunnah." Under the repression of the Abbasid rulers, many relinquished their cause except Ahmad Ben Hanbal who took his religious responsibility very seriously and refused to abandon his role as a teacher and a religious leader. He demonstrated a profound understanding of Ayah 79 of Surat Al-Imran: "...Be faithful servants of the Lord by virtue of your constant teaching of the Scripture and of your constant study thereof."

It was Ahmad Ben Hanbal's perseverance that brought an end to the Mu'tazilites except from being mentioned in the books of philosophy and history. People congregated around Ahmad Ben Hanbal to the extent that one of his companions, Qutaibah, used to say: "If you meet someone who likes Ahmad Ben Hanbal, then be certain that he is an upholder of the authentic Sunnah of the Prophet." Many historians equate Ahmad Ben Hanbal with Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq. Ali Ben Al-Madini, a great scholar of Hadith and a teacher of Al-Bukhari said: "God fortified this religion with Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq during the crisis of the renegades "Ar-Riddah" and with Ahmad Ben Hanbal during the crisis of the creation of the Qur'an "Khalq Al-Qur'an."

By the fifth century after Hijra, the conditions under the Abbasid rule became so "un-Islamic" that a major convulsion was considered a welcome development in order to shake the people and wake them up from their slumber. Leaders started to compete as to who is the most skillful in dirty political maneuvers. People were over taxed and kept little for their families. That led to sub-standard social interactions. The kind of life that was enjoyed during the rule of leaders like Umar Ben Abdel Aziz was talked about as only belonging in fairy tales. People were in desperate need for a religious leader who could restore the strong connection with their faith, the same as Muhammad (pbuh) was able to accomplish for the people of Jahiliyyah (Pre-Islamic Ignorance Period): "He it is who has sent among the unlettered ones a Messenger of their own, to recite to them His revelations and to purify them of their sin, and to teach them the Scripture and wisdom, though before that they were indeed in error manifest." Surat Al-Jumu'ah, Ayah 2.

Salah Al-Deen Al-Ayoubi and the Crusades:

In 477 (A.H.) (1099 AD), Muslims received a major blow when the first of eight campaigns launched by the Crusades was successful in storming Jerusalem and establishing Christian sovereignty over the holy land. For the next 88 years Muslims faced a bleak future. The very existence of Muslims as a community was threatened by armies of Christian rulers, knights, and merchants who were driven by political and military ambitions, topped by a religious fervor that captured the European popular mind and gained its support. In 565 A.H. (1187 A.D.), Salah Al-Deen Al-Ayoubi (Saladin), having reestablished Abbasid rule over Fatimid Egypt, led his army in a fierce battle and recaptured Jerusalem.

Despite not being a religious scholar, everything about Saladin was an embodiment of Islamic ideals and teachings. His

military conduct and magnanimity was a source of pride for every Muslim. Being chivalrous and devout to his faith, Saladin endowed the Muslims with a great source of energy to recapture their identity that almost got crushed by the Crusaders. In other words, Saladin's religious leadership was offered by example. It is interesting to note that such leadership was complimented by contemporaries of the caliber of Abdel-Qader Al-Jilani who lived during a phase of Islamic history that was wrought with turmoil and internal strife.

Abdel-Qader Al-Jilani and the Crisis of Dirty Politics:

In his masterpiece of History "The Beginning and the End"/"Al-Bidaya Wal-Nihaya", Ibn Katheer painted a clear picture of what went on during the final years of the Abbasid dynasty. Baghdad was the center of a horrifying struggle for power between the Abbasid caliphs and the Suljuqi Sultans who insisted on imposing their influence on the caliphate. When they could not achieve that through peaceful means, one Suljuqi Sultan, mas'oud, waged a series of battles against the Abbasid caliph, Al-Mustarshid, and was finally able to overthrow the caliph and take him into custody. People's belongings were ransacked and the supporters of the caliph took to the streets and started to vandalize property and civil unrest spread throughout the Iraqi region. Women were seen wailing in the streets and men stopped attending congregational prayers at the mosque of Baghdad.

In the midst of the sedition that shook the foundation of the Muslim community and threatened the faith of people who could not tolerate the power struggle in the political arena, Abdel-Qader Al-Jilani rose as a shining star that provided guidance during the darkness of the night. He preached tirelessly and reminded the people of the Hereafter. He was unmatched in his ability to penetrate the hearts. His orations were dynamic and dealt with what people were experiencing. He induced the past in as much as it could benefit the present and the future. He was very skillful in articulating his ideas to produce a desirable effect. Historians reported that Abdel-Qader Al-Jilani's impact on the people was significant and produced the kind of remedy that was expected of an effective religious leader. Ibn Katheer said: "He used to enjoin good and forbid evil in front of caliphs, ministers, sultans, and judges, in private and in public. He was even ready to admonish those who needed his admonishment without fearing anyone but God." Abdel-Qader Al-Jilani's leadership did not ignore the need to train people who could spread his teachings throughout the Muslim world. He succeeded in halting the derailment of the Muslim community for centuries to come. His students were not only instrumental in reclaiming for the masses the spirituality they had lost, but they succeeded in spreading Islam deep inside Africa and all the way into Indonesia, India and China. It was the word rather than the sword that spread Islam beyond the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula.

The Mongols: The Ultimate Crisis:

In the seventh century after Hijra, the Muslim world faced a disaster whose magnitude was rarely ever experienced throughout human history. The savage Mongols literally devoured the entire Muslim world like locusts unleashed on a green field. People became convinced that the Mongols were unstoppable and that it was in their destiny to succumb to their invaders. The future of Islam as a faith and a way of life never seemed so bleak, especially when two major jolts, the Crusades and the Mongols, shook the Muslim world almost at the same time. Despite what medical practitioners refer to as hopeless prognosis, a full recovery was being divinely planned against all perceivable odds. It was nothing short of a miracle that could halt the Mongolian onslaught. And perhaps in retrospect, what ended up happening was indeed a miracle.

The crisis that was by far the most serious to threaten the Muslim world was not only neutralized but reversed to the extent that it became a source of great benefit. How was that achieved continues to be a source of bewilderment to all historians. The subjugators laid down their arms before the faith of those they were trying to subjugate. The savages of yesterday became the preachers of tomorrow. The Mongols accepted Islam as groups and as individuals. Within a short period of time, the Mongols were transformed from attackers of Muslims to protectors of Islam. How could have that possibly happened?

It was indeed a demonstration that the divine will was not bound by the cause-effect relationship: "His command is such that if He wills something, He would say to it be, and it becomes." Surat Ya Seen, Ayah 82. Whereas humans are

unable to reason outside this relationship, God wants us not to lose focus that faith is as essential in weighing observations as reason is. After all, that is what faith is all about: a firm belief that God is at the center of all things. Had the Muslims not been subjugated to the convulsions they were made to endure, they would have perhaps lost interest in religion all together. Some shaking of the sand mixture will always bring the gold to the surface.

In case of the Mongols crisis, it is interesting to note that God kept his human tools of intervention almost unanimous. Whereas history recorded the names of the champions whose leadership was instrumental in reversing the tide of a particular crisis, those who neutralized the most serious of crises remained unknown to us. They were the ones whose wisdom, and deep commitment to their faith allowed them to effectively reach out to the Mongols and bring an end to the crisis. Their religious leadership was able to bring out of the Mongols jurists, scholars and effective preachers in conformity with the Qur'anic statement: "And whomsoever it is God's will to guide, He expands his bosom to Islam (submission to the will of God), and whomsoever He wills to send astray, He makes his bosom closed and narrow as if he were ascending in the sky." Surat Al-An'aam, Ayah 125.

Crises Inflicting Muslims in the Modern Age:

Currently, all religious communities are living through a profound crisis with so many dimensions that are determined by a world-wide earthquake brought on by exceptional challenges in all aspects of life: political, economic, ecological, military, moral, cultural, and so on. In addition to these challenges, the international Muslim community has some unique circumstances that were precipitated by the events of September 11, 2001 (commonly referred to as 9/11).

It is beyond the scope of this article to present all the challenges currently faced by Muslims. My intention is to present them in connection with the responsibility of present day religious leadership. One obstacle that has been snowballing over time is the extraordinary diversity and multiplicity within the international Muslim community. There is far greater ethnic diversity than in any other religious community. This diversity has been legitimized by political entities that end up dictating the degree of efficacy of any level of religious leadership. With this arrangement, religious leaders are rendered into preachers without executive powers. Having said that, no one can dismiss the power of effective preaching in transforming people, thus the need to learn history lessons as I attempted earlier in this article.

September 11, 2001:

By far, the most serious challenge facing Muslims in this phase of their history is the incipient attempt to demonize Islam and Muslims. It is wrong to assume that such attempts came as a result of 9/11. Indeed, a more realistic assessment would look at 9/11 as the day project "demonize Islam" was launched. Since that infamous day, books have been written and theories have been advanced about the way the horrible events of that day unfolded. I am not about to subscribe to any particular theory, but it is rather clear to any objective examiner of world events that the so called "war on terrorism" is a convenient front to much deeper objectives. Perhaps the slogan that was raised in the early nineties of the twentieth century, "New World Order", is the best summary of what is being planned behind closed doors.

Christian Zionists:

In the last decade, or slightly more than that, a branch of Christianity has arisen to political power in the U.S. with an utterly outrageous outlook on the Middle East. Large parts, though not all, of the evangelical churches have adopted Christian Zionism which favours unconditional support for Israeli policies and hostility towards Palestinians. Such dangerous outlook is based on a peculiar reading of the "Old Testament" in which God calls for Israelite dominion over large parts of "the Promised Land." Therefore, according to Christian Zionists, Palestinian nationhood would block the fulfillment of God's intentions. In the radical version of this theology, some Christians draw on the Book of Revelations to insist that the End of Days is close upon us. Its coming will entail the bloodiest of wars-Armageddon (Har Megiddo in Hebrew) – in which Israel must triumph over its satanic foes. Thus the view that has been propagated all over the world that Islam is satanic in origin and that Muslims are satanically violent by their very nature.

The World-Wide Earthquake:

Just as the 9/11 attacks were unprecedented for what was propagated as a religious justification, the response has been also unprecedented on the part of the U.S. government and its allies. Thousands of lives have been lost in the

name of teaching democracy to the ignorant masses and ridding the world of weapons of mass destruction. The colonizing powers of the last century that came at the heels of the Crusaders campaigns are now reinvading the Muslim world, albeit with a different strategy. The horrors of war and the deprivation inherited from decades of colonial subjugation are producing generations of angry young people who are probably seeing on movie screens the plentifulness that the West is enjoying while they are swimming in oceans of misery. Violence and counter violence are becoming the inevitable outcome of this craze.

The worldwide earthquake has stimulated restorationist fervor among some Muslims, a phenomenon which is encountered across religious communities whenever they are immersed in a crisis of massive proportions. As in the other Abrahamic communities, some of these fervent restorationists have turned to violence as a tool to rid the community or even the world of the "impurities" that threaten its very existence. Yet the majority of religious leadership has been quick to denounce violence as a means to "restore" Muslim supremacy in the Middle East or achieve it anywhere in the world.

Religious Leaders as the Heirs to the Prophets:

Religious leaders have a great responsibility in overcoming their carnal temptations to show compassion to their own group while teaching the others a lesson in the disadvantages of "going astray." A religious leader is a spokesperson of the prophet he represents. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is reported to have said: "Scholars (religious leaders) are the heirs to the prophets." God commanded Muhammad (pbuh) by saying: "Call to the path of your Lord with wisdom and the use of a good (practical) advice." Surat Al-Nahl, Ayah 125. A religious leader must have what the Chinese call "jian ai", "concern for everybody." All Abrahamic traditions agree on the theme of "love for the others." Jewish law stipulates: "Honour the stranger," Jesus said: "Love thy enemies," and the Qur'an states: "O you who have faith: Be staunch in justice, witnesses for God, even though it is against yourselves or your parents or your kindred." Surat Al-Nisa', Ayah 135. A religious leader must have what it takes to see beyond the narrow spectrum of events and lead outside the boundaries of ordinary human desires and carnal wishes.

Competent religious leaders who are up to the challenge presented by a complex array of modern realities must be able to bypass the confines of sectarian restrictions, be brave in presenting viable alternatives: "O Messenger: Make known that which has been revealed to you from your Lord, for if you do it not, you will not have conveyed His message. God will protect you from (the wrongdoers among) people." Surat Al-Ma'idah, Ayah 67, and show respect to people of other faith traditions: "And argue not with the People of the Scripture unless it is in the best of ways, except with such of them as do wrong." Surat Al'Ankabut, Ayah 46. Who is most qualified to face the challenges: the highly qualified scholars of the calibre of Al-Qaradawi, the neo-preachers (Al-Du'aat Al-Judud) like 'Amr Khaled, the academic thinkers like Mahmoud Ayoub, the political activists like Nihad 'Awad, the modernist educators like Hamza Yousuf, or perhaps a team of all of the above?

Conclusion:

As a result of religious leadership, whether genuine or self declared, becoming more conspicuous, many are viewing this leadership as not necessarily more compassionate, more tolerant, more peaceful or more spiritual than the rest of the people. This is a very dangerous view because it robs religion of its relevance and even makes it the culprit instead of being the saviour. Unfortunately, nowadays, compassion does not seem to be a popular virtue among religious leaders. Many prefer to be right rather than compassionate. They do not want to give up their egos. They want religion, as Karen Armstrong, the famous author says, "to give them a little mild uplift once a week so that they can return to their ordinary selfish lives, unscathed by the demands of their tradition." She adds: "Religion is hard work; not many people do it well. The failure of religious people to be compassionate does not tell us something about religion, but

about human nature. Religion is a method: you have to put it into practice to discover its truth." A similar sentiment is echoed in the Qur'an: "It was by the mercy of God that you were lenient with them (O Muhammad), for if you had been severe and hard-hearted they would have forsaken you." Surat-Al-Imran, Ayah 159.

Glossary

A.H. After Hijrah (After Migration from Makkah to Medina), the historical event that marks the beginning of the Islamic lunar calendar.

Abbasids The dynasty that ruled after the Umayyads

Ahl-As-Sunnah Followers of the authentic teachings of the Prophet

Al- Du'aat Al-Judud Neo-preachers of Islam

Al- Azhar One of the oldest Islamic Universities, located in Egypt

Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimoon Muslim Brothers, an Islamic organization with a political platform

Al-Khulaf'a Al-Rashidoon Rightly Guided Caliphs

Ar- Riddah Crisis of the renegades

Aweqaaf Endowments

Ayat/Ayah Qur'anic chapter

Caliph Community leader who succeeded the Prophet

Deen Generally speaking: Religion/From the Islamic Perspective: Islamic way of life

Dur Al-Hfta' Jurisprudence Councils

Fatimid A line of Imams that ruled Egypt from the 10th to the 12th century

Habeel Able (son of Adam)

Hadith Sayings of Prophet Muhammad

Hizbul Tahreer Liberation Party, an Islamic organization with a political platform

Imam Leader of the prayer, religious leader

Jahiliyyah Pre-Islamic Ignorance Period

Khalq Al- Qur'an Creation of the Qur'an

Ma'aruf Recognized as good

Mufti Highest religious authority within a certain state

Munkar An act which is disliked intensely

Mu'tazilites A school of thought that used reason as the basis of all knowledge

Ottoman Empire One of the three empires that emerged out of the weakened Abbasid dynasty and was centered in Istanbul

(pbuh) Peace be upon him

Qabeel Cane (son of Adam)

Shaikh Head of a tribe, ruler, religious teacher

Shura Consultation

Suljuqi A military dynasty that ruled portions of the Abbasid state while the caliph stayed on the throne as a symbol of legitimate government.

Sultans Rulers in medieval Islamic states

Sunan Prophetic traditions (actions and sayings)

Sunnah Teachings of the Prophet, next in importance to the Qur'an

Surat/Surah Qur'anic chapter

Umayyads The dynasty that ruled after the four Rightly Guided Caliphs

Ummah World community of Muslims

List of References

(In the same order as they were used in the text)

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