

July 6th, 2006

Assalamu 'Alaykum

The purpose of this letter is to initiate discussions of long-term planning to deal with the rising discord between Muslims and non-Muslims in Canada. We seem to be in "reactionary mode," where we react to whatever events affect us, and do not exert ourselves sufficiently to identify root problems and develop long-term strategies to deal with them. I will argue below that at the ideational level, this discord is based on a black and white world-view, where groups of various religious orientations view themselves as "good" and others "evil," and strategize towards a "win-lose" outcome. To counter this oppositional world-view, I wish to propose a peacemaking ethos, overcoming prejudice and isolation, and working towards "a win-win" outcome. I will begin by identifying possible sources of the discord, proposing strategies at both the external and internal levels. The following points are not intended to be comprehensive and are merely ideas to initiate future discussions.

External Problems:

- 1) **The rise of a destructive, war-like, Messianic ethos, with a discourse of "good" and "evil," and large-scale destructive policies, as manifested in war against Afghans, Iraqis and others.** This ethos can exist at various levels: Whereas some people may be actively messianic, others may only be affected by the black and white world-view. Historically, since the crusades, Messianism has deeply influenced Muslim-Christian relations. A thousand years ago, believing themselves the "holy" Frankish race, the crusaders attempted to purge the Holy Land from the "accursed" Persian race (See Pope Urban II speech at Clermont), who were polluting the Holy Land with their presence, thereby preventing the coming of the Messiah. The time we are living in now coincides, with the second thousand-year cycle and the second rise of Messianic expectations.

Suggested Strategies:

- 1) To counter Messianism, Christians and Jews have some wonderful positive values and recognize the general undesirability of hate. In addition, they have the *fitra*, the beautiful human nature by which we can all distinguish between the positive and negative. We need to find ways and means of reaching out to these positive values and human conscience, working towards the recognition of harmful activities, putting a stop to them and replacing them with friendship.
- 2) Study the extent of damage this ethos has caused, e.g. how many Canadians died as a result of the war in Afghanistan, which seems to be only harming everybody: whether Afghan, Canadian or otherwise.
- 3) Identify sources, which propagate destructive Messianic ideology and address them, e.g. *Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which can imbue children and teens with the "hate" ethos. For example, in *Lord of the Rings*, free peoples of the West and North enter an all-out war with the terror-inflicting forces of the South and East, in Middle Earth (Middle East?), for the second time after a thousand-year lapse (crusades?). On the border of the conflict lies the land of Gondor (Palestine?), run by a steward, and awaiting the coming of a king, who is also a healer (Messiah?). Interesting is Saruman (Catholic church?), the leader of a group of priest- or monk-like wizards, who in the previous conflict lead the wizards, but has turned evil, thereby necessitating the new leader, Gandalf (Evangelicals/Masonites/templars/another church?). Also interesting is the steward (Jews?), who fails to accept the new king and dies a pagan death. As we can see, this book promotes a disturbing world-view, made even more disturbing by the fact that it is widely read by teens and young persons.
- 4) We need to develop our own media, such as a newspaper, that promotes a more balanced view and that counters the "Lord of the Rings" worldview. I think we should work together with African Canadians, Aboriginals, Asians, and anyone else who wishes to promote a more positive worldview.

Internal Problems:

At the ideational level, we have largely ignored some of the Qur'an's most fundamental teachings – monotheism, the peace-making ethos and the empowerment of women- a failure that has led to some senseless, destructive and unbalanced actions. In order to improve our collective actions, we need to address our problems at their ideational roots.

1) Decline of Monotheism and the rise of ancestor/scholar veneration in the form of a narrow, sectarian interpretation of Islam.

Qur'anic monotheism leaves no room for a rabbinic-like religious elite or clergy. For example, Sūrat Ālī 'Imrān (3:64) defines Muslims as those who do not take each other up as Rabbis/ *arbāb*. (See the term "Rabbi" below)

The tangible benefits of monotheism can be noted in the removal of the clergy and intellectual boundaries, which confine an individual's thinking to a particular cultic framework, and which also act as a barrier between the individual and God. When following the Qur'anic teachings of monotheism, individuals become "alive," seeing, hearing and thinking outside the box. On the other hand, the Qur'an portrays unbelievers as "dead" persons, who cannot hear, see or think beyond the barriers surrounding them. Noteworthy are a third Qur'anic category, the ones who go astray (*ḍālīn*), who let others do their thinking for them, and have not developed their own abilities to see, hear and think. For example, they sit back passively and ask others to light a fire to see with (*istawqada*) and close their ears when a thunderstorm hits them (al-Baqarah 2:1-20). Thus, the result of Islamic monotheism is enlivenment. Since our faith is the very core of our being, enlivening our very hearts and minds can have a tremendous impact on our actions in every aspect of human endeavour, whether it is the economy, arts, sciences or human relations. Therefore, we need to develop our capacities to look and think beyond our cages, reflecting critically on our inherited traditions and current behaviours, identifying unacceptable ideas and practices, thereby initiating a process of enlivenment.

The extent of the decline of monotheism can be noted in the debate over women Imams, where most Muslims chose to follow an ancestral prohibition directly opposed to the Qur'an. The basis for the prohibition is a *hadith* in Bukhari, stating that a people who give the governing of their affairs to a woman wouldn't prosper. Not only does the content of the *hadith* oppose the Qur'anic portrayal of the queen of Sheba, but also accepting the testimony of the tradition's transmitter defies the Qur'an, since the transmitter was convicted of slander and the Qur'an deems the testimony of such a person unacceptable (al-Nur 24:4). This example shows just how much the authority of the Qur'an wanes compared to a narrow, sectarian, form of Islam: "Sectarian" because it places sectarian tenets over and above the Qur'an and "narrow" because it only accepts a limited part of the wide-ranging interpretations of medieval Sunni Islam, bearing in mind, that several medieval Sunni scholars allowed women to lead prayers.

A suggested strategy could be to initiate panel discussions on related topics within our mosques, thereby encouraging independent thought and a process of enlivenment. Speakers representing various perspectives should be present, e.g. if one should choose the topic of women imams, mosques should have speakers for and against the idea, as opposed to only against the idea, as has largely been the situation so far.

2) The disempowerment of women and resulting imbalance in our focus:

This notion is the result of an observation and subsequent reflection in connection with the Qur'an. The observation took place in an Islamic school, where I was actively involved for a couple of years. The board, which was comprised of men, were primarily interested in fund-raising, acquiring a larger building and going up to grade eight, since the school only went up to grade six. On the other hand, the parent committee, which was comprised of women, was primarily interested in the quality of teachers, textbooks and equipment. It seemed to me that the men had a genius for "expansion," whereas the women had a genius for "nurturing." This

difference in foci does not mean that the men were not also interested in quality education, or that the women were not also interested in expansion; it only means that the contribution of women helped bring a focus on quality which was vital to the school's success: The more balanced the foci of men and women, the more successful the school. In order to have a balance, women must be motivated to contribute and motivation comes only through empowerment. I think the same can be applied to any institution, whether it is a school, government or mosque: we need to balance power between men and women. Interestingly, every nation that managed to conquer us empowered their women more, whether the Mongols, English or Americans. It is as if women contribute internal strength, without which a nation cannot hope to prevail externally.

For me, the above observation resonated with surat al-Nahl, which contains a passage dealing with gender discrimination from the moment a baby girl is born (16:58-59). The ignorant fathers are unhappy with the birth and contemplate infanticide or letting her live in a state of contempt/weakness (*hun*). God deems their judgment "worse," either meaning that their actions are exceptionally bad, or that their judgment will become worse in the future. Reading this passage together with another verse in the same surah enhances the meaning of both segments. The verse contains the similitude of milk, the wholesome fluid upon which healthy human beings are reared, and which is produced from in between two unpalatable fluids: blood and *farth* (16:66). Similarly, in order to have a healthy society, it must be reared upon the values and ideas of both genders; otherwise the society runs the risk of imbalance and bad decision-making. If we have only "blood" then all we will get is "blood" we cannot hope to achieve "milk."

A suggested strategy could be to initiate panel discussions at our mosques on issues such as women imams and segregation with the objective of empowering women. Other internal problems that need addressing are isolation and the declining role of the mosque compared to the time of the prophet.

3) The neglect of the peacemaking ethos in favour of a destructive approach

1) Our approach needs to be in tune with our faith, with its peacemaking ethos and teachings of kindness and humility. For example, in Surat Fuṣṣilat (41:34f.) God teaches us to repay unkindness with kindness and tells us the benefits of this long-term approach, which can transform enemies into friends.

2) We need to point out to our youth that the Qur'ān distinguishes clearly between two groups of harm-wishers: those that actively participate in ethnic cleansing against us and those that don't (al-Mumtaḥanah 60:8-9). Defensive military activity is only prescribed against the ethnic cleansers and only until they turn to peace (al-Baqarah 2: 190-194). Otherwise God prescribes forgiveness and patience (al-Baqarah 2:109; Alī 'Imrān 3:186).

3) We need to point out to our youth the power of the peacemaking ethos, which, in my view, is in the win-win outcome as opposed to the lose-lose outcome. Persons who adhere to the win-lose ideology and think they need to make somebody else lose in order feel they are winning, lose out in the end, because the persons they "bully" will end up their enemies leading to a continuous state of fighting and weakness.

To demonstrate why I think the peace-making ethos is so powerful, I would like to share two examples from personal experience. A distant relative, who had harmed my husband and me, found himself in difficulties. We had the option of either ignoring him or repaying him with kindness. Being Muslim and wishing to improve our account for the Day of Judgment, we opted for the latter. The result was a win-win situation all around; perhaps we won the most, since we managed to rid ourselves of a grudge we had been carrying for years, thereby gaining in happiness. If we had left the person to his difficulties, the person would have lost, but we also would have lost, since we would not have overcome the damaging effects of the person's harm, i.e. the grudge. The second example comes from going through various power struggles with my children at various stages of rebellion, whether the teenage years or the terrible twos. In a win-lose scenario, I could have squashed them, thereby breaking their spirits. However, being a mother, I wanted the best for my children and wanted them to grow up strong, self-confident

individuals, so I worked at the win-win option. The same applies to every person: Every person is the child of someone, every person deserves to win; in a way every person is my child. Needless to say, I find the win-lose option an immature and irresponsible choice for any dealings between human beings.

4) When dealing with our youth and others, we need to develop a constructive, nurturing approach as we see the Supreme Educator use in the Qur'ān, when He taught peoples of various religious backgrounds the Islamic faith. God did not start with destroying existing faiths, thereby wiping the slate clean and beginning from scratch, but affirmed the already existing foundational values and affected change by constructively replacing the better value for the unacceptable one. For example, the Fāṭihah establishes the common grounds and basic principles, whereas al-Baqarah affects piecemeal change.

Perhaps some of our youth who are most vulnerable are the ones that are isolated within cult-like groups, an isolation that is made easier by segregation and the inability of families to be together during mosque activities. During the prophet's lifetime, the mosque united the Muslim community; it was a place where people could meet one another and feel welcome, as opposed to today, where a culture of segregation, sectarianism and close-mindedness dominates. The mosque is the heart of the Muslim community, and its problems need to be addressed before it can become functional once again.

Key Terms for Discussion:

Islam: Peacemaking. Islam is usually translated as “submission,” which is a bad translation, because it does not give “*islam*” when translated back into the Arabic, but “*istislām*.” There is a world of difference between these two words: whereas *istislām* is passive and turns over the agency to someone else, *islām* is not only active, but causative. The basic form, *salām* means peace, well-being and safety. Therefore, the causative form means peace-making, well-being-making and safety-making. These three meanings originate from the root meaning of “wholeness,” a person being internally wholly devoted to a single God as opposed to being torn apart by devotions to more than one God (al-Zumar 39:29). “Submission” may be an orientalist translation, perhaps distancing Muslims from the “peacemakers” that Jesus blessed in the Bible. Alternatively, it could also reflect our current understanding of our faith.

Semites/Semitic: a group of peoples/languages that includes Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, Ethiopic, Akkadian and Syriac. The prophet Muhammad is a Semite and the Qur'ān a Semitic scripture, since it is in Arabic. The prophet's geneology goes all the way back to Sam, the son the Noah.

anti-: against

anti-Semitism: Usually used to denote hostile activities towards Jews, but is not generally used in connection with anti-Muslim activities. The recognition that anti-Muslim activities may have racial connotations is not yet reflected in the language use. Since Semite/Semitic originally includes Arabic, the prophet, the Qur'ān and Muslims, we need to reclaim that term.

Islamophobia: Similar to claustrophobia, this term underlines the “fear” aspect and not the “racism” aspect of anti-Muslim activities. It does not adequately express the negativity of anti-Muslim activities, but seem to make of “fear” an excuse, even reinforcing the “terrorist” image.

Terrorist: Someone associated with the use of terror. Within North America, this term is usually used to describe Muslims and is not used self-critically by non-Muslims, for example, when analyzing the effect of American carpet-bombers on the Afghan population. The term seems to be used by those in power to designate the “other,” usually disempowered persons, perhaps to justify atrocities committed against them, e.g. in the Afghan context.

Terror is a common motif in the Bible, especially in association with apocalyptic texts, and also occurs as a description of the deity. Perhaps the proliferation of this term at the present time is connected to apocalyptic/Messianic expectations and projects the accompanying terror upon the “other.”

Zealot: Someone associated with excessive zeal. In connection with Muslims who commit violent activities for ideological reasons, “zealot” is more apt than “terrorist” since it stresses the “zeal” motivation as opposed to the “terror” motivation.

Rabbi: A Semitic word made up of *rabb* and the first person pronominal suffix. *Rabb* means lord, teacher, master, chief, or leader, so *rabbi* would mean “my lord,” “my teacher,” etc. In the Qur’an it is applied to God and the use of human “rabbis” in the place of God is criticized. In Judaism, it refers to highly learned experts in Jewish law.

Fundamentalist: This term was chiefly used in the Protestant context and referred to persons who believed in the literal interpretation of the Bible. Most Muslims, who are termed fundamentalist today, do not go back to the literal teachings of the Qur’an, but to inherited traditions and should be termed “traditionist” as opposed to “fundamentalist.” Muslims do not seem to have a fundamentalist movement at the present time, except for some feminist and holistic interpretations of the Qur’an.

Literalist: Someone who follows a literal interpretation of the Qur’an. Generally, sectarian interpretation, whether Sunni or Shi’i, is not literalist in character, but follows the opinions of a narrow range of first and early second century “authorities” termed *ahl al-ta’wil*. Therefore, they should not be termed “literalist,” but “traditionist.”

Messianism: At the present time, Messianism is a movement centered on the expectation of the coming of a Messiah and is associated with apocalyptic ideas and an upcoming war such as “Armageddon.” In Christianity, the coming of the Messiah is associated with the passing of a thousand years. Jewish Messianic hopes can be noted in the promulgation of the “Star of David,” which symbolizes the Davidic Messiah.

Conclusion:

In light of the above, we are facing difficult times and should therefore prepare ourselves to the best of our combined abilities. Our internal problems are paralyzing us with two possible outcomes: either further divisions or successfully overcoming our challenges. If we continue to give the opinions of our rabbinic-like religious elite authority over and above the Qur’an, we may just end up with divisions of “orthodox,” “conservative” and “reform,” similar to Rabbinic Judaism, since “God does not change His ways.” (35:43; 6:68, 159) Alternatively, we can look at what is perhaps the most successful reformation in recent history: that of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century Muslim reformers, such as Muhammad Abduh, Qasim Amin, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and Abul Kalam Azad: successful because it affected a wide range of Muslims and because it did not result in further sectarianism or bloodshed. With respect to women who were living in Taliban-style conditions at that time, the main goals of these reformers were education, removing the face-veil (*sufur*) and removing gender apartheid. Few managed to escape their influence; even Hanbalite Saudi Arabia introduced some reforms in the area of education. In my view, the success of these reformers is largely due to their dependency on the Qur’an and reason as opposed to blind tradition, and to their generally non-aggressive, non-confrontational stance (Of course, there were exceptions). Similar to the Qur’anic approach, they affected change by looking towards common grounds first and basing their reforms upon these common grounds.

In my view, we should begin with reforming the mosque, since it is the heart of the community, and without a functional mosque, we may not survive these difficult times.

Sincerely,
Nevin Reda