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Is Islam Compatible with Western Civilization?

Christine Schirrmacher

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. In this regard, careful research makes possible clear, differentiated answers.

Essentially, forms of Islam based on Sharia law are not compatible with Western civilization because they are not compatible with democracy, whereas Islamic religious and ethical systems not based on Sharia are compatible with democracy and with Western definitions of human rights and civil liberties.

In this article, I substantiate the above statement through six theses and a conclusion.

1. The types of Islam that reject the social and political claims of 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. One 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 that 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 political program.

Although officially established Muslim theology does not accept a distinction between faith and rituals on one hand and Sharia law on the other hand, many Muslims practise such a distinction. Those who do distinguish between following the rules of their religion and the application of the political part of Sharia law are true friends of democracy; sometimes, they become the most vocal supporters of democracy.

Muslim intellectuals, theologians, progressive thinkers, women's rights activists, and human rights activists are appealing for a freedom-oriented Islam that does not apply Sharia law

*Dr **Christine Schirrmacher** is currently professor of Islamic studies at the Evangelisch-Theologische Faculteit (Protestant University) in Leuven, Belgium and at the University of Bonn, Germany, where she also teaches Middle Eastern history and languages. She has visited many countries of the Middle East, is head of the International Institute of Islamic Studies (IIIS) of the World Evangelical Alliance, and lectures on Islam and security issues for the German parliament as well as other government and EU institutions.*

to society and politics. However, such people are reaping criticism and intimidation—even death threats—from those who do not want to give up the claims of Sharia law on European societies. 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 reform efforts. Such threats have no place in an open society. If we cannot have a rational 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 (i.e. one seeking to apply Sharia law to society and politics) that does not experience resistance will become even bolder in making increasingly explicit political demands on society and on the state, to the extent that any resistance to such demands may be branded as restricting 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 encounter 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 that follows Mohammed not only in his religion but also in his political activities, his law-giving and even his conduct of war (as the jihadist groups do) is not compatible with Western civilization. Even a type of Islam that does not call for violence but pursues purely political means to establish and enforce Islam while regarding all aspects of Sharia law, as interpreted in classical Islamic theology, as binding on the Muslim community and beyond is not compatible with Western civilization and law.

The classical interpretation of Sharia law, as established in the very centres of Muslim theology, does not allow equal rights for women, prescribes the death sentence for people who have lapsed from Islam, and accords Jews and Christians only an official second-class status as publicly subjugated groups.

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 see democracy only as a temporary emergency solution with which one might have to conclude a temporary truce, but which must be replaced, in the long term, by an Islamic social order.

While in Medina, Mohammed led his people in multiple wars in which their fallen warriors were promised paradise as a reward for their martyrdom. He stated:

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 favour 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).

Given that some Muslim theologians view these verses as valid for today and that extremists quote this passage 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 has been (and still is) argued that the use of force is legitimate in order to defend Islam. But then the question arises: when is it required to defend the Islamic community? Can force of arms be a legitimate response to the publication of cartoons of Mohammed? What means are legitimate in response to each type of threat?

Some movements affirm only nonviolent protests as proportionate responses to cartoons, but others endorse intimidation or even violence against non-Muslims. Some other groups promote violent attacks against cartoonists and artists. Although 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 Muslims even regard police officers in non-Muslim countries as always being legitimate targets for a violent attack.

It should be clear that how one interprets the defence of Islam varies considerably among the multiple 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 terrorism.

3. Those types of Islam that 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 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 irreplaceable and binding in all times and places is practising 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. Voices of political Islam claim that democracy is a human system of rule by the people and for the people, in direct contrast to Sharia law which comes from Allah, the Sublime and Almighty. Further, they claim, true Muslims cannot accept

laws from any human entity; the system of democracy is, therefore, a modern system of polytheism composed of laws coming from multiple sources.

From this perspective, freedom of religion is a one-way street that can be used to allow for one's own propaganda, but which 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, one loses the freedom of having no religion, as well as the ability to conduct independent research or to express oneself freely through art or 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.

Absolute truth claims exist 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. Possessing absolute truth claims does not make a worldview radical; rather, the *political enforcement* of an absolute truth claim is dangerous and radical.

Threats and efforts to intimidate people of other opinions, so that it becomes impossible to criticize a religion or worldview and its representatives,

are marks of a totalitarian manner of governance. This tendency is especially apparent in the attitude shown by political Islamic movements towards 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 must be considered a threat to society.

5. The Sharia-oriented Islam 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 as practised in Europe is having an influence on the varieties of Islam seen in the Middle East. On the contrary, Islam from the Middle East is having an immense influence in Europe by means of the people, funds, and key ideas coming through well-established organizations.

In conjunction with these multiple dependencies on sources in the Middle East, the powers of Sharia-obligated Islam are leaving no stone unturned in their efforts to destroy 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 who distance themselves from political Islam.

One recent example among many others is the Palestinian-born Austrian sociologist, Mouhanad Khorchide (b. 1971), who has publicly called for a new interpretation of Sharia law and since then has received multiple death threats.

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 exclusion—sometimes even with 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 is following its Arab neighbours 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.

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 creators 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. It teaches the complete validity and authority of Sharia law as divine law for the twenty-first century, even if only a few countries today fully implement Sharia in their criminal law.

Sharia law declares that wives have a duty to obey their husbands, and that husbands have the right to punish their wives if they disobey:

> 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 (Sura 4:34, Arberry translation).

This right to chastise one's wives, even with physical violence, is still taught by established Islamic theology.

This same Sharia law teaches that the death penalty should be imposed on 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 through Bukhari asserts that there are three situations in which it is permissible to shed the blood of another Muslim: if the person is guilty of 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 adul-

terers, the unruly, thieves, rebels and street criminals. These rights remain largely uncontested within established theology, even if the majority of Muslims worldwide have not chosen to live in a country that fully applies Sharia law.

This established mainstream theology, which is taught at universities and mosques, at best ignores any attempt to move towards a more progressive theology; at worst, it condemns or persecutes anyone who thinks differently or affirms freedom. When this type of theology is imported into Europe, conflict with democracy, freedom and the rule of law is inevitable.

Conclusion

The real confrontation over Islam within Europe is not about the burqa or a veil over a woman's face; it 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 us to engage in a new effort to communicate and teach the foundations of democracy and its advantages. 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, xenophobia nor Islamophobia; it is simply a statement of 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; one that demands the full acceptance and public application of Sharia law as God-given is not compatible with Western civilization and its institutions.