

Some noisy public debates are going on about the sensitive issue of the "intrinsic" nature of Islam. Two members of the liberal intelligentsia (Bill Maher and Sam Harris), who do not find any religion logical, have dared to say that the well-intentioned mantra that "Islam is a religion of peace" is baloney. Islam, they say, is intrinsically violent. The respected public intellectual Fareed Zakaria chastised Maher and Harris for condemning this huge world-wide religion. Too broad a brush, he said, to designate a 1300-year old faith as intrinsically violent..

It is true that most Muslims are not Jihadist, but all Jihadists are Muslim. Harris says that from its inception, Islam has always made the worst possible choices (medieval institutions) and Maher gives plenty of examples of beliefs anathema to western liberal: killing apostates, abusing women, murdering followers of other religions in the name of Allah, issuing edicts condemning to death those who "insult" the Prophet Mohammad, and rampant sexual violence.

Zakaria makes a good point that Islam is not practiced just one way. Over the centuries, Muslims have adhered more and sometimes less to Sharia law, a code frozen in time in 1200. There are pious Muslims living in non-Muslim countries who obey the host country's law, as well as some in even Muslim-majority countries such as Iran who are only nominally Muslim. However, recently in Egypt a poll was taken asking whether it was right to execute those Muslims who convert to another faith or reject Islam altogether. The vast majority thought it was right. The current military government, fortunately, will not do so. However, nobody has polled the majority of Muslims around the world to ask this, and other questions, that make the faith so primitive.

Maher and Harris find Islam intrinsically flawed, and do so based on its practices for the past 1300 years. Zakaria objects that this condemnation is only valid for a relatively small cadre of extremists, not for the Muslim world as a whole. But what only a few scholars are doing is looking at the religious sources that make the arguments of the Islamists legitimate in the eyes of most practicing Muslims. The radical Islamists are going back to their first model, the life and practices of the Prophet Mohammad and his companions.

If one imitates the life of Islam's founder, one could, of course, imitate his first ten years as a missionary using persuasion and a kindness. However, Islamists note that the last ten years when Mohammad was a warlord trumped the earlier. Arab Muslims are allergic to the very notion of history, claiming that everything before Mohammad was darkness and ignorance. Unlike Christianity and Judaism, Islam is not a linear religion in which changes occur in time, yet in this one instance, choosing the last ten years rather than the first, they are practicing a horrible historicity.

During the Prophet's last ten years of struggle (jihad) to convert all Arabs to his new religion, he led a guerilla army that waylaid merchant caravans to steal their goods and money; personally tortured captives to find out where the gold was hidden; gave the conquered people the option to convert to Islam, pay an extortion tax if they were "people of the book," or be decapitated. After killing the men, the women and children were parceled out as booty. When he was finished, only Muslims were permitted to remain in Arabia, a prohibition that remains even today.

Imitating the life of Jesus is very different from imitating the life of Mohammad. Throughout history, many Christians did not imitate Jesus, but those who did, such as St. Francis of Assisi and the Quakers, provided a sterling model. Christianity today has pockets of crazies, but these are not a model for the Christian world. Islam's crazies, alas, are such a model. This explains their success in recruiting foot-soldiers to their cause.

Although we are told that only 5% of the world's estimated 1 billion Muslims are committed Islamists, 5% equals more than 50 million crazies! Not a happy thought. The faith of Islamists is certainly not a religion of peace.

685 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of God's Law or Man's Law. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.