

# **Misconceptions about freedom of thinking in Islam**

**Is Islam rigid and does not allow different  
interpretations?**

**Are the writings of old scholars sacred?**

**BS Foad, M.D 2009**

# Freedom of thinking in Islam

We will discuss the following concepts:

- 1-There is nothing wrong in asking questions in order to understand and learn
- 2-As human beings we are limited in our abilities to understand certain concepts like the nature of God or the unseen
- 3-Do we follow the literal words or the spirit of the Prophet's sayings, and do we take the Hadeeth out of historical context?
- 4-Some Muslims follow the literal word and consider the writings of old scholars sacred; others follow the spirit of the Prophet's sayings and understand that old scholars lived at a time and place different from ours
- 5-Extremists's ideology is based on wrong understanding of Islam
- 6-Different groups within Islam :Sunni & Shi'ite; different Madhahib within each group; Sufi Muslims
- 7-Muslim-Christian-Jewish dialogue

# **Human interpretation of God's message**

**It is human beings who must understand God's message and apply it in their lives.**

**They are guided by basic guidelines and doctrine in their religious tradition, and by basic principles of morality**

**To question and criticize religious teachings is not wrong if the goal is to understand how these teachings apply to our life today. The writings of old scholars is not sacred, since they lived in a different time and approached problems based on their knowledge and experience.**

# **There is nothing wrong in asking questions**

- \*The way to learn and understand is to ask questions**
- \*We should not accept opinions without proof or if such opinions go against clear logic**
- \*Faith based on correct knowledge and proper understanding is stronger and able to stand difficulties, compared to faith based on blind obedience without understanding**

# **Abraham asks God to show him how He gives life to the dead**

**“Abraham said: “O my Lord show me how You give life to the dead” God said: “Do you then not believe?” Abraham said: “Yes I believe, but I want my heart to be satisfied” God said: “Take four birds, cut them to pieces, then put a portion of them on every hill, and call on them: they will come to you flying with speed. Then know that Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise”**

**Al-Baqara 2: 260**

**Abraham asked God to show him how He  
gives life to the dead**

**God did not get angry at such a question. Rather  
God told us about it to illustrate that there is  
nothing wrong in asking questions if the goal  
is to learn, understand and increase our faith**

**Asking questions and arguing, and persisting in  
our wrong ways, after the truth becomes clear  
is a different matter**

# **Human interpretation of the Divine text**

**As human beings we need not only a Divine text, but also a human messenger/ prophet that explains God's message and applies it in his character and behavior, and becomes an example to follow**

**With time God's message takes on a certain form and religious tradition. From time to time scholars add to and amplify this message. Therefore, religion becomes a dynamic and evolving concept, rooted in history but given various interpretations suited to our times and addressing our problems and challenges**

# **Study the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings**

**The way to understand and form an opinion is to**

- Study the Qur'an and its guidelines**
- Study Prophet Muhammad's sayings**
- Then use our intellect to come up with an answer to our problem, realizing that we are fallible and that our conclusion could be wrong**
- Listen to other points of view**

# **We need both a divine text and a human messenger**

**“How would you deny faith while the signs of  
God are rehearsed unto you, and among you  
live His messenger ? However holds firmly to  
God will be shown a way that is straight“**

**Al-Imran 3: 101**

# **The Qur'an asks Muslims to think and reflect**

**Many verses of the Qur'an asks us to study, ask questions, think critically, reflect and consider**

**This way our opinion and understanding is based on knowledge and not conjecture.**

**The Qur'an praises those who know and understand and condemns ignorance**

**Those whose faith based on true knowledge and proper understanding are better and more committed**

**Think critically, reflect and consider**

**“And among the signs of God is that He created for you, from among yourselves mates, that you may find peace and tranquility in them, and made your relations based on kindness, love and mercy; indeed in this are signs for those who reflect”**

**Ar-Rum 30: 21**

# **Think critically, consider and reflect**

**“And among His signs is the creation of the Heavens and the Earth; and the differences in your color and in your tongues; indeed in this are signs for those who know”**

**Ar-Rum 30: 22**

**“A Book, We sent down to you, full of blessings, in order that they might consider its verses, and that those endowed with understanding may remember their duty towards God”**

**SA D 38: 29**

**As human beings we are limited in our ability to understand certain concepts**

**We do not understand the innate nature of God**

**We have not seen the Angels**

**We struggle to understand resurrection and life after death**

**We do not understand the nature of the Soul**

**We do not know what will happen tomorrow, but God knows the future**

# How to approach things that we do not understand?

- To realize that as human beings we are limited in our ability to understand certain concepts:

**“They ask you concerning the Spirit, say: “ The knowledge of the Spirit belongs to my Lord. The knowledge imparted to you is indeed limited”**

**Al-Isra’a 17 : 85**

- The way to think about God is to consider His attributes and reflect on His creation
- We need to accept and have faith though we do not have direct proof

# Look at God's creation

**“Indeed the creation of the heavens and earth is more difficult than the creation of man, but most people do not know“**

**Ghafir 40: 57**

**“If all the trees on earth were pens and the oceans were ink, with seven oceans behind it to add to its supply, the words of Allah would not be exhausted, for Allah is exalted in power, full of wisdom“**

**Luqman 31: 27**

# **No vision can comprehend God**

**“No vision can grasp Him: but His grasp is over all vision. He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things”**

**Al-An'am 6: 103**

# Think of and consider God's attributes

**“The most beautiful names (attributes of perfection) belong to Allah: so call on Him by His names; and shun such as use profanity in His names: for what they do, they will soon be requited“**

**Al-Araf 7: 180**

# **As human beings we are fallible and we make mistakes in judgment**

**What is important is to realize that we can make mistakes, and be willing to correct our mistakes. This cannot happen until we are willing to listen to and consider different points of view.**

**Extremists , or hard-liners consider their own view as infallible and are not willing to listen to, debate or argue with others who differ with them. If you do not share their views, then you are against them. There are no grey areas**

**Moderate Muslims understand that their own views could be wrong, and other views could be right. They are willing to listen and consider. It is only through this process of discussion, analysis and reflection that the truth becomes apparent and accepted, and false ideas rejected. Therefore, as Muslims we should not be afraid of innovation or new ideas, nor of making mistakes then correcting our mistakes.**

# **Muslims differ in their interpretation of God's message**

## **Critical thinkers**

**Other Muslims understand that old scholars lived in a different society, and that their opinions are not written in stone. They note that some of these great scholars changed their rulings based on new information and different circumstances. They understand that the Qur'an asks us to think and consider and reach conclusions that help us in our life. They realize that Ijtihad (critical thinking to come up with solutions to new problems) should always be available**

# Muslims differ in their interpretation of God's message

## **The traditionalist**

Some are traditionalists and view the opinions of old scholars as sacred and cannot be changed. Their logic is this: Those scholars heard from the Prophet and witnessed the revelation of the Qur'an, and knew the Arabic language. If they had any doubt, they asked the Prophet for clarification. Since their knowledge of the Qur'an and Sunnah is better than our understanding, then their opinions are better than our opinions. Therefore, we should be followers and not innovators in religious matters. They say God has completed his religion, and nothing was left out, therefore, there is nothing new. It is not up to us to devise new concepts or new guidelines in Islam. Those who follow this way of thinking are dogmatic and unwilling to listen to opposing points of view. They feel safe and secure in following old established religious doctrine, and are uncomfortable when confronted with new ideas

# **Follow the spirit of the Prophet's sayings, not the literal words**

**(Whoever builds a house (mosque) for Allah, Allah will build for him a house in paradise)**

**Bokhari**

**A house or mosque at our time may mean a school, clinic, orphanage or other activity that benefits the whole community**

**(What is below the ankle, of dress, is in hell fire)**

**Bokhari**

**This Hadeeth does not mean we wear short pants. These words were said when the Prophet (PBUH) saw a man walking arrogantly and his long robe wiping the floor. It is meant to teach us humility and warns against being arrogant or showing off**

# **Follow the spirit of the Hadeeth, not the literal words**

**(O Allah let me live like a Meskeen (needy person) , and let me die as a Meskeen, and resurrect me in the company of Masakeen)**

**Tabarani & Ibn Majja**

**This Hadeeth does not mean that the Prophet wants to be dependant on the generosity of others. He sought God's protection from poverty and debt. It means that he cared for and was sympathetic to the plight of the needy.**

# **Do not take the Prophet's sayings of historical context**

**(Whoever changes his religion, kill him)**

**Ahmad & Bokhari**

**This Hadeeth does not mean that Muslims kill anyone who denounces his Islam. Everyone is free to accept or reject faith. The Prophet did not kill those who rejected their Islam. This saying only involve those who reverted from their Islam and fought the Muslims. In other words their crime was treason and being an enemy combatant, not because they rejected faith**

# The views of old scholars

**Sunni Jurists were critical thinkers and gave opinions based on their understanding of the Qur'an & Sunnah. Abou Hanifa emphasized this when he said (I respect the opinion of the Prophet's companions; after them came men with their views, and we too have our own views)**

**These scholars did not disagree on basic concepts of faith or morality. They differed in issues of Fiqh. They respected the right of others to have a different point of view and stated that the conclusions they reached could be wrong and opposing points of view could be right**

# **The views of old scholars**

**Imam Shafe'I expressed views when in Iraq and when he went to Egypt expressed other views. His opinions called old and new differed in certain rulings. When asked why? He said: Because we now know things we did not know before. Therefore, our views should change to reflect our understanding of new knowledge or experience or different circumstances**

# The views of old scholars

**Muslim Jurists and scholars left a wealth of knowledge and writings over many centuries. We should examine their views and study it and reflect on their conclusions. Their writings reflected their experience and understanding and the challenges they experienced. Their writings are not sacred. What is sacred is the Qur'an and the teachings of prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as God's messenger. But it is up to us as human beings to understand how to apply these teachings in our life and how to use divine guidance to solve our problems**

# The four Sunni Muslim Jurists

- 1-Malik lived in Madina and his Fiqh depends on the Prophet's sayings and the opinions of Muslim jurists in Madina. His fiqh is followed in north Africa**
- 2-Abou Hanifa lived in Iraq, and his fiqh is based on interpretation. He was a merchant and his rulings are best in financial matters. His fiqh is followed in Egypt, Pakistan & Iraq**
- 3-Imam Shafe'l lived in Madina, Iraq & Egypt. He had old & new rulings. He invented Qias. His fiqh is followed in Egypt & Syria**
- 4-Ibn Hanbal's fiqh is more strict and is followed in Saudi Arabia.**

**Islam is a moderate religion, yet the views of extremists are portrayed**

**What most Americans see in the news media is a picture of backward Muslims, living in days past, with views that are extreme and hostile to the West**

**Moderate progressive Islam is not shown**

**The implication is that there is a clash of civilization and that Islam is not compatible with Western civilization, such a concept is wrong and dangerous**

# **Extremists are a minority among Muslims**

- These extremists represent a minority among Muslims, most of whom are peaceful, and have the same hopes and fears as anyone in the Western world. They want a good life for themselves and their families. They do not hate non-Muslims and want to live in peace**
- If you ask any Muslim in the Middle East they will tell you we love Americans and everyone would love to come and live here. What they dislike is American policy which they see as wrong and unfair and siding with rulers that are oppressing their own people**

# **Why extremists hold such radical views?**

- 1- Lack of proper knowledge and understanding of Islam, or knowledge that is superficial, wrong and harmful**
- 2- Oppression and lack of freedom and deep mistrust of the West, as siding with and supporting rulers that are ruthless and corrupt**
- 3- Poverty and inability to provide for one's family, despair and lack of human dignity**

# Why extremists hold such radical views?

- **Lack of proper knowledge about Islam**

Their knowledge and application is based on old and wrong interpretation. They want to live as Muslims lived 14 centuries ago. Their teachings revolve around prayers and memorization of the Qur'an and blind obedience that does not allow for questions or critical thinking. Concepts are dogmas that are followed as sacred. They consider any view outside their own as wrong, including their fellow Muslims

# Why Extremists hold such radical views?

- **Lack of democracy in many Muslim countries**

Dissidents are not allowed to express their opinions, and many are jailed or even killed. Most Muslim countries are ruled by dictators who oppress freedom and have a monopoly on power.

America and the West must deal with governments and often turn a blind eye on violations of human freedom. Muslims see the West as collaborating with ruthless corrupt rulers

# Why extremists hold such radical views?

- **Poverty and lack of decent jobs**

It is easy for extremists to recruit young men who are hungry, desperate and vulnerable, and to brain-wash them and program them into instruments of terror

The wealth of Muslim countries is usurped by corrupt dictators. Bribery is common and those in power only care about themselves

It is difficult to have human dignity or to have hope when you are poor and unable to provide for your family

# How can we deal with the problem of terrorism?

- Hunting down terrorists and killing them or putting them in jail does not solve the problem; it only suppresses it as it grows underground and festers
- We must address the basic underlying reasons for extreme ideology by proper education and exposing the wrong teachings of the terrorists against the teachings of true Islam; and by addressing the problems of poverty and lack of freedom and oppression in Muslim countries

# **Islam is compatible with Western democracy**

- **Islam respects and safeguards human freedom and liberties. Among these is the right to express yourself and to think critically and oppose what you consider to be wrong. Islam is against oppression and transgression in all its forms**
- **Justice and equality are two basic concepts of government in Islam**
- **Citizens should respect the rule of law and obey those charged with authority**
- **The dignity of every human being is safeguarded, no person is better than another person because of lineage, wealth or power: what is important is character and behavior**

# **Be just towards others and do not let your likes dictate your behavior**

**“O you who believe stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be against rich or poor, for Allah can best protect both. Follow not your lusts, lest you swerve; and if you distort justice or decline to do justice, indeed Allah is well acquainted with all that you do“**

**An-Nesa'a 4: 135**

# The equality of mankind

No person is better than another person because of his lineage, wealth, power or knowledge. What determines our worth is our character and behavior:

“Indeed the most honored amongst you to Allah is the most righteous” Al-Hujerat 49: 13

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: (Allah does not look at your faces or your wealth; He looks at your hearts and your deeds) Muslim

# Is there an American Islam?

- **Concepts like the Oneness of God and being accountable to Him; that prayer, charity and fasting are duties obligated on mankind by God; and principles of morality like being truthful, honest, kind, forgiving, hastening in all good deeds, and helping those who need our help: these guidelines do not change with time and remain constant regardless of the society that we live in**
- **What changes is how we apply Islamic guidelines in our life: the way we dress is governed by modesty and not vulgarity; the form of government is guided by justice and consultation so that there is adequate representation and no dictatorship; our financial dealings are governed by helping the poor and needy, and not cheating others, and not hoarding our money, but allowing the wealth of the community to circulate and create jobs**

# **There is nothing wrong in having an American form of Islam**

- **The Qur'an provides guidelines but does not restrict our choices**
- **The prophet's sayings must be understood in historical context and the spirit of the Hadeeth followed not the literal words**
- **As long as we are faithful to Islamic basic principles: basic beliefs, rituals of worship and ethics and codes of morality, we can come up with new answers to new challenges**
- **We should learn and incorporate what is good in the American experience**
- **Listen to new ideas and not be afraid of new interpretation of religious doctrine: religion is evolving and dynamic**

**The prophet may be dead but his message and example are alive**

**We know a lot about prophet Muhammad (PBUH): his sayings and his life story; what he stood for; how he struggled and solved problems; his character and faith.**

**All these qualities guide our life as Muslims every day of our life, whether we live here in America or any other place on earth, if we reflect and derive lessons and apply it in our life**

# Different groups in Islam

- **Sunni Muslims represent the majority of Muslims and believe that any Muslim who is qualified and righteous can be a ruler**
- **Sh'ite Muslims are a minority and believe that only those who are descendants of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) have the authority to rule**

**There are other differences relating to obedience to the Imam, certain rituals performed and where they get their religious information**

# The Twelve Imams

Sh'ite Muslims believe in 12 Imams that have the right to rule over Muslims, starting with Ali (the prophet's cousin and his son in law) and his two children: Hasan & Hussein, and their descendants

The last Imam disappeared and in his absence the Ayatu Allah (sign of God) or religious leaders govern. Since the religious leaders represent the absent Imam obedience to them is obligatory

Sh'ite Muslims give 20 % of their income to religious theocracy

They commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in Karbala' by beating themselves as a sign of remorse

# Shi'te Muslims

- **Live in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Yemen and north Africa**
- **They believe in the Qur'an and in Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).**
- **Their books of Hadeeth are different from Sunni Muslims, since they only accept a Hadeeth related by their scholars**

# **Bringing Sunni and Shi'te Muslims together**

**Many attempts occurred in the past to bridge the differences and to bring scholars together**

**The most recent attempt was the effort to reach out to Christians in "Common words", when Muslim theologians, both Sunni & Shi'te signed a document along with Christian theologians stating the common bonds between Muslims and Christians. It is a beginning that may foster cooperation and dispel misunderstanding**

# **Muslim-Christian- Jewish dialogue**

**Has been occurring in America for many years,  
one such group exists here in Cincinnati**

**What it has accomplished is a better  
understanding and appreciation of each  
group's faith and tradition, and the  
development of common bonds and  
friendship between individuals**

**The goal is apply this understanding and allow  
the children to come together**

# **Our own understanding is confirmed when we listen to different views**

**Christians and Jews have different views and  
prospective. They ask questions during these  
dialogues. When we reflect on their questions  
and beliefs our own understanding of Islam is  
strengthened and renewed.**

**The idea of dialogue is not to proteolyses but to  
develop better understanding and respect for  
other people's rights to their own beliefs, and  
to develop friendship**