The Myth of Islamic Tolerance: How Islamic Law Treats Non-Muslims.
Edited by Robert Spencer. Prometheus Books, Amherst,
New York. 2005. Hardcover, 593 pp.

Since the September 11, 2001 attack on America, the non-Muslims are hastening to assure the public that the Islam of the terrorists is not the "true Islam," which is, they maintain, a benign and tolerant faith. Today, despite the mountain of evidence provided by the historical record and the current terrorist attacks on Israel, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the myth of Islamic tolerance reigns supreme in the academic and public spheres. The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) and their allies present Islam as another of the world's great religions, closely akin to Judaism and Christianity and, like them, liable to be "hijacked" through no fault of their own by "extremists" who commit violence. This claim is accepted as self-evident by most Americans and Canadians; to do otherwise would be regarded in many circles as tantamount to committing the cardinal sin of "racism." The fact is that Islam is not a race. Many Muslims are not Arabs, the ethnic group with which they are mostly identified. Although it is a difficult topic to discuss, the "dogma of Islamic tolerance" cannot and must not be out of bounds for a careful examination. It is all the more urgent now that millions of Muslims have emigrated to Europe, U.S.A., and Canada.

Islam and Tolerance

How tolerant is Islam toward other religions? The authors of *The Myth of Islamic Tolerance* point out that non-Muslims are not regarded as citizens by any Islamic state, even if they are original natives of the land. To say otherwise is to conceal the truth. If we compare the attitude of Western democracies toward Islam with Islamic theocracies toward Christianity, we see a great divide. Since the 1970s, there has been an energetic upsurge of mosque construction in the West, there has been no corresponding development in Christian buildings in the Muslim world, since Islamic law permits only the repair of existing buildings, forbidding the construction of new ones. The same ruling forbids any Christian presence whatsoever on the Arabian peninsula; thus, whereas the Saudis recently constructed a giant mosque in Rome, there is no possibility for the Roman Catholics or anyone else to build even the smallest chapel in Saudi Arabia. The basis for this intolerant attitude is Muhammad's saying, "Two religions cannot be professed together in the peninsula of Arabia." Furthermore, Islam fears the consequences of tolerating moral and religious "error". It abhors unorthodox views and practices, believes in the superiority of "the true believers", and shows intense hostility toward those who are nonconformists with respect to socially accepted norms of religious faith and practice.

The Koran

At the very core of Islam is the Koran. Strict orthodox Muslims think it was dictated word for word to Muhammad by an angel, and for that reason must be literally accepted, repeated, and applied all the way down to the regulations of an archaic penal code. It

also frequently censures Christians for believing in "false" doctrines – including beliefs that are central to the faith as it has been understood and practised for as long as six centuries before Muhammad began preaching.

Sharia

For Islam, there is no "separation between church and state." It does not consider religion a private matter. It has detailed rules for virtually every aspect of human behaviour, private and public. The non-separation of politics and religion confer a fixed and sacred character on politics. Islam's legal code is the Sharia, which is a complete compendium of laws based on theological sources, principally the Koran and Hadith – that is, the sayings and acts of the Prophet. It dates back to the seventh century and allows no judicial appeal. It sets the pattern of Muslims' social and political behaviour and explains its theological, legal, and political motivations. Muslims believe that the Sharia should not be criticized, and Christians and Jews cannot say it has any defect whatsoever. But the sharia often flagrantly contradicts the General Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations (1948). This is particularly the case with respect to legal equality for women (laws on marriage, divorce, inheritance), and work for non-Muslims (prohibited from certain professions, etc.), all of which naturally implies probing questions directed at the Koran. Furthermore, there is no equality of dignity or rights for non-Muslims under Islamic law. Therefore, the idea that Jews and Christians have suffered under Islamic law is totally rejected by the Muslims – based on theological grounds.

Israel

Many Muslims in the Arab/Muslim world are convinced the so-called occupation of Palestinian land is the primary cause of international, anti-Western Islamist terrorism. The state of Israel is viewed as illegally established on "Arab-Muslim lands." It has been made the scapegoat, responsible for every evil which afflicts the Arab world – as well as other regions. For years, anti-Semitism has reared its ugly head in many Muslim countries. It is fuelled by the writings of some of the most popular and influential radical Muslim theorists of modern times. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood theorist, Sayyid Qutb, recites a litany of Islam's supposed historical grievances against the Jews, concluding: "In modern history, the Jews have been behind every calamity that has befallen the Muslim communities everywhere." In 1965, a Moroccan Muslim testified in an article that for the popular class "Hitler's massacre of the Jews was acclaimed with delight. It is even believed that Hitler is not dead, but very much alive. And his arrival is awaited.... to free the Arabs from Israel." Historian, David G. Littman observes that in Palestinian society, "Islamic Jihad and Hamas derive their inspiration from the Lebanese Hizbollah organization, and all of them are mainly financed by the Islamic Republic of Iran." The 1988 charter of Hamas, the radical Islamist government of the Palestinians, has a blueprint for genocide – the total destruction of Israel.

Author Bat Ye'or clarifies many modern misconceptions about Islam, including the notion that the behaviour, or, indeed, the very existence of the modern state of Israel is

the root cause of the friction between the Islamic world and the West, and that if Israel were to disappear, so would any impediments to a flowering of the tolerant, humane, and generous Islamic spirit. She says that, unfortunately, Israel is just one arena of the global jihad, and anti-Semitism but one manifestation of the intolerant spirit of contempt and disdain that generally have marked Islamic relations with members of the Koran's "People of the Book" (Jews and Christians).

Apostasy

Islam is a missionary religion. A non-Muslim wishing to become a Muslim is encouraged to do so, and anyone, even a father or a mother, who attempts to stop him may be punished. However, anyone who makes an effort to proselytize a Muslim to any other faith may face punishment. In fact, once a person is a Muslim he cannot recant. If he turns away from Islam, he becomes an apostate. He is viewed as "an infidel enemy". He is resented as a menace to the stability of a community or a society, as a traitor to the "Truth," which is regarded as stationary and eternal. The punishment for apostasy is severe. In his book, *Shari'ah: The Islamic Law*, Doi remarks, "The punishment by death in the case of Apostasy has been unanimously agreed upon by all the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence."

The accusation of apostasy is used by radical Islamists to victimize many liberal and moderate Muslim academics and journalists, including many human rights defenders. For example, in Sudan in January 1985, Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, a renowned Islamic scholar, liberal, and a reformer, was executed for apostasy for publishing a leaflet calling for the reform of Islamic law to make it more just and humane. From a Christian perspective, the law of apostasy makes mission work among Muslims extremely difficult. That's why converts from Islam to Christ need our consistent support and prayers.

Radical Islam

Christianity is divided into many denominations whose differences amongst each other do not lead to violence. In Islam, however, the differences between the Sunnis, the Shiites, the Wahabbis, the Muslim Brotherhood and so on have often caused violent clashes. In numerous Islamic states, battles are waged by radical Islamists for totalitarian control. Many Westerners believe Islamic terrorism is a consequence of poverty. But this is not true. Many societies are poor, yet they do not produce an organized criminality of terror. Islamist terrorist organizations aim to establish the Islamic Sharia, or "Islamic way" as the law of the land. Bat Ye'or notes that the world is being confronted with an absolute culture of hate. It has multiple heads, from Algeria to Afghanistan to Indonesia, via Gaza and the West Bank, Damascus, Cairo, Khartoum, Teheran, and Karachi. It scatters the seeds of terrorism from one end of the earth to the other. But not only Western democracies are targeted. Waves of Islamist-inspired assassinations have struck several Muslim countries, killing and maiming writers – beginning with Egyptian Nobel laureate for literature, Naguib Mahfouz – journalists, artists, intellectuals, and anyone considered by Islamic extremists as a "heretic" or an

"apostate," and therefore a legitimate target for arbitrary execution. In some Muslim countries, the morals police publicly beat women who dare to ride in a taxi unaccompanied by their husbands, or who drive a car alone. Islamists oppose regimes in Muslim countries that are considered un-Islamic. Moderate Muslims who challenge the Islamist beliefs, wishing to live in peace with the non-Muslim peoples and nations of the world, have their lives threatened. Many political prisoners are confined to jails in Pakistan and most other Islamic countries. Most schools of the Sharia hold that non-Muslims are not allowed to assume any position that might bestow on them any authority over any Muslim.

Radical Muslims use the Koran and other core Islamic sources for their actions. They cite, for example, "Muhammad is Allah's Apostle. Those who follow him are ruthless to the unbelievers but merciful to one another" (sura 48:29). As radicalism increases, Muslims grow increasingly less tolerant toward their non-Muslim neighbours. Sheikh Tabtaba'i, the iman of the Kadhimain mosque in Baghdad, said recently, "The West calls for freedom and liberation. Islam rejects this freedom. True freedom is obeying Allah."

Treasure Religious Freedom

How should Christians respond to *The Myth of Islamic Tolerance*? The right to practice one's faith is a deeply religious issue. Since life is religion, persons and associations have the right, ensured and enforced by the legal order, to live out their beliefs freely, without infringement upon the rights of others, within the various structures of society. They have the right to freely choose and change their religion. In our religiously divided world with its various faith communities, everyone must have the freedom to express his deepest faith convictions openly in the public square.

Islamists claim the sole ownership of the truth, and their religion should rule the entire world. But the Christian faith leaves no room for totalitarian world domination. Christians are concerned with individual freedom to worship God without the interference of a tyrannical government. As Christians, we want to build a tolerant society. This does not mean that we cannot distinguish right from wrong. Tolerance is neither indifference to the truth or specific truth claims in question, nor a skepticism with regard to one's own claim to truth. Tolerance does not mean that we should be lenient toward criminal activity or anyone who breaks the law. Tolerance implies the right to differ from and to co-exist with the one who holds a different opinion or religion, or political beliefs. It means to practice pluralism and peaceful coexistence. The Reformed scholar, Benjamin Warfield, wrote, "true tolerance comes into play only when we are confronted with what we recognize as error. There can be no true tolerance in a mind which has no strong conviction and no firm grasp on truth."

Our modern notion of rights finds some of its historical roots in the Protestant Reformation. While it did not espouse tolerance as such, it did represent a revolt against authority in the final dismemberment of a united Christendom. Luther's emphasis on Christian freedom and Calvin's focus on the immediacy of God's rule over human

beings paved the way for religious freedom. The spirit of tolerance in the West was greatly accelerated in principle and in practice by the emergence of pluralistic societies resulting from constitutional governments.

Scripture does not advocate coercion. A Biblical defence of religious liberty is based on the creation account. All human beings everywhere are created in the image of God and are thus endowed with God-given human rights. As God's image bearers, we possess dignity unlike any other creature. There are many passages in Scripture that speak of our responsibility to defend the rights of others. The God, in Whose image we were created, is just and righteous in all His ways. Consequently, we base our right to worship according to our conscience by appealing to the order of creation. God's work of creation offers true freedom – freedom to accept our responsibilities, to fulfill our duties and obligations, and to exercise our rights, and safeguard others in the exercise of their rights. Since "righteousness and justice are the foundation of [God's] throne" (Ps. 97:2), as human beings we are to image God by striving for justice and righteousness in all dealings. The God-given rights we cherish for ourselves we must also be eager to extend fully and freely to our neighbours. Therefore, we desire to protect the liberty to practice one's faith in our constitutional democracy. This right to religious liberty we owe strangers, sojourners, enemies, and every other person. It is firmly lodged in the responsibility to obey God precisely by loving our neighbours in word, thought, and deed (Ex. 22:21).

At the very core of the defence of religious freedom is Christ. In Him, all human rights issues find their final and decisive ground of appeal. In sovereignly unique and vicarious ways, Christ endured the ultimate violation of His human rights in His lifelong suffering, in His unjust tribunal before Pilate and Herod, and finally in the atoning death on the cross. This stands as the unshakable basis for all rights issues among human beings. Their divinely ordained rights have been restored through the cross and the resurrection. Our Lord now continues to uphold and guarantee these restored rights by His glorious ascension and heavenly rule. Responsibilities come with rights. Christians have the right and the responsibility to proclaim the gospel. They are obliged to be a blessing to the nations by the promoting of a view of human rights rooted in the righteousness of King Jesus. And people everywhere have the right to hear and believe the gospel.

Conclusion

We in the Western nations are free to follow our religious beliefs as we wish. But it is all too easy to forget the suffering and fear that so many of our fellow believers are experiencing within many Islamic countries today. What can we do? Edmund Burke said that for evil to prevail, all that is necessary is for good people to do nothing. Islam needs frank exposure and critique. We must not stifle rational discussion of Islam. Any criticism of Islam should not be shouted down as "religious hatred". And we may not forget the persecuted church in Islamic states. What does the future hold for Christian minorities in Islamic contexts? The trend in the last two decades has been consistently toward the erosion of their rights and status, the increase of pressure, discrimination,

and violence. These developments have gone largely unnoticed by the world in general, including the Western churches. Christians in Muslim countries feel themselves forgotten by their Christian brothers and sisters elsewhere who are blessed with greater freedoms, and this only adds to their pain and hopelessness. However, even tragedy can bring a ray of hope. Patrick Sookhdeo, director of the Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity, suggests that the renewed interest in Islam as the result of September 11 could result in great publicity for the plight of the suffering Church under Islam, which has continued for fourteen centuries.

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