

Secular Values Can Be Islamic Values

I have some trepidation over publishing this article. I'm bound to upset some people. There will be some who think I'm too generous to Hassan and others like him who do not always denounce appalling beliefs held by members of their own community. And there will be others who think I'm being Islamophobic and bigoted in some way. To some extent or other, the criticisms of both parties may well be correct, I don't know. However, I feel the need to take these risks and add my small contribution to the conversation. – ZR

Zena Ryder

I had a profound experience last night. You know that feeling when you skip the small talk and you feel a deep connection with another human being, *as* a human being? That's what happened. But it was between what is perhaps an unlikely pair: on the one hand, myself, an outspoken atheist and, on the other hand, a teacher of Islam, whom I will call Hassan. (I will explain later why I don't want to give his real name.)

This is the story of what happened.

From the podium, Hassan came across as a nice, friendly person. He cracked a few jokes, he made the audience like him. I liked him. The content of Hassan's talk about Islam was exactly what you'd expect: Islam is a lovely religion, full of good things; Muslims are taught to respect other religions; Muslims can be just as Canadian as Christians; Muslim men are taught to respect women, although men and women are created differently; and so on. Of course he cherry picked. Of course he wanted to blame every bad thing done by Muslims on culture and not on Islam. One thing that was news to me, however, is that it is part of Islamic teaching, according to Hassan, that Muslims must obey the laws of the country that they are in. If those laws conflict with their practicing of Islam, their only choice is to leave the country. It is not an option to disobey the laws of the country you are in.

No doubt, there are Islamic scholars who would disagree with Hassan's views on following the laws of the country in which a Muslim

lives. But I'm not interested in wading into the exegetical debate. As an atheist, I think all religions' holy books are largely fictional and their religious laws are created by humans, and so it doesn't matter to me what interpretation counts as the *true* one. All that matters to me is that the people who revere those books adopt interpretations that are *good* ones – that is, ones that encourage those people to lead safe, fulfilling, moral lives.

So at this point in Hassan's talk, I was feeling both glad that he was teaching fellow Muslims to obey Canadian law – but also a bit uncomfortable that perhaps some Canadian Muslims would feel they *ought* to be stoning adulterers and killing apostates, and it's just the law of the land preventing them from actually doing so. (78% of Muslims in Afghanistan, for example, say they believe that apostates deserve to die. So if you're an apostate in Afghanistan, you're going to keep that to yourself – since the law is not going to protect you. 88% of Muslims in Afghanistan say they believe that their country's laws follow Sharia very or somewhat closely.¹)

As you'd expect, it was during the Q&A session that things got really interesting. I will talk only about the question that I asked. I told Hassan that I understood that Muslims are supposed to follow the law of the land, and that I also understood that of course he personally would never kill anyone. But I also wanted to know what he believed: Do apostates *deserve* to be killed? Even if it's against the law to kill

them, and even if he would never do it, does he believe that they nevertheless *deserve* to be killed?

In the fashion that is typical of religious speakers of all varieties (have you ever seen a Young Earth Creationist in action?), he deftly avoided answering the question. He wanted to give context; he wanted to tell a story; he wanted to talk about all the steps one is supposed to take to persuade apostates to return to Islam; he wanted to avoid talking about what he personally believed. But I had hung on to the microphone. I pressed him. Given what he had explained about the numerous steps a faithful Muslim is supposed to take when dealing with an apostate, I asked for clarification, “So, you’re saying that apostates *don’t* deserve to be killed?” His reply: “No, I’m not saying that.” At that point, I expressed my sadness and disappointment that he couldn’t reject the view that apostates deserve to be killed and handed the microphone back.

Here was an apparently nice guy, someone with influence over other Muslims, someone who most of us would probably label as a “moderate” and yet he could not say that apostates do not deserve to be killed. I so very much *wanted* this man to be someone I could admire, someone I could hold up as an example of what decent Muslims believe. I also really wanted to be able to offer some small reassurance to my ex-Muslim friends, some of whom are genuinely, literally *scared* to be out of the closet about their beliefs, even here in Canada. But I could not.

After the talk, when most of the audience had drifted away, I managed to talk one-on-one with Hassan. I asked him to imagine that I

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was an ex-Muslim. I asked him to imagine that he had done his duty and tried to persuade me to rejoin the faith, but that I was committed to my beliefs and no longer had any interest in Islam. I was an apostate. I looked him in the eye and asked him, “In your heart of hearts, do you really believe that I deserve to be killed?” He said, solemnly: “I do not.” At that moment, he and I were human beings. I felt a connection through our shared humanity, through our shared values. I felt like hugging the guy! (But since he had said he doesn’t even shake hands with women, I didn’t feel that would be welcomed.) Of course, he

could have been lying to me. I have no way of knowing for sure. We rarely do. But I certainly *feel* as though he was telling the truth, for what that’s worth.

I asked him why he hadn’t expressed his true belief about apostasy when he was up at the podium. His reason was because that would have been publicly denouncing his religion. And I think I get that. I don’t think he was scared of being attacked by a fundamentalist next time he visits Saudi Arabia (although I could be wrong and this is why I don’t want to use his real name). I think he just didn’t feel he could air what he views as his dirty laundry like that. He thinks of Islam as a package deal. He thinks he has to accept all of it and to publicly say that some part of it is wrong is just too uncomfortable for him. It would perhaps have been like someone bringing up criticisms of their spouse in an anniversary speech. “I love my wife so much. But I do wish she hadn’t cheated on me last year.” “I love my husband so much. But I do wish he wouldn’t spend our rent money on booze.” It’s the kind of thing

you might discuss in private with people you trust – certainly not with a mixed crowd of strangers.

I expressed to Hassan my hope that he finds a way to reconcile his Islam with his truest, deepest beliefs – the good beliefs that come from him being a decent, empathic human being, and from being raised in a secular, liberal democracy. In his position as a scholar and teacher of Islam, he has influence over other Muslims. He needs to tell *them* how they can still be Muslims and how they can also believe things like apostates don't deserve to be killed (as well as how they can reject the other nasty beliefs that many Muslims around the world accept as being essential to their faith). He, along with other teachers of Islam, need to find that path and I have hope that he will.

There is, after all, some scholarly debate over the issue of the death penalty for apostasy, although it's definitely a minority view within Islamic scholarship to reject it. According to a 2006 BBC article,² Dr Abdelmouti Bayoumi of the Islamic Research Academy in Cairo believes that changing religions doesn't warrant the death penalty; only if the apostate is found to be working against the interests of Muslim society is the death penalty justified by Islamic law. Gamal al-Banna, the brother of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, said that "each and every individual has the right to change his religion without any conditions whatsoever."³ Sheikh Ahmad Kutty, an Islamic scholar at the Islamic Institute of Toronto says that freedom of conscience is a fundamental right that is enshrined in the Quran and that "it is absurd for anyone to suggest that Islam advocates killing people who convert to another religion."⁴ So Hassan would not be alone in his view.

If you feel the urge to look up the text of the Quran and to try to contradict these scholars, you are missing my point. It shouldn't matter to us – atheists or secular humanists – what it says in the Quran or the hadith (except as a matter of historical interest). What matters is the *beliefs* most Muslims hold, and how they act. Islam is theirs. If a Christian believes that Christianity is a religion of love, peace and humility, the fact

that we can point to violent passages in the Bible is irrelevant. If most Christians believed that Christianity was a religion of love, peace and humility – and they lived their lives accordingly – then Christianity (or least a major denomination of Christianity) would be a religion of love, peace and humility. No matter what the Bible says. We don't think it's necessary to identify Christianity with a particular interpretation of the Bible, and we shouldn't think it necessary to identify Islam with a particular interpretation of the Quran.

I hope that Hassan and more and more others like him will follow the scholars mentioned above, and the brave Muslim bloggers and Tweeters who repeatedly stand up for human rights and decent, secular values. It will take courage, but it is the right thing to do. If one is a Muslim, and one also believes in secular human rights and values (such as freedom of conscience), one simply *cannot* accept that Muslims ought to believe that apostates deserve to be killed. One has to find a way to reconcile one's secular values and one's religious beliefs. And the desire is there, at least in the United States (and I would imagine Canada to be similar). In a 2011 survey, nearly half of American Muslims faulted their own leaders for failing to challenge Islamic extremists. 57% of American Muslims believe that there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of Islam.⁵

And we – and I am mostly referring to atheist critics of religion – need to not stand in Hassan's way, trying to score cheap "gotcha" points, while he performs this feat. Religion is not going away any time soon. It is deeply important to millions upon millions of people. In the meantime, we have to try to counter the harms caused by religion – and people like Hassan are *allies* in that goal, not the enemy. If Hassan has to do some fancy footwork, reconciling his deepest ethical beliefs with what it says in the Quran, so be it. If he has to embrace contradictions, so be it. His intellectual gymnastics are not my problem, and they are not your problem. He's the one who has to live with them, just as many Christians live with beliefs like the Virgin Birth and the Holy Trinity.

Hassan's faith is important to him. I happen to think that his supernatural beliefs are

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wrong – and some of them are completely out to lunch wrong – but I really can't bring myself to care all that much. But I *do* very much care about his moral beliefs. I don't want him, and others like him, to be in the uncomfortable position of having to choose between Islam and their decent moral beliefs, because there's a good chance that choice won't go the way we need it to go. Let him cherry pick from his holy book. Don't contradict him when he says that Islam is a religion of peace. *Islam is whatever Muslims believe that it is.* Islam will change as the beliefs of Muslims change, just as Judaism and Christianity have. Let Hassan believe what he needs to believe in order to persuade himself and others that he can continue to be a Muslim *and* continue to believe – truly, deeply believe – in secular, liberal values. Encourage him, and others like him, to bravely stand up and contradict bigotry among the worldwide Muslim community. He is bound to be more successful than those outside that community.

As an aside: I used to have some lovely, liberal Christian neighbours who attended a pretty conservative church. They never stood up to their preacher's homophobia, and only complained about it privately. They ought to have been braver. Not wanting to rock the boat, or worrying that a disagreement could be awkward, is not a good enough reason to stay silent in the face of the promotion of hate and prejudice. Rocking the boat in a Christian community in Canada is a far cry from speaking up against Islamic fundamentalism in Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan.

In my view, challenging specific terrible religious beliefs is a more important goal than proving Islam (or any other religion) wrong, or encouraging people to leave their religion, or feeling intellectually superior because we can spot a contradiction or a fallacy. If you wish to engage in those intellectual exercises, there is a time and a place. If there are Muslims who are privately questioning their faith, and who do want to leave

Islam, I hope they will be able to find such conversations. We can *help* people leave their faith – whether it's Islam, Christianity or any other religion – if that is what they wish, without it being a major *goal* to encourage people to do so. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't criticize obnoxious religious beliefs – such

as that apostates, gays or adulterers deserve to be killed. Of course you absolutely should! It's important that you do. What you should not do is throw obstacles in the way of those who wish to *reject* those obnoxious beliefs, while nevertheless maintaining their religious identity.

We ought not to stand in the way of Muslims who are trying to be *good* Muslims – that is, people who identify as Muslims, who love Islam, but who share important secular values: freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, gender equality, freedom of expression, non-violence, gay rights, and so on. Hassan needs to show how secular values can be Islamic values. •

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