



IS ISLAM A RELIGION OF PEACE?

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I was raised a practicing Muslim and remained one for almost half my life. I attended madrassas, that is, Islamic schools, and memorized large parts of the Quran. As a child, I lived in Mecca for a time and frequently visited the Grand Mosque. As a teenager, I sympathized with the Muslim Brotherhood.

At 22 while my family was living in Kenya, my father arranged my marriage to a member of our family clan, a man that I had never met. I ran away, made my way to Holland, studied there and eventually was elected a member of the Dutch parliament. Now I live in the United States.

In short, I have seen Islam from the inside and the outside.

I believe that a reform of Islam is necessary and possible. And only Muslims can make that reform a reality. But we in the West cannot remain on the sidelines as though the outcome of this struggle has nothing to do with us. If the jihadists win and the hope for a reformed Islam dies, the rest of the world will pay a terrible price. The terror attacks in New York, London, Madrid, Paris and many other places are only a preview for what is to come.

For this reason, I believe that it's foolish to insist, as Western leaders habitually do, that the violent acts committed in the name of Islam can somehow be divorced from the religion itself. For more than a decade, my message has been simple: Islam is not a religion of peace.

When I assert this, I do not mean that Islamic belief makes all Muslims violent. This is manifestly not the case: There are many millions of peaceful Muslims in the world. What I do say is that the call to violence and the justification for it are explicitly stated in the sacred texts of Islam. Moreover, this theologically sanctioned violence is there to be activated by any number of offenses, including but not limited to adultery, blasphemy, homosexuality and apostasy—that is, to leave Islam.

Those who tolerate this intolerance do so at their peril.

As someone who has known what it is to live without freedom, I watch in amazement as those who call themselves liberals and progressives—people who claim to believe so fervently in individual liberty and minority rights—make common cause with the forces in the world that manifestly pose the greatest threats to that very freedom and those very minorities.

In 2014 I was invited to accept an honorary degree from Brandeis University for the work I have done on behalf of women's rights in the Muslim world. That invitation was withdrawn after professors and students protested my criticism of Islam. My subsequent "disinvitation," as it

came to be called, was no favor to Muslims—just the opposite. By labeling critical examination of Islam as inherently “racist,” we make the chances of reformation far less likely. There are no limits on criticism of Christianity at American universities...or anywhere else for that matter. Why should there be of Islam?

Instead of contorting Western intellectual traditions so as not to offend our Muslim fellow citizens, we need to defend both those traditions and the Muslim dissidents who take great risks to promote them. We should support these brave men and women in every way possible.

Imagine a platform for Muslim dissidents that communicated their message through YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. These are the Muslims we should be supporting—for our sake as much for the sake of Islam.

In the Cold War, the West celebrated dissidents such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Andrei Sakharov, and Václav Havel, who had the courage to challenge the Soviet system from within. Today, there are many dissidents who challenge Islam, but the West either ignores them or dismisses them as “not representative.” This is a grave mistake. Reformers such as Tawfiq Hamid, Asra Nomani & Zuhr Jasser and many others must be supported and protected. They should be as well known as Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, and Havel were in the 1980s.

If we do in fact support political, social and religious freedom, then we cannot in good conscience give Islam a free pass on the grounds of multicultural sensitivity. We need to say to Muslims living in the West: If you want to live in our societies, to share in their material benefits, then you need to accept that our freedoms are not optional.

Islam is at a cross roads of reformation or self-destruction.

But so is the West.

I’m Ayaan Hirsi Ali of Harvard University for Prager University.