

Beyond Veil and Holy War: Islamic Teachings and Muslim Practices with Biblical Comparisons

Saleem Ahmed

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In the aftermath of 9/11, Muslims grappled with the shock of seeing the horrific attacks and their attribution to so-called Muslim fundamentalists. Some questioned whether indeed there was anything in the Qur'an that could condone such acts and whether negative portrayals were in any way indicative of their religion. Others struggled with accusations as non-Muslims similarly groped for answers. *Beyond Veil and Holy War* exemplifies one such struggle.

Written in a question-and-answer format, the book answers many of these questions and calls for *ijtihad*, or objective soul-searching, in order to differentiate between behaviors that Islam preaches and the practices that some Muslims follow. The intended audience is non-Muslims looking for answers, as well as Muslims searching for reasons for the dubious behavior of fellow Muslims.

The book presents an Islam that celebrates religious pluralism and is compassionate toward human weaknesses. It is divided into two parts: the current situation and a vision for the future. The first part contains 13 chapters and provides a background in contemporary issues relating to Islam. The first three chapters deal with the Muslims' basic beliefs and sources of guidance. The author relies on the primary sources alone – the Qur'an more so than the Hadith – to support his arguments throughout the book.

Whereas he is critical of the Hadith, he presents proofs for the modern analytical mind that the Qur'an is indeed the word of God. These are verses containing "predictions," in the form of descriptions of natural phenomena, that anticipated recent scientific discoveries. This reflects present day *i`jaz* discourse, the theory of the Qur'an's inimitability, that has transcended the medieval discourse of language. A brief historical overview of the major sects also is included. The author argues against defining Islam through its various sects and advocates broadening it to epitomize faith in a single God, equal respect of all prophets, affirmation of the equality of all races and the doing of righteous deeds.

Chapter 4, "The Universality of God's Message," argues for including the founders of the world's major religions under the broad umbrella of "unnamed prophets" of Islam. Chapter 5 is devoted to the more practical duties of Muslims and stresses the importance of belief, righteous actions, and duties to others over Islam's ritualistic aspects.

Chapters 6 to 13 examine various controversial issues within contemporary Islam, among them jihad, the status of women, marriage, divorce, female circumcision, inheritance, adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, food, alcohol, gambling, usury, slavery, orphans, amusement, music, dance, and the punishments for crimes. In these chapters, the author brings forward evidence from the Qur'an and the Hadith that points to Islam's more compassionate and broad-minded practice. In the chapter "Jihad and Violence," the author examines some of the issues relating to the Middle East conflict. The author also seems to accede to the neo-orientalist claim that Islam spread primarily by the sword, although many historians no longer ascribe to it.

Noteworthy about the book are the Biblical comparisons. These consist of Biblical passages that correspond to Qur'anic ones, which provides a cultural and religious context for the Qur'anic verses. Included are brief explanatory notes by Rabbi Avi Magid of Honolulu's Temple Emanu-El and Regina Pfeiffer, a Biblical studies instructor at Honolulu's Chaminade University.

Beyond Veil and Holy War comes with a forward in which a Muslim, a Jewish, and a Christian perspective are presented. The Muslim perspective is given by Dr. Fida Muhammad Khan, the Jewish perspective by Gregg J. Kinkley, and the Christian perspective by Regina Rossi Pfeiffer. Kinkley's and Pfeiffer's perspectives are quite helpful, especially in explaining how Jewish law has gone beyond the Torah and the importance of the rabbinic contributions. This information is useful in explaining Rabbi Magid's comments, which otherwise may seem short and dismissive of the Torah's laws.

The second part contains three chapters. The first is an introspective analysis in which Ahmed tries to find a reason for the variance between Qur'anic teachings and some Muslim practices based on the Hadith. He hypothesizes that the Prophet may have been following Biblical practices prior to receiving the Qur'anic injunctions. Chapter 15 is a prospective synthesis. "Based on Qur'anic injunctions, this future-looking chapter underscores that we are all creatures of the same God and that, while our respective messengers may have been different, the Message has always been the same: Believe in One Almighty God and then lead a righteous life." It closes with an invitation for the reader to visit the website at www.believersall.net. The last chapter is a summary of the book.

The author has succeeded in presenting a strong case for tolerance and compassion in Islam based on the primary sources. The main weakness is his failure to note that Islamic practice and law has overstepped the Qur'an and even the Hadith, and has relied more and more on the work of scholars, especially of the medieval period. This accounts for some of the discrepancies between the Qur'anic text and Muslim practices. The author seems to be advocating a return to basics.

The book is not a scholarly work and contains some minor mistakes, especially in the transliteration of Arabic words. It reflects a contemporary view of Islam and is pleasantly accessible to the general reader. Its main strength is the inclusion of Biblical comparisons and the contribution of Christians and Jews. Thus, it exemplifies outstretched hands of friendship uniting people of various faiths.

Nevin Reda
Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Near Eastern and Islamic Civilizations
University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario, Canada