

Update of archaic doctrine should accompany censure: Front Burner

By Ebrahim Moosa Guest columnist

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Any moral teaching is judged by the conduct of its adherents, wrote the 12th-century Muslim jurist and theologian Alauddin al-Kasani. Kasani, who lived in Aleppo, Syria — a city destroyed by civil war today — knew that one gained friends with good conduct and alienated people with bad behavior. Kasani's point was that the misconduct of some could ruin the reputation of the larger group and stigmatize all. Sound familiar about a faith community today?

Kasani's wise message, one hopes, reaches the inboxes of today's Muslim religious leaders and authorities. Orthodox Muslim leaders claim they energetically combat extremism. Zulifqar Ali Shah, secretary of the Muslim ethics council, the Fiqh Council of North America — who was chairman and CEO of the controversial Kissimmee-based Universal Heritage Foundation — told me his organization joined 126 leading Muslim religious leaders in order to condemn ISIS in September 2014, and they denounced the killing of the Charlie Hebdo journalists in Paris this January. I am sure orthodox leaders in every Muslim society vigorously condemn the deeds of malcontents, but extremism regrettably escalates.

Perhaps part of the real fix is to rethink some theological doctrines as a way to combat extremism. The bad news is the absence of serious efforts to replace troublesome doctrines. Just ponder at how Muslim religious authorities deal with the death penalty for offenders who insult the Prophet Muhammad or respond to the enslavement of prisoners of war, something the self-proclaimed Islamic State now perpetrates with impunity. If press releases citing verses of the Quran about the sacred nature of life are not accompanied by morally credible theological teachings, then skeptics might view such efforts as mere platitudes. A new Muslim teaching must explain on doctrinal grounds why blasphemy today is not punishable by death,

Prisoners of war, classical Islamic law states, could at the discretion of a legitimate political authority be set free, be ransomed or executed or could even be enslaved. Many contemporary orthodox scholars refuse to theologially ban slavery. Mufti Taqi Usmani, a renowned Pakistani religious authority, denounces the attempts by a modernist scholar who claimed the Quran abrogated slavery. Despite harnessing all the evidence of how the thrust of Muslim moral teachings encourages the freeing of slaves, Usmani is unable to connect the dots and conclude that slavery is morally repugnant.

Rather, in a book he writes: "The clear manifest truth is that taking slaves is permissible in Islam, with its laws and its limits ... and nothing has abrogated it, and there is wisdom in this ... and ... its [slavery's] abrogation is rejected." It is unthinkable that such words could have been penned in the 20th century.

But why do most Muslim states not enslave captives? As signatories to international conventions, explains Usmani, they are obliged by treaties and forbidden from taking prisoners as slaves. Usmani then surprisingly states that Islamic texts favor "the virtue of emancipation" by enjoining "freedom as more desirable in the Islamic Shariah [than

slavery]." So why does Usmani not square the circle and declare slavery repugnant today, if Islamic teachings actually support the virtue of freedom as superior to bondage?

Few people know that Muslim orthodoxy is essentially synonymous to a zealously policed method of interpretation, one that brooks no violation, except on pain of inviting excommunication. When idolatry of method is identical to the truth, then it promises the forfeiture of meaningful ethical outcomes. Usmani might revise his opinion given the return of slavery in ISIS-controlled territories. But the greater hope lies in the pioneering efforts of two traditional scholars, Waris Mazhari in India and Muhammad Ammar Khan Nasir in Pakistan, who are attempting to restore moral common sense in Muslim moral philosophy and theology.

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