



Saudi Woman Writer Speaks Out on Fanaticism



A week ago [PI Online](#) reported on reform efforts being undertaken in several moderate Muslim circles advocating reinterpretation of the Qur'an. [See PI 536] Most of those discussions were generated by Muslims living in Europe or the Maghreb. *Iman Al-Qahtani* is neither. A Saudi writer who has championed women's rights, she addresses the issue of fanaticism in Islam and blames the clerical establishment and the education system.

According to Muslims, the *Qur'an* is the word of God. The second source from which Islam derives its dogma is the *Sunna*, which constitutes a detailed explanation of the Quranic text, as augmented by the prophet Muhammad and further clarified by his companions and the theologians who followed him. *Al-Qahtani*, writing for *Al-Arabiya*, reopens the debate by asking whether humans have corrupted the true meaning of the Qur'an throughout the centuries.

She examines the issue from a larger historical perspective on the relationship between Islam and other religions. She likens the present Islamic situation to that of the Christian church in the Middle-Ages at the time of Inquisition. *Al-Qahtani* recalls sixteenth century Europe and the execution of those who opposed the church, such as Thomas Moore and Michael Servetus.¹ She notes that following these dark ages, Europe evolved, reaching its present stable state, that of the free secular human being. In contrast, Islam has yet to see such an evolution.

Directly addressing the average Muslim man and woman, she warns: "Muslims today suffer from the worst kinds of cultural misery deriving from a decline in knowledge, the sciences, politics and civil life. Man in our Middle Eastern world is experiencing a most serious confrontation on matters related to his relationship with his God. Muslims will first try to amicably convince you that your beliefs or doctrine is corrupt. In the event you do not submit to their way of thinking, you shall be subjected to discrimination, stripping you of your humanity and your rights. You may even encounter an assured destiny, which is "death," in the event you decide to abandon your religious beliefs and convert."

She declares that Muslims today lack the ability to accept those who practice other religions and offers various examples of this intolerance. In particular, she is enraged by an Egyptian case this past month in which a Muslim man openly declared his religious conversion to Christianity. In response, the official religious institution of *Al-Azhar* issued a fatwa requesting the civil authorities to administer the death sentence to any person converting from Islam, concluding that it is the proper punishment for apostasy under Islam. *Al-Qahtani* denies that the Quran contains any verse permitting the killing of the apostates and argues that *Al-Azhar's* decision is a political one having nothing to do with religion.

Al-Qahtani also points out that it has become a standard Islamic message in clerics' sermons in Arab and Western countries to assert that the West has instigated animosity towards all things Muslim. That accusation, she claims, is usually used as a pretext to justify all kinds of violent actions perpetrated by Muslims and she sharply criticizes the many sheikhs whose sermons portray such violence as understandable and pardonable. However, the author reserves her harshest criticism for education in Islamic countries: "It is an education that incites animosity towards those who are different and instead of focusing on the intellectual development which allows the person to rationally deal with differences, it emotionally inflames them."

¹ Michael Servetus was burned at the stake for heresy. His main offense was his rejection of the Trinity.

Al-Qahtani asks Muslims to stop trying to demand respect for Islam and to compel free thinkers in the West not to criticize it. In her view, Muslims by their actions are responsible for tarnishing the religion. How can a religion that refuses to respect the beliefs of others demand such respect in return.

Al-Qahtani left open the question to whom she assigns culpability for what she considers erroneous interpretations of the Quran. She does not say whether she is finding fault with recent pronouncements, such as the fatwa by *Al-Azhar* or, like several Muslim thinkers in the Maghreb and Europe, traces the problem back to the time of the prophet and his companions. The theological argument is not what appears to interest her. Rather, she is concerned by the result – what she considers the rise of Islamic intransigence and fanaticism. She understands, however, that unless serious reform is undertaken to correct the notion that Allah condones the killing of non-Muslims, any dialogue between the West and Islam is doomed. The religious establishments' attacks against her will undoubtedly continue. Indications are already surfacing that *Al-Azhar* in Egypt and the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia find this debate worrisome. This past Thursday, the president of *Al-Azhar* University, *Ahmad Al-Tayyib*, claimed that “there is a plan being implemented among the Egyptian youth to defame the companions of the prophet.”² There is little doubt that *Al-Tayyib* had in mind *Al-Qahtani* and those like her.

Source:

<http://www.alarabiya.net/views/2008/01/31/44970.html>

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² Source: http://www.moheet.com/show_news.aspx?nid=83131&pg=1