

THE EMERGING PHENOMENA OF POST-9/11

Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid (J. E. Rash)¹

Legacy International
1020 Legacy Drive, Bedford, Virginia 24523
USA
barzakh@mindspring.com

ABSTRACT

After pointing out several disturbing social and political “after-effects” of 9/11, the author offers a Sufic perspective on these trends and humanity’s responsibility to counter them with the practical application of universal values. He affirms the foundational principles of harmony and peace inherent in Islam, the power of remembrance as fundamental to the quality of humanity, and need for reflection in and on the Muslim community. The author encourages us to meet the challenge of a post-9/11 world filled with bigotry, prejudice and racism by putting our values into practice for the betterment of humanity.

Keywords: 9/11; current events; emergent phenomenon; extremism; peace and harmony; pluralism; political ideologies; practical application of values; religious ideography; Sufism; universal values.

A few days after the September 11th terror attacks, Mark Stroman, a white supremacist, went to three Dallas area convenience stores and shot three

1. Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid, an authorized teacher of five Sufi orders, works actively to apply Islamic principles to current issues through education, peace building, leadership training, and cross-cultural relations. He is the founder of three not-for-profit organizations: Legacy International, the World Community, and the Circle Group. Founded in 1979, Legacy International (www.legacyintl.org) is a secular, non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting peace by strengthening civil society and fostering a culture of participation worldwide. The World Community is a not-for-profit religious organization and Sufic community located in Virginia, USA; it includes the Circle Group (www.circlegroup.org), which provides activities and published materials related to the philosophy and practical application of Sufic Islam, and the World Community Education Center, a Montessori-based school for grades K-12. Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid has published two books: *Islam and Democracy: A Foundation for Ending Extremism and Preventing Conflict* (WingSpan Press, 2006) and *Applied Sufism* (WingSpan Press, 2006).

clerks whom he thought were Muslims. Two of his victims died, and Stroman was convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

The sole survivor of Stroman's killing spree, Rais Bhuiyan, campaigned to commute Stroman's sentence to life without parole. Although the gunshot wounds left him blind in his right eye and three dozen shotgun pellets are still embedded in his face, Bhuiyan says his Muslim faith teaches forgiveness, and that forgiveness brings "peace, compassion and healing in our society, in our country."

This campaign was both remarkable and unprecedented; it was the first time in the history of Texas that a victim of a convicted murderer had asked for clemency. Bhuiyan's pleas were denied; and Stroman, who lost every legal appeal, was executed as I write this article. However, before he died, Mark Stroman said that he would die a changed man, "I've come from a person with hate embedded into him into a person with a lot of love and understanding for all races."

Bhuiyan says that response is the point of his pleas. "We have to break the cycle of this hate and violence."² This is the Islam that Muslims know and believe in. It is the Islam taught by the Prophet Muhammad who taught his followers, "*Forgive him who wrongs you; join him who cuts you off; do good to him who does evil to you, and speak the truth although it be against yourself.*" This is the Islam that the vast majority of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims knows and strives to live. Thus, ten years ago, the events of 9/11 shocked us as much, if not more, than the rest of the world because the acts, done in the name of our religion, broke every tenet of Islam and disgraced the name Muslim.

9/11 was a political event that has brought out certain challenges for the Muslim community. As an authorized Sufic Pir (spiritual guide), I don't usually comment on politics, preferring instead to talk about the universal spiritual capacity of humans to transcend conflict, to find common understanding through inner understanding, and to experience the universal principles and responsibilities that we share as human beings. But in reality, one cannot always separate the political from the personal, the religious from the social. In fact, political issues, as an external reality, can and have provided us with many opportunities for a more transcendent personal and world view.

As the founder and president of an international, secular non-governmental organization that works globally in civil society development (Legacy International, www.legacyintl.org), I also strive to help people to derive lessons and opportunities from every event and challenge, to apply

2. Don Teague, "Victim Pleads for Texas Death Row Inmate's Life," *CBS News*, July 18, 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/07/18/eveningnews/main20080502.shtml>

their values in real and sustainable ways, and to develop their greatest potential. Events like 9/11 and its ensuing consequences are an opportunity to seek to apply our deepest and most universal values, as Mr Bhuiyan did when he applied his values of compassion, mercy and forgiveness to the tragedy that life brought him. He was making as much a social and moral statement as a “religious” one.

Linking Piety and Politics

Like an earthquake out at sea, it is often not the quake itself that is the most destructive, but the ensuing waves (or tsunamis) and after-effects that we should be most wary of. Ten years has given us time to see the tidal waves of post-9/11 changes in our society and our world. For all the tragedy of 9/11 with the thousands killed on that day, the after-effects are far more troubling.

Perhaps what concerns me most among the post-9/11 trends is one that has, unfortunately, become perceived as the norm: that of linking piety with politics. Certainly, we are no stranger to this concept, as it is the core of many ideologies, from the 1979 revolutionary movement in Iran to the rhetoric of many prominent Evangelical Christian ideologies in the US today.

In the Muslim community, the association between “religion and politics” has become an unwelcome focus after 9/11. Thrust into the political sphere, virtually every Muslim found her or himself suspect, their religion vilified, their identity victim of the ideographic association: Muslim = terrorist. Forced into being defensive, Muslims were and continue to be simultaneously challenged to articulate Islam to a national audience, often ignorant of their religion, and at the same time unknowing victims of an equally ignorant or biased media. Experts on Islam are often political pundits whose expertise ranges from fear-mongering to outright lying. The average Muslim was, and to a large extent, still is, ill-equipped to counter the misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in American society.

Today, anti-Islamic, anti-Muslim rhetoric has grown into a large, money-making industry, especially for people with political aspirations, built upon fear and bigotry, racism and hate. Who would have thought, prior to 9/11, that such attitudes would become, not only openly expressed, but a basis for gaining political power and influence?

Prior to 9/11, many of us thought that we had passed that barrier and were truly becoming a nation more pluralistic in nature, as well as in demographics. But, alas, this was not to be. The ersatz religion of political piety, couched in familiar religious external orthodox terminology (whether Christian, Muslim or Judaic) has revealed itself as alive and well. The methodology

of such false piety relies heavily on the media, with its insatiable appetite for content and “reality” (or rather, constructed reality). “Shock and awe,” has become the way of information, as well as war. With each new pundit and politician seeking to “out-shock” and “out-play” the next, this trend has grown in strength, rather than diminished, since 9/11.

A Decade Later

A decade later we are faced with increasing prejudice, misunderstanding and, often, intentional provocation. The burning of Qur’ans, the desecration of Muslim cemeteries and property, gunshots into mosques, women harassed and attacked on the streets, and people attacked and killed simply because they look “Muslim” (as in the story I began with)—these types of incidents are increasing, not decreasing, as time passes.

The loss of dignified social and political discourse, alongside the mainstreaming of vitriolic and intolerant punditry is one of the most tragic after-shocks of 9/11. The rhetorical “war on terror” offered up an enemy, an ambiguous and undefined non-person, thus providing justifications for multiple wrongs, and heightening fears that each one of the 1.2 billion Muslims in the world could be a perpetrator of ill, a terrorist, and the only way to distinguish this is by his/her complexion, dress or accent.

The stoking of suppressed fears and prejudices has been accompanied by the abrogation of basic human and civil rights in the name of security. We seem to have forgotten that the true security of individuals and nations lies in freedom and mutual respect, forgiveness, tolerance and concern for the well-being of all people. These are qualities that Americans were once known for (whether fully true or not, at least this is what has always been espoused), and which we exemplified in behavior, guided by rule of law, and in the “secular religion” of our democracy.

What was, perhaps, not easily seen in the months after 9/11 was that such a concept of keeping people occupied with fear and the constant threat of violence in the form of an amorphous “war on terror” is the very same mentality the “terrorists” promote in many Muslim majority nations. It created the perfect scenario for fostering insipient racism and fear of “other.” It gave us permission to add yet another minority to the list of perceived threats to the American Way of Life, conveniently forgetting that the vast majority of people in this country are children of immigrants.

The View from Within

In the ten years and two wars since 9/11, terms like, “Islam,” “Muslim,” “Jihad,” “Shariah” and “Hajji” have become not only household words,

but also pejorative terms with twisted definitions in the minds of many. But how many know the true meanings of these sacred concepts?

These terms conjure an image in the minds of many that does not reflect the true face of Muslims in the US or around the world. Statistically, Muslims in the US are more educated, wealthier and more successful than the average citizen.³ According to the State Department publication “Muslims in America—A Statistical Portrait,” Muslim Americans range from highly conservative to moderate to secular in their religious devotion, just like members of other faith communities.⁴ And a 2009 study by Gallup showed that Muslim American women are more educated than the average American and report incomes closer to their male counterparts than American women of any other religion.⁵

We have similar values to our Christian and Jewish brethren, and have prophets (Jesus, Moses, David, Solomon, just to name a few) and texts in common. Muslims are educated to be tolerant, peaceful, service-full and loyal. We are told in the Qur’an to be open-minded, to accept our differences, and to learn about each other: “*O humanity! We created you from a single male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know each other...*” (49:13).

While this is the view and life of the average Muslim, it is also important to recognize that many feel that Islam has also been betrayed from within. Around the world, people who call themselves “Muslims” have undermined the foundations of Islam. Partisanship, once again, comes to the fore. Tribalism, hidden in the dress of Islam, terrorizes Muslims in many countries. Muslim youth in the poorest and most challenging circumstances have been exploited, fed a diet of falsehoods about other faiths, and taught the Qur’an without learning meanings or understanding what they are saying.

All too often, their governments have abdicated responsibility, leaving Muslim youth to the disenchanting and politically motivated religionists with their distorted understanding of the teachings of the Prophet (peace be upon him)—a prophet who taught not extremism, but moderation and balance in all things, saying: “*Whoever overburdens himself in his religion will not be able to continue in that way. So you should not be extremists, but try to be near*

3. See “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream,” *Pew Research Center*, May 22, 2007, <http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf>

4. “Muslims in America—A Statistical Portrait,” December 18, 2008, <http://www.america.gov/st/peopleplace-english/2008/December/20081222090246jmnamdeirf0.4547083.html>

5. Mohamed Younis, “Muslim Americans Exemplify Diversity, Potential,” *Gallup*, March 2, 2009, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116260/muslim-americans-exemplify-diversity-potential.aspx>

to perfection and receive the good tidings that you will be rewarded." (Reported by al-Bukhari, one of the six canonical hadith collections of prophetic traditions in Islam.)

No Muslim can initiate acts of war or terror. No Muslim can take the life of innocents, destroy the property of others, or accuse others of disbelief; yet, this has been and continues to be done in the name of Islam. "*A Muslim is one from whose tongue and hand the people are safe, and a believer is one in whom people place their trust in regard to their life and wealth*" (saying of the Prophet Muhammad).

All around we see the accoutrements of piety in the Muslim world, but piety worn on the sleeve (or on the head) is not necessarily the same as understanding, nor is it necessarily piety in the heart. The true face of Islam can be seen in the acts and words of those who put those values into action, like Rais Bhuiyan did in forgiving the man who tried to kill him.

A Muslim should be known by his or her good deeds, generosity, tolerance, sense of justice, patience, love and respect. The litmus test for a Muslim, indeed any one who espouses essential religious teachings, is: "Is the message inclusive, tolerant, merciful, compassionate, forgiving, loving and reflective of the most humane treatment of not only one another but also of the planet and all its creatures?" If not, then turn away from such people. They have lost their way and will encourage you to do the same.

There is Hope

Certainly, I have painted a bleak picture here, but there is hope; and it lies in the hearts of people who resonate with the essence of the universal values at the root of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, indeed, all essential faiths. While politicized religion and secular political interests may have fanned flames of intolerance, they cannot completely undermine the basic principles of human understanding and true faith—principles we know to be articulated in the Torah, the New Testament and the Qur'an. These principles of understanding and tolerance are not only core principles of democracy, the American Constitution and the Bill of Rights, but also the essential principles every community aspires to.

Take, for example, the Arab Spring still in progress across the Middle East, powered mostly by youth who have never before experienced freedom and democracy, who have never crossed the ethnic or religious barriers designed by despotic leaders to discourage understanding and tolerance. They have expressed their profound desire for, and indeed insisted on, a change in civil society that would reflect democratic principles, human qualities, and their religious and faith principles.

How many people (Muslim or non-Muslim) realize that what these young people are demanding is the civil manifestation of the foundational principles and attributes of Allah, as presented in Islam, Judaism and Christianity? They protested, marched and acted peacefully in the face of violence, joining with their Christian brothers and sisters to demand not only their political rights, but also their civil rights and their human rights. The world witnessed compassion, mercy, love, forgiveness, patience, tolerance, justice and peace as demanded by the core of the human heart. Such transformational processes take time and continued commitment if the ideals are to be maintained in the face of many corrupting realities, but the truth and essential building blocks are there.

These are universal values, and it is the affirmation of universal values that will save us from hypocrisy that eats at the essence of our religion and politics. It is these values, reflected in the heart of every human being, that are the hope of the world. To the Muslim, these qualities are the Names of Allah, the 99 beautiful names that are hardwired into each human being. More than just descriptive terms, they are pointers to the heart and soul of what makes a human being humane. These manifest attributes (beauty, love, yearning, knowledge, inner peace) are evident in nature. These attributes and qualities are the reality, the proof of Divine presence and, moreover, the affirmation that everything in life is a metaphor as well as a reflection of the Creator. We are told in the Qur'an: "*Wheresoever you look, there is the Presence of Allah*" (2:115).

When values such as compassion, mercy, forgiveness, tolerance, patience, perseverance, justice, love, protection, faith and duty determine our actions, our fellow human beings resonate with our essential goodness. When we act whole-heartedly on these values, the Qur'an tells us, "*You will see your direst enemy has become your closest friend*" (41:34).

Security in Our Homeland

Throughout history, there have always been people who understood this message of forgiveness, compassion and self-less service; who teach community, as well as personal, responsibility; and who value being in the world but not "of the world." These people are the mystics and scholars who are seekers of deeper and deeper knowledge of their own origin and of the personal experience of the Creator. In Islam, these people are the Sufis.

The Sufism that I know and try to live and teach is "Applied Sufism."⁶ It is not piety that is shown in ostentatious expressions or forms but is exemplified in service to humanity, in addressing food security issues,

6. Ahmed Abdur Rashid, *Applied Sufism: Classical Teachings for the Contemporary Seeker* (Livermore, CA: WingSpan Press, 2006).

poverty, women's rights, community health challenges, peace and justice, civil society development, education for employment, dialogue between people in or potentially involved in conflict.

The Sufism that I know is founded on these core principles, and is strongly rooted to the message of the Qur'an and the exemplary life of the Prophet (pbuh), to the lives of the Prophets of the Torah, and to the Prophet Jesus. It is recognized in the teaching of the Buddha and the Gita, in Zoroastrian principles, and in the hearts and minds of human beings who seek knowledge and understanding.

We seek the opportunity to return to a state of awakening, awareness of the Divine presence through the application, manifestation and affirmation of the Divine attributes within our self. Thus, we are creating a harmonic resonance with the source of these qualities that are seeded within us, by manifesting those qualities in the world around us: in our homes; our workplace; our institutions of governance. This is accomplished by remembering to remember. This living in remembrance is also the core of Islam.

The hope for the future of Islam, and consequently for the safety and security of both Muslims and non-Muslims, lies in the core teachings of Sufism (which are the original, essential teaching of the Prophet Muhammad [May the Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him]). Sufis, still misunderstood in much of the Islamic world, are victims of attacks at their shrines and homes, derided as innovators, and even accused of disbelief. But the teachings of Sufism represent what has been lost by those who, in the name of Islam, betray the name Islam itself (a name that affirms that we are all surrendered to a higher power and which also means: to provide a means to safety and security).

After 9/11, the US created Homeland Security. Ironically, it was the loss of security in the homeland of the hearts of Muslims that created an environment of attitudes and ideas that cut to the core of their faith. Today, many of us still find ourselves lacking that sense of security, personally, socially and politically. Looking around our society, we see groups of people either in extreme states of doubt and insecurity, or with extreme "beliefs," intolerant of "the other." Is it too much to hope that we turn toward our hearts and serve one another? Certainly, it is something to work for. The paradigm can and will shift as hearts become more focused on mercy, compassion, love and gratitude.

To the aware Sufi, everything is an opportunity to remember. Only through our effort to reclaim our own soul and heart, only by turning our attention to knowing the core of our self can we even entertain the possibility of being at peace and in harmony, let alone come to recognize the Divine presence. This is true both for the individual and the society.

This gift of consciousness, of conscience, of choice, is the only way to turn tragedy into a more permanent and inclusive spiritual harmony. Such a challenge remains before us today: to persevere in choosing goodness, love, mercy and forgiveness. But it must be more than sweet words...it must be through daily courageous action.

The Light on the Horizon

The challenge today is to help people to listen to their own hearts, to engage in public service that awakens the sense of civic responsibility, to share that service with people of faith communities that understand that essential religious teaching is one of unification and reuniting people, and to reunite our souls with the Divine that is present here and in the Here-after. This noble challenge requires that the message becomes known, that efforts are made, and that funds are available for true faith-fulfilled work, inviting all to join, believers and non-believers alike, to find the core of their humanness. This is the true Islam, the true teachings of the holy books and prophets, to surrender to the greater power, to create protection and security for those who seek it, and to take responsibility for the place, time and circumstance we find ourselves in.

Realizing the potential that lies in the core of each human being is the goal of life. It is never realized through violence or destruction, and can never be achieved by prejudice and fear. This is the message of all the prophets, regardless of the religious tradition: "Love thy neighbor," want for your brother what you want for your self, or, as it says in Qur'an: "*All believers are but brothers: therefore, make peace between your brothers...*" (49:10).

Post 9/11, we are challenged to turn to education for the future, education that liberates people from ignorance, creating bonds for success and mutual respect. How distasteful it is to hear ideologues promoting bigotry, hate, distrust and fear; undermining the very principles they espouse; wrapping themselves in the mantle of the flag or religion or cultural superiority or ethnicity. Yet people will continue to embrace such deception, until they are liberated from ignorance and awakened to the Divine qualities of their heart and soul.

Post 9/11 has been a time of great trials for the Muslim community and the global community. It has been, and continues to be, a time of insecurity and degradation of moral and ethical principles among peoples of the world, in political circles and civil society. But this is not an existential darkness. There is light on the horizon; the urge for freedom lies deep. There are examples of diversity in unity being embraced, of conflicts being avoided by reflecting on common values, and education of youth and the development of leaders and social innovators. Trans-global conversations

and idea dissemination are taking place thanks to the harmony between souls and the technology of the Internet.

When good and pure ideas flourish, when principled actions and common well-being are affirmed, the tyrants and oppressors (political, ideological, corporate, or religious opportunists) capitulate. The yearning for outer freedom is a reflection of the need for inner peace and freedom. No one, no regime, no tyrant or political party can quench the thirst for freedom once the person accesses their heart, opens their eyes, and listens to the plaintive calls of those in need.

No longer can we think just about events as the driving force of the future. No longer must arrogance and posturing bully people into submission and cloud their own good sense of ethics and morality; we must consider each citizen as a partner participating in the global renewal. The necessity of embracing diversity in unity is the challenge and blessing of a pluralistic nation and interconnected world. As good citizens of this world, we have no choice but to continue to contribute to its political affairs and social challenges, as a matter of gratitude and love. This is my humble understanding and hope.

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