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Political Islam and Non-Muslim Religions – A Lesson from Lessing for the Arab Transition

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Abstract

Hardly any region has recently captured the global geopolitical imagination as much as the Arab world after the so-called Arab Spring and very likely no state more so than Egypt. Finally, it seemed that democracy was coming to the region, that this would spell the end of radical Islam, of any local aspirations of creating Islamic states, and mark the beginning of a rapprochement between East and West. This paper analyses and links those dynamics, with particular reference to the transition process in the wake of the so-called Arab Revolution, and gauge what may be at stake for members of non-Muslim faiths. It will particularly trace the rift between theoretical Muslim discourse about Islamic tolerance towards other faiths and its implementation or the absence thereof in practice. It will conclude that so far no real progress has been made and that for the relationship to evolve, Islam needs to proceed to a state of self-perception that sees it as a mere but full equal to other religions. The recognition of its tradition-based nature and of the consequences which flow from such a realization for the treatment of its fundamental sources, the Qur'an and the Sunnah, will be addressed. We will use the example of a famous 18th century German play by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, about the occupation of Jerusalem by Saladin, to evaluate the current situation and the outlook.

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For each We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto Allah ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ. – Qur'an, Sura 5:48

O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for friends. They are friends one to another. He among you who taketh them for friends is (one) of them. Lo! Allah guideth not wrongdoing folk. – Qur'an, Sura 5:51¹

Introduction

Hardly any region has recently captured the global geopolitical imagination as much as the Arab world after the so-called Arab Spring and very likely no state more so than Egypt. Finally, it seemed that democracy was coming to the region, that this would eventually spell the end of radical Islam, put paid to any local aspirations of creating Islamic states, and mark the beginning of a rapprochement between East and West – in short, the West breathed a collective sigh of relief from its fear of the Muslim radicals, a spectre which the West over the last two centuries had had more than a hand in creating in the first place². It may have exhaled too soon, because it neglected the religious-psychological dynamics of (political) Islam. This paper will try to analyse and link those dynamics, with particular reference to the transition process in the wake of the so-called Arab Revolution, and gauge what may be at stake for members of non-Muslim faiths. It will particularly trace the rift between theoretical Muslim discourse about Islamic tolerance towards other faiths and its implementation or the absence thereof in practice. It will conclude that so far no real progress has been made and that for the relationship to evolve, Islam needs to proceed to a state of self-perception that sees it as a mere but full equal to other religions, and not a kind of *primus inter pares*. The need for the recognition of its tradition-based nature and of the consequences which flow from such a realization for the treatment of its fundamental sources, the Qur'an and the Sunnah, will be addressed. We will use the example of an 18th century German play by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, about the occupation of Jerusalem by Saladin, to evaluate the current situation and the outlook.

¹ Translation of both verses by Pickthall, see <http://quran.com/5>.

² Jeremy Salt, *The Unmaking of the Middle East – A History of Western Disorder in Arab Lands*, 2008.

The Road from Tahrir Square

The Arab and in particular the Egyptian revolution have been hijacked by those who were not part of the initial demonstrations and who only jumped on the wagon when the insurrectionist train was already gathering speed and becoming more or less unstoppable, i.e. by conservative Islamist³ groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists. Both of them and the political parties they formed after the revolution are in substance based on religious principles and ideologies and this may have worrying consequences which we are now beginning to see with the new Egyptian Constitution and the recent events in Tunisia. Their candidacy in the Egyptian parliamentary elections was *prima facie* in violation of Article 4 of the Constitutional Declaration (CD) of March 2011⁴ which prohibited the participation and even the establishment of religious parties:

Citizens have the right to establish associations, syndicates, federations, and parties according to the law. It is forbidden to form associations whose activities are opposed to the order of society or secret or of militaristic nature. No political activity shall be exercised, nor political parties established on a religious referential authority, on a religious basis or on discrimination on grounds of gender or origin.

The nonchalance with which this fundamental constitutional issue was already then brushed aside by the Islamists, and not enforced despite the fact that the military was still in control, did not bode well. These concerns have materialized with the new Constitution⁵. Nathan Brown believes that there will be no repetition of an Iranian-style theocracy⁶. Yet, given that the extremist fringe has historically often succeeded in cowing moderate practices by the threat or use of violence against moderates and liberals, this is not necessarily a consolation. In some countries, notably Pakistan, the use of doubtful⁷ and harsh interpretations of Shari'ah law against non-Muslims and other Muslims in the context of, for example, the blasphemy laws and the so-called “*takfir* wars”, occurs within an ostentatiously democratic setting which is, however, beset by radical Islamist propaganda, imams who do not shrink from praising the Islamist murderer of a moderate governor as someone who made “every Muslim proud”⁸, and

³ This word is used here to denote any adherent to the idea of a political Islam, not just the extremists.

⁴ See www.cabinet.gov.eg/AboutEgypt/ConstitutionalDeclaration_e.pdf.

⁵ See the text at <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypt-s-draft-constitution-translated>.

⁶ Nathan Brown, Post-Revolutionary Al Azhar, September 2011, available online at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2011/10/03/post-revolutionary-al-azhar/5m9t>, at 1, 15 and 17.

⁷ See Matthew J Nelson, *In the Shadow of Shari'ah – Islam, Islamic Law and Democracy in Pakistan*, 2011.

⁸ See <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/murderers-and-martyrs-the-difficult-struggle-of-christians-in-the-orient-a-738971-2.html>.

an uneducated as well as impoverished vast majority who lacks the intellectual wherewithal to scrutinise and where necessary, resist the messages spread by both⁹. Brown also made the important point that in Egypt the role of Al Azhar may become central to this development and that the struggle for control over it as well as its constitutional remit has already begun, with the current moderate Grand Imam Al-Tayeb still providing a bulwark against an Islamist “*Durchmarsch* through the institutions“¹⁰. The new Constitution bears Brown’s predictions out¹¹. Al Azhar is the oldest and quite possibly most prestigious seat of Sunni theology and learning in the world and even though not legally binding in general, its opinions will have a large impact on Sunni Muslim attitudes and policies¹². Its 2011 declaration on the Arab Revolution¹³ is a good example of the latent reform potential of the institution for the development of Islamic principles:

The forces of the revolution and reform should unite in achieving their dream of justice and freedom. They should also avoid sectarian, ethnic, doctrinal and religious conflicts in order to preserve their national fabric and respect citizens' rights; and they should join forces to achieve a democratic transformation for the benefit of everyone, in a framework of national consensus and harmony aimed at building a future based on equality and justice. Furthermore, they must prevent the uprising to be exploited by sectarianism or denominationalism or to provoke religious sensitivities¹⁴.

The latter exhortation would, however, seem to have gone unheeded. To be sure, there can be no argument from the point of view of pure democratic theory that if the electorate wants a majority for Islamist parties and the outcome of the elections sanctions that desire, then democracy has *prima facie* worked. Interestingly in this context, as a poll in July 2011 about the constitutional referendum in Egypt and in particular Article 2, which establishes Shari’ah as the primary source of law, seems to indicate, both Muslim and Christian responses were quite similar with regard to the overall referendum and more aligned to socio-economic

⁹ See Michael Bohlander, “There is no compulsion in religion” – Freedom of religion, Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and Crimes against Humanity at the Example of the Islamic Blasphemy Laws of Pakistan, [2012] 8 Journal of Islamic State Practices in International Law, 36.

¹⁰ Nathan Brown, *ibid.* (fn. 6), at 8 ff.

¹¹ See Article 4: “Al-Azhar is an encompassing independent Islamic institution, with exclusive autonomy over its own affairs, responsible for preaching Islam, theology and the Arabic language in Egypt and the world. Al-Azhar Senior Scholars are to be consulted in matters pertaining to Islamic law.” – online at <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypt-s-draft-constitution-translated>.

¹² *Ibid.* (fn. 6), at 4 ff.

¹³ See for the English translation <http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ilm/AlAzharDeclaration.pdf>.

¹⁴ See <http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ilm/AlAzharDeclaration.pdf>, under “Fourth”.

standing, but there was a clear split along religious lines with regard to Article 2¹⁵. An entirely different issue is whether Muslims understand democracy in the same sense as people in the West would. Evidence from a major 2007 Gallup Survey indicates that while some form of democracy is supported by a large part of the population in the surveyed Muslim countries, the qualifier that it needs to be in compliance with Shari'ah was also emphasised by a large majority¹⁶. A key issue in any democracy is the role of human rights and civil liberties. Here the evidence is not encouraging: The 1990 Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam¹⁷ does not match the secular understanding of human rights, either, precisely because of the religious element¹⁸ involved. Some examples shall suffice (my emphases):

From the Preamble

Reaffirming the civilizing and *historical role of the Islamic Ummah* which Allah made *as the best community* and which gave humanity a universal and well-balanced civilization, in which harmony is established between hereunder and the hereafter, knowledge is combined with faith, and to fulfill the expectations from this community *to guide all humanity which is confused because of different and conflicting beliefs and ideologies and to provide solutions for all chronic problems of this materialistic civilization.*

Article 22

- (a) Everyone shall have the right to express his opinion freely *in such manner as would not be contrary to the principles of the Shari'ah.*
- (b) Everyone shall have the right to advocate what is right, and propagate what is good, and warn against what is wrong and evil *according to the norms of Islamic Shari'ah.*
- (c) Information is a vital necessity to society. *It may not be exploited or misused in such a way as may violate sanctities and the dignity of Prophets, undermine moral and ethical Values or disintegrate, corrupt or harm society or weaken its faith.*
- (d) It is not permitted to excite nationalistic or *doctrinal* hatred or to do anything that may be an incitement to any form of racial discrimination.

¹⁵ See Jayson Casper, Comparing Muslim and Christian responses in the El-Zanaty Survey, in Cornelis Hulsman (ed.) *The Sharia as the Main Source of Legislation? – The Egyptian Debate on Article II of the Egyptian Constitution*, 2012, 115 – 116.

¹⁶ John L Esposito/Dalia Mogahed, *Who speaks for Islam? – What a billion Muslims really think*, 2007, 29 ff. – How far this survey is still accurate after the events surrounding the Arab revolution is open to question.

¹⁷ [Http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/cairodeclaration.html](http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/cairodeclaration.html).

¹⁸ Similar restrictions based on the precedence of the Shari'ah are present some provisions on freedom of religion in the otherwise somewhat more advanced Arab Charter on Human Rights 2004 – see Mervat Rishmawi, *The Arab Charter on Human Rights and the League of Arab States: an update* [2010] *Human Rights Law Review*, 169 ff.

Article 24

All the rights and freedoms stipulated in this Declaration are *subject to the Islamic Shari'ah*.

Article 25

The Islamic Shari'ah is the only source of reference for the explanation or clarification of any of the articles of this Declaration.

Obviously, the reliance on *one religion*¹⁹ to define *human* rights does not correspond to the idea behind human rights in the first place. Article 22(d) is honoured more in the breach than in observance by Islamists and *takfiris* and enforcement of the prohibition seems to be lax at best. The text of the preamble is nothing short of an insult to all non-Muslims, religious or not. Notwithstanding the question of what the effect the Cairo Declaration has under law, it shows the mindset with which modern transitional efforts in the Muslim context might have to contend, especially if the process is being driven by Islamist ideals²⁰.

¹⁹ The new Egyptian Constitution excludes Shi'a Islam from its ambit. See Article 219: "The principles of Islamic Sharia include general evidence, foundational rules, rules of jurisprudence, and credible sources accepted in Sunni doctrines and by the larger community." – Online at <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypt-s-draft-constitution-translated>.

²⁰ Modern Muslim theoretical apologists of a specifically Islamic human rights discourse take, of course, a different stance and employ such concepts as the ECtHR's "margin of appreciation" doctrine to allow for accommodation of particularly Muslim approaches; see, for example, Mashood A Baderin, *International Human Rights and Islamic Law*, paperback edition 2005, 219 ff at 231 ff. Baderin advocates in effect a bilateral accommodation with Islamic law striving to conform to international human rights standards, and the latter in effect granting Islamic law some leeway based on "Islamic ethical and moral values" (at 222). Baderin calls the Cairo Declaration "current codified Islamic human rights standards recognized by Muslim states" (at 48), so it would be fair to assume that they represent at least the main substance of those ethical and moral values, as the Declaration itself would seem to say in its Preamble. It is of interest to note that of the 39 instances (see page xx of the book for a list) where Baderin refers to the Cairo Declaration, only two (at 60 and 217) can be said to contain an analysis and/or critique of the Declaration, even where in the remaining 37 there are cases of a lack of a corresponding protection under the Declaration compared to international human rights law, which reinforces the conclusion that the Declaration is in Baderin's view in sync with general Islamic doctrine. In any event, the basic difference between the secular and the Islamic approach, as Baderin himself points out (at 51), is that the former is anthropocentric and the latter theocentric – and that theocentric quality, as the Preamble shows, is not deistic but Islamic, in other words in a human rights system governed solely by Islamic law the God who determines the rights of humans and their ambit is the God as seen and constructed by Islam, not any other religion, and certainly not any non-religious ideology. To which extent these rights are *human* and/or *rights* is thus open to question. Baderin himself appears to advocate what he calls an "inclusive universalism" (at 28 – 29) based on a "multi-cultural or cross-cultural approach" (at 28) and opines that it "may only be difficult, but not impossible" to arrive at a "universally acceptable consensus" (at 29). How far adherents of political Islam would be prepared to engage in such a mutual trade-off exercise remains to be seen – see the text around the following footnotes.

Islam(ism) and Transition – A Doubtful Process?

The real problem, at any rate, is what comes after the elections: Will democracy have worked once and then be discarded²¹ for a more or less Shari'ah-based state model run by Islamists, or will its ideas remain in the fibre of the new country²² and also bind the Islamist politicians to its principles, such as human rights and the rule of law? The new Constitution does not provide any comfort here, with its vague and conflicting messages especially on freedom of religion and opinion in Articles 43 – 45 and 215²³. Will the fundamentalists and radicals succeed in driving the moderates before them, because the latter do not wish to appear as lax Muslims, and all will be caught in an ever increasing spiral of proving who the better believer is? Evidence from the Muslim world does not help in dispelling concerns about radicalisation as opposed to mere moderate Islamisation: The spread of blasphemy and apostasy laws appears to be on the rise in the Islamic world²⁴. In 2012, Kuwait passed a law allowing for the imposition of the death penalty on Muslims for insulting Islam, God or Mohammed, and a minimum sentence of 10 years for Christians and other non-Muslims²⁵. Further evidence of a creeping Islamisation of the Egyptian administration of justice is the conviction in 2012 of Egyptian actor Adel Imam for insulting Islam by portraying critical characters in film and on stage²⁶. Open intolerance vis-à-vis other faiths, for example Christians despite their nature as “people of the book”, seems to be alive and well in the Gulf region with Saudi Arabia still banning the building of churches²⁷, its Grand Mufti demanding the destruction of existing ones and Kuwaiti politicians considering similar moves²⁸. In Malaysia, the sale of some European teams' *Euro 2012* football jerseys imprinted with a

²¹ The present Islamist Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan is on record for having recited a poem in 1997 that went as follows: “Democracy is merely the train we board, the mosques are our barracks, the minarets our spears and the believers our soldiers“. - My translation from the German quote cited in Necla Kelek, *Himmelsreise – Mein Streit mit den Wächtern des Islam*, paperback ed., 2011, 95.

²² Some scholars have denied that Egypt, for example, is in a proper state of transition at all. See Reem Abou-el-Fadl, *Beyond Conventional Transitional Justice: Egypt's 2011 Revolution and the Absence of Political Will*, (2012) *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 1.

²³ See <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypt-s-draft-constitution-translated>.

²⁴ Paul Marshall/Nina Shea, *Silenced: How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes are Choking Freedom Worldwide*, 2011.

²⁵ See <http://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2012/12/kuwait-introduces-death-penalty-for-cursing-god-and-prophets>. The Emir had previously blocked the effect of the vote in June 2012, see http://www.catholic.org/international/international_story.php?id=48968. He was overruled by a 2/3 Islamist majority in Parliament, yet the law did not enter into force because the Parliament was dissolved by the Emir and the Constitutional Court immediately afterwards (Communication from Dhari Al-Fadhalah, Kuwait, of 21 March 2013 – on file with the author).

²⁶ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17832703>. – See generally on the rise of blasphemy prosecutions in the Islamic world http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/Blasphemy_Cases.pdf.

²⁷ See <http://www.secularism.org.uk/saudikingwantsmonotheismstounite.html>.

²⁸ See <http://rt.com/news/peninsula-saudi-grand-mufti-701/>.

cross was banned by Muslim clerics who argued that wearing them would be “promoting the devil”²⁹. In Libya, the re-introduction of Shari’ah is openly demanded³⁰ and Salafi radicals have begun destroying the tombs of saints revered by some Muslims³¹. In Nigeria, the *Boko Haram* Islamist group has carried out a series of attacks on Christian churches and killed hundreds of people, including moderate Muslims³². In Indonesia, Islamist violence against minorities such as Christians and Ahmadis is on the rise, with the state turning a blind eye³³. Even Tunisia, a country which had been considered as a success story in terms of a moderate Islamist government, is facing violent Islamist unrest as the controversy over modern art exhibitions³⁴ and the recent assassination of a prominent opposition leader³⁵ have shown, and there is doubt about how far the ruling *Ennahda* party is willing to tackle the more extreme elements in the country³⁶. The Egyptian tourism industry is worried about conflicting messages from the Islamist factions about the availability of alcohol for non-Muslim tourists and the regulation of appropriate beach wear³⁷. The perennial issue of women’s rights in Islam merits special mention in this context: It seems that as soon as Islamist politicians³⁸ gain power the first thing they have to do is to roll back³⁹ any positive development of the status of women that may have been achieved until then – as if there were not more important issues to deal with in the entire Muslim world than enforcing the veil and ensuring

²⁹ See <http://midnightwatcher.wordpress.com/2012/06/06/malaysian-clerics-ban-sale-of-soccer-jerseys-containing-dangerous-cross-symbol-you-are-only-promoting-the-devil/>.

³⁰ See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8844819/Libyas-liberation-interim-ruler-unveils-more-radical-than-expected-plans-for-Islamic-law.html>.

³¹ See the response from the Libyan *ulama* at <http://shanfaraa.com/2012/08/statement-from-libyan-ulama-on-the-salafi-destruction-of-mosques-and-tombs/>.

³² See <http://www.usip.org/publications/what-boko-haram>.

³³ See <http://en.qantara.de/Democracy-without-Tolerance/19359c20500i1p497/index.html>.

³⁴ See <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2012/06/12/tunisian-islamists-riot-over-art-show-they-say-insults-muslims/>.

³⁵ See http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/09/opinion/the-assassination-of-chokri-belaid-in-tunisia.html?_r=0.

³⁶ See <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/salafists-in-tunisia-riot-over-art-heresy>.

³⁷ See the telling comment at <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?313848-Egypt-Muslim-Brotherhood-reassures-tourists-Alcohol-and-women-will-be-there>.

³⁸ This does not just apply to the usual suspects. i.e. the Salafis in the Middle East and Pakistan: Even respected and courted European Muslim intellectuals such as Tariq Ramadan find it difficult to come clean and renounce religion- and tradition-based gender discrimination outright, because he wants to start from within the existing texts of the Qur’an and the Sunna as well as Islamic tradition; see the chapter on the issue in his *Radical Reform – Islamic Ethics and Liberation*, 2009, 207 ff. and particularly at 208: “Clearly, the internal debate in the light of scriptural sources must be thought through and started from within, and it cannot simply and naturally identify with, or be assimilated with categories introduced by women and feminists in Western societies“. If this sentence is to have any meaningful substance, it implies by necessity that what women want in the West, i.e. simply full equality in law with men and the right to make their own life choices, is either not something that Muslim women want (which appears doubtful), or not something that an Islamic debate “from within“ can subscribe to unreservedly. If the latter is true, then the title of Ramadan’s book is a multiple contradiction in terms.

³⁹ See in the context of the Arab Spring <http://en.qantara.de/Women-as-Losers-of-the-Revolution/19346c20482i1p500/index.html>.

patriarchal⁴⁰ customs of disposing of women in the family as one would of chattels⁴¹. It remains to be seen to what extent the involvement or not of women in the transitional process will have – or would have had – a beneficial effect. It is in any event a terrible waste of human potential⁴² not to refer to the insight of the female half⁴³ of any population, especially in such historical periods of a nation's life, and a sign of serious deficiency in democratic terms. As Shereen El Feki puts it: "It's hard to see how democracy can flourish in a society if its constitutional and cultural cornerstone in the family is so undemocratic"⁴⁴.

We all know from reliable media reports that the examples mentioned above are not out of character and have been on the agenda for quite a while. It appears that there is an elephant in the room that everyone who is a moderate participant to the cross-cultural dialogue is doing their best to ignore or to explain away: If it seems, and the evidence so far is more in favour of that contention than against it, that political Islam – at the very least *as practised* – is part of the problem and not of the solution, then how can it be a supporting factor in a transition towards good governance under the rule of law? Political Islam is overwhelmingly conservative Islam, and not rarely ultra-conservative or even violent-extremist. It is difficult to reconcile the evidence with the claim by the more moderate Muslim clerics and intellectuals that extremism is un-Islamic, and ultimately this poses the question from whose point of view the "extreme" is defined and where zealous devotion crosses the line into blind fanaticism. It is not sufficient to reiterate like a mantra that Islam is a religion of peace and

⁴⁰ It is almost as if Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian Nobel Prize laureate, had never written his Cairo Trilogy (1956 – 57), in which he dissects a Cairene Muslim family's life as well as the socio-political life in Cairo in the period from 1919 until 1944, and especially castigates the duplicitous behaviour of the main character, the self-important family tyrant, father and husband Ahmad Abd al-Jawad, who imposes the strict traditional rules of conduct on the female members of his household, but has himself an excessive and loose life style, involving women and alcohol.

⁴¹ On the situation in Germany see Necla Kelek, *Himmelsreise – Mein Streit mit den Wächtern des Islam*, paperback ed., 2011; and more generally the collection of essays in Dutch by the Somali Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *De Maagdenkooi*, 2004.

⁴² Yet, even in Saudi Arabia exceptions are possible if there is the necessary political will: At the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) women are allowed to drive on campus, do not have to wear a veil and can attend mixed classes with male students, something which would boggle the mind of any Saudi in a normal setting, and this has drawn the criticism of the Saudi *ulama* who want to have the courses vetted according to Islamic law. This has led King Abdullah to dismiss a member of the highest clerical authority, Sheikh Saad al-Shithri, who had publicly criticised the policy. – See "KAUST resets top 10 ambitions", online at <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=420231>.

⁴³ Here again, it may be apposite to refer to the 2007 Gallup Report on the views of women, where the defining element of the questioning process was the juxtaposition to Western forms of equality, and apparently Muslim women did not admire the Western view because in their eyes women were sexually degraded at the same time as being liberated to equality under law; the conceptual disjunction of the two issues did not seem to register with the respondents. Another reason given was that full equality would mean women would have to contribute to their own and the family income, something which traditional Islamic law does not require them to do at all; *ibid* (fn. 16), 99 ff.

⁴⁴ *Sex and the Citadel – Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World*, 2013, 91.

tolerance and to refer to its undoubtedly high-minded ideals in the *maqasid al-Shari'ah*⁴⁵, if some highly visible adherents of that religion and/or a largely tradition-oriented majority do not practise them. Islam has always, and rightly so, denied that kind of excuse to Christians or other religions if they did not live up to the demands of their faiths or principles. It must suffer to be held to the same standards. To refer to the allegedly flawless nature of Shari'ah and other Islamic precepts in the face of their violation by literalist fundamentalists in practice is reminiscent of someone who tells you not to worry about people committing crimes because there is a perfect criminal law. The *practical occurrence* of retrograde development⁴⁶ apparent in several recent Muslim-led transitional or (post-)conflict situations such as Afghanistan (*during and after* the Taliban⁴⁷ regime), early and modern-day Pakistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Sudan, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya would also appear to give that theoretical discourse about the perfection of Shari'ah the lie, and particularly so when it comes to other religions, even the *ahl al-kitab*.

How far is Islam as practised in the region (and also in the West) capable and/or willing to recognise the legitimacy of other faiths or ideologies without asking the question about the “true religion”? How far are the main actors in the Muslim (factual) hierarchy – political and religious – willing to teach the uneducated and analphabetic masses tolerance and

⁴⁵ E.g. Baderin, *ibid* (fn 20) at 15, 41 – 44, 88, 222, 224. - A typical recent example of overlooking the reality and extolling the theoretical virtues of Islamic rules can be found in Maher Y. Abu-Munshar, *In the shadow of the 'Arab Spring': the fate of non-Muslims under Islamist rule*, [2012] 23 *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 487.

⁴⁶ Islam has a massive international image problem based on how it is visibly practised as opposed to intellectual issues in *usul al-fiqh*. The problem is only at the surface the terrorist violence. The real problem is the inflexibility of those Muslims who insist on the right to live their faith in full according to their traditions, even if these clash with the values of the host society or international standards. The inflexibility is justified by divine command and thus placed beyond the reach of merely human argument. This approach is in contradiction to the principles of an open secular society which, and that is the rub, was built on the experience of centuries of oppression based on religion, for example in Europe, this time by corporate Christianity. An open secular society works on the principle that no-one gets to live out his own ideas in full as soon as that clashes with the spheres of others, and it mostly will clash somewhere. An Islam which is not prepared to compromise because of its own perceived superiority does not fit into an open society, but destroys it from within by using the openness for its own ends. The main worry of those people who subscribe to the idea of an open society is thus not really the spectre of Islamic overpopulation as a demographic threat based on Muslim birth rates. It is the erosion of their own freedom through the (ab-)use of the very liberties provided by that same open society, by persons who do not want to sacrifice anything of their own sphere so as to contribute something to rather than demand more from society. Every position secured by Muslim human rights litigation also means a restriction on what the open society and its members can do with regard to Muslims. The record of Muslim abidance by decisions which do not go in their favour is far from perfect; at this stage the superior divine command is often mobilised and in some cases the state is more or less openly challenged into enforcement. To lay the blame for this concern only at the feet of the people who are worried about the developments and to accuse them simply of uninformed Islamophobia is disingenuous and at worst obfuscatory propaganda.

⁴⁷ It is often overlooked that the Taliban themselves were a transitional Muslim regime after the previous government and the Mujahidin had been ousted.

recognition, and to publicly educate and reprimand the highly visible extremists about their un-Islamic interpretation of Islam and the Shari'ah? How great is the chance of disentangling religious teaching and ethnic traditions, such as honour killings and forcing women to wear the veil and be subservient to males? The evidence for a change to the positive so far is less than encouraging⁴⁸, even – and maybe especially – with those Muslims living in Europe and the US, where they often strive more towards the creation of parallel spheres⁴⁹ of society and even law, than towards integration with – as opposed to assimilation⁵⁰ to – the host community⁵¹.

⁴⁸ The Muslim Brotherhood, according to one of its functionaries, Midhat Saki, still has the ultimate aim of establishing the global Islamic Caliphate, although, as he said, without the use of force; see Alexander Smoltczyk, *Unter Brüdern, Der Spiegel* 21/2012, 94 – 96. – Similarly, one of the Salafists behind the mass Qur'an distribution campaign in Germany in May and June 2012 – see <http://www.dw.de/dw/article/0,,16035993,00.html> and <http://en.qantara.de/Mass-Conversions-in-Public-Places/19344c20480i1p500/index.html> – Ibrahim Abu Nagie, declared in an interview that he wants Shari'ah to rule on a global level as a natural consequence of his Islamic faith, see <http://www.swr.de/blog/terrorismus/2012/05/24/interview-mit-ibrahim-abou-nagie/>. Asked by the interviewer whether he respected democracy, he replied (my translation): “This is not about respect. The people here must understand this. Someone, a Muslim who denies the Shari'ah, he immediately leaves Islam. He is an infidel. How can I as a Muslim accept any other system but that of Allah. I say [cites the *shahadah* in Arabic] presupposes that Allah is the ruler, and guides us. But we live in this country and have no problems with that. But things which go against the Shari'ah we reject, and Shari'ah comes from the bottom, not the top. ... That means that the Muslims themselves have to want the Shari'ah first, and the leader is merely a symbol.”

⁴⁹ Compare the furore caused in Germany in 2010 by the public outcry over Thilo Sarrazin's book *Deutschland schafft sich ab – Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen*, 2010, and the response by a number of intellectuals in *Deutschlandstiftung Integration* (ed.) Sarrazin – *Eine deutsche Debatte*, 2010.

⁵⁰ Turkish President Erdogan during a recent visit to Germany told a football stadium full of Turkish expats verbatim that assimilation was a “crime against humanity”; see the full text of the speech at <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/2.220/erdogan-rede-in-koeln-im-wortlaut-assimilation-ist-ein-verbrehen-gegen-die-menschlichkeit-1.293718>.

⁵¹ See for the German example Joachim Wagner, *Richter ohne Gesetz – Islamische Paralleljustiz gefährdet unseren Rechtsstaat*, 2011; Karl Albrecht Schachtschneider, *Grenzen der Religionsfreiheit am Beispiel des Islam*, 2nd ed., 2011; for a view on the European situation see Christopher Caldwell, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe – Can Europe be the same with different people in it?*, 2009. – His book and similar others have been severely criticised as adding to a culture of Islamophobic fearmongering based on demographic concerns of Muslim overpopulation and/or lack of knowledge about Islam by, for example, Pankaj Mishra in *The Guardian*, see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/aug/15/eurabia-islamophobia-europe-colonised-muslims>. This criticism overlooks the fact that creating and sustaining fear of possible retaliation is an undeniable part of the arsenal of Islamist propaganda itself, and we have by now arrived at a stage where there is no more need for explicit threats, and that those who do not expressly make them can actually brand themselves as moderates. Moderate Muslims in the proper sense of the word, who may merely react in a seriously offended manner, as a devout traditional Christian might, do thus not have to threaten or even contemplate reprisals themselves because the audience will by default assume that such a reaction may be in the realm of the possible, based on narratives about other Muslims who have, sometimes wholly unexpectedly, reverted to violence. In such a situation it is psychologically hardly helpful to the debate to distinguish between religious and traditional or ethnic sources of behaviour and to blame the violent part wholly on the latter. In any event, there is some evidence that at least as far as folk-Islam as opposed to scholarly Islam is concerned, the two have merged in the Muslim consciousness, with the consequence that less well-educated Muslims will themselves be unable to make that distinction anymore – compare Sami Zubaida, *Beyond Islam – A New Understanding of the Middle East*, 2011, 111. Similar phenomena can be noticed in most if not all scripture-based religions after they have had sufficient time to build up settled rituals and practices which often mix with pre-existing folklore. It is then these rituals and practices which transport religious identity to a possibly larger degree than the finer points of the doctrinal teachings with which many believers will be unfamiliar to begin with.

Islamic self-understanding, religious psychology and Arab reason as obstacles to progress?

This leads us to asking a very blunt question: Does the reliance on internal Islamic frames of reference as well as the heavy emphasis of and in parts almost slavish adherence⁵² to centuries-old sources from different and more often than not overcome and outdated Arab historical and societal contexts allow Muslims to consider such reforms, or is it not necessary for them to step outside the box and the historical straitjacket of Islamic sources and to try to view their own system through the eyes of the others, i.e. non-Muslims? To hope for such a move may seem illusory given the vehement resistance traditionalists put up against any form of innovation⁵³. One should not fall into the trap of thinking that what a few thousand students, intellectuals and other well-meaning reform-minded people may say will have any direct impact on the situation on the ground: Hope for a short- or even midterm change is likely to be wishful thinking unless the Islamic and the Arab world in particular tackles the prejudices and preconceptions imminent in its education systems, the traditional family and wider ethnic structures, and empowers the masses of its ordinary citizens to think and decide for themselves as individuals, instead of abiding by a tradition- and community-based identity-encoding model; this goes for both men and women. To protest against oppressive governments, high unemployment and corruption is not the same as engaging in a sustained effort to reconcile Islamic thinking with the realities of the 21st century⁵⁴. Is the Islamic world forever going to be trapped in its traditional religiosity, or “lost in the sacred”, as Dan Diner⁵⁵ put it? In other words, is it right to say that Muslims simply cannot be trusted ever to wish to join modern democratic society and, more to the point, to separate state and religion, and is that separation considered necessary at all by Islamic bodies politic? Is the transitional effort in the wake of the Arab Spring destined to fail and fall prey to people with literally medieval minds and sectarian agendas? Before we look at Lessing’s play, we need to understand that with Islam’s traditional refusal⁵⁶ to separate religion and state, transitional justice is not merely about institution-building and legal or political awareness training – it is

⁵² See Abdullahi Ahmed An Na’im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, 1996, 161 ff..

⁵³ Compare the accounts by Sadakat Kadri, *Heaven on Earth – A Journey through Shari’ah Law*, 2011, 163 ff. and John L Esposito, *The Future of Islam*, 2010, 88 ff.

⁵⁴ See, for example, <http://en.qantara.de/The-Arab-Uprising-Was-Not-about-Liberal-Democracy/18498c19256i1p/index.html>.

⁵⁵ Dan Diner, *Lost in the Sacred*, 2007.

⁵⁶ See for a modern Islamic approach to this conundrum Abdullahi Ahmed An Na’im, *Islam and the Secular State – Negotiating the Future of Shari’a*, 2008.

also and to a large part about religious psychology and parental as well as peer-group based behavioural conditioning. Other fundamental questions must be asked in this context: Are Muslims willing to accept that it must be permissible to question the tenets of their faith, and to subject even its primary sources to historical-critical research which does not proceed from the premise that they are sacrosanct in their textual integrity and that any instances of vagueness or inconsistency merely await the right interpreter? Are they prepared to subject them to an external criticism to which the Christian holy scriptures, for example, have been subjected for many decades⁵⁷? Are they prepared to accept that non-Muslims do not have to proceed from a pro-Islamic position in the cross-cultural conversation and do not have to spare the religious feelings of Muslims in what they say? Are they willing to engage in such research themselves to avoid any grounds for the often vociferous and emotionally charged denial of the findings of Western Orientalist research⁵⁸? Or will they remain in an attitude of religious superiority by insisting that they alone are in possession of the final revelation, sent down verbatim to Mohammed from Heaven, and that Mohammed was an infallible interpreter of God's will? Will they fear that Islam as a religion will fall with the divine nature of the Qur'an and/or an uncoupling of political from private religious life? These are hard and very uncomfortable questions but as long as Muslims will not accept the need to consider such a drastic concept, so long will they by definition be talking down to others⁵⁹.

Especially as far as the Islamic tradition has been influenced by Arab thinking, it is interesting to hear what the Moroccan philosopher Mohamed Abed al-Jabri has expressed in his "Critique of Arab Reason"⁶⁰:

"The entire modern and contemporary Arab thinking is characterised by the lack of historical perspective and objectivity. The only reading offered of tradition is a fundamentalist one, which

⁵⁷ This has so far apparently not been the case – see Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike – Ein europäischer Zugang*, 2010, 767 – 768.

⁵⁸ For an example of the *ad personam* style of argument, see Mustafa as-Siba'ee, *The Sunnah and its Role in Islamic Legislation*, 2008, when he takes on the noted orientalist Ignaz Goldziher, at 254: "Perhaps the most dangerous of the Orientalists as well as the most despicable in this regard is the Jewish Orientalist Ignaz Goldziher"; and at 264: "An important lesson for Goldziher is that a liar must at the very least make his lies seem plausible."

⁵⁹ In this context it is hardly surprising that a running theme of any Islamist propaganda video is the copious use of the index finger raised in schoolmasterly if not warning or even threatening admonition by the speaker.

⁶⁰ Mohamed Abed al-Jabri, *Kritik der arabischen Vernunft – Die Einführung*, 2009. The translation of the following excerpts is by the author from the German version of al-Jabri's book "Naqd al-aql al-arabi", which in turn was translated from the French, so hopefully there are not too many undiscovered and misunderstood Chinese whispers here. – For a more extensive discussion of the complexities surrounding the approach to Arab Reason see the volume by al-Jabri, *The Formation of Arab Reason – Text, Tradition and the Construction of Modernity in the Arab World*, 2011.

transcends the past, sacralises it and tries to extract from it ready-made solutions for the problems of the present and the future. This applies without restriction to the Islamist movement, but equally to the other streams of thought, of which everyone invokes founding fathers with whom “salvation” is to be found. All streams of Arab thinking take their project of a Renaissance from a model oriented towards the past In the face of each new problem this kind of thinking falls back on the mechanical thought process of finding ready-made solutions in relationship to some “foundation”. ... The Arab reason can be renewed only by questioning the old and through a thorough critique...”⁶¹

Al-Jabri highlights, perhaps with some philosophical license, the deleterious influence which tradition-guided thinking⁶² has had on the Arab mind:

“.. [T]he contemporary Arab reader is restricted by his tradition and crushed by his present, which means firstly that tradition absorbs him, robs him of independence and freedom. Since he entered the world he has been inculcated with tradition, in the form of a certain vocabulary and a certain attitude, language and way of thinking; in the form of fables, legends and imaginary ideas, a certain manner of relating to things and a manner of thought; in the form of knowledge and truths. He receives all this without any critical analysis and without an iota of critical intellect. Through these inculcated elements he perceives things; on them he bases his opinions and observations. The exercise of thinking under these conditions resembles more a memory game. When the Arab reader delves into the traditional texts, then his manner of reading is that of *remembering*, in no way, however, is it *exploring* or *reflecting*.”⁶³

This analysis may not be entirely on point for the foreign-educated intellectual urban elite, but it is certainly in resonance with the appearance of the thought processes manifested by many if not most of the traditionally trained *ulama*, and, of course, the less well-educated majority of the population who will likely accept anything their imams tell them almost unquestioningly.

Ambiguous Islamic attitudes especially towards Christianity

The two verses from the Qur’an cited at the beginning of this paper are evidence of a conflicted stance of Islam even towards one of its Abrahamic sister religions. The reference

⁶¹ Ibid, 80 – 81.

⁶² See for its impact on the Arab education system <http://en.qantara.de/No-Arab-Spring-in-Education/19337c20473i0p162/index.html>.

⁶³ Ibid. (fn. 60) 86 – 87 (emphasis in the original). – See also similarly Necla Kelek, Ein Befreiungsschlag, in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 30 August 2010, on the Sarrazin Debate about education patterns among Muslims in Germany.

made to Sura 5:48 in the interfaith debate overlooks another one only three verses down, namely 5:51. For Salafists, reference to the *tafsir* of *Ibn Kathir* as one of the standard traditional commentaries on the Qur'an will be a tempting option, and we find the following commentary on 5:51:

“Allah forbids His believing servants from having Jews and Christians as friends⁶⁴, because they are the enemies of Islam and its people, *may Allah curse them*. Allah then states that they are friends of each other and He gives a warning threat to those who do this.”⁶⁵

Nothing is said about this verse ever having been abrogated by later verses. In the celebrated *Common Word* of 2007⁶⁶, an open letter from the Muslim side about a fresh start in Muslim-Christian relations, which was signed by 138 Muslim religious authorities, 5:51 is not mentioned at all. While the *Common Word* is based on the two linked commandments of loving God and one's neighbour, its authors apparently could not (at page 15 of the English version) resist inserting a jibe about the Trinity and the previous debate among early Christians about the divine nature of Christ⁶⁷:

“Muslims recognize Jesus Christ as the Messiah, not in the same way Christians do (but Christians themselves anyway have never all agreed with each other on Jesus Christ's nature)”

On page 14, the *Common Word* qualifies the neighbourly love of Muslims for Christians in the following manner:

“As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them—so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes...”

While it may have been well-intentioned and sincere, the impression which the *Common Word* leaves is that the Muslim side was after all unable to change its spots. It is difficult to

⁶⁴ Some readings also allow for “as protectors“, the Arabic original is *awliya'a*; see Hartmut Bobzin, *Der Koran*, 2010, 646.

⁶⁵ *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Abridged Version, 2000, vol. 5, 204 – my emphasis. - - See also the recent attempt to defuse the tension by Hakan Çoruh, *Friendship between Muslims and the People of the Book in the Qur'an with special reference to Q 5:51*, [2012] 23 *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 505.

⁶⁶ See <http://acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=option1>.

⁶⁷ For an overview of the main classic Christian heresies compare Alister McGrath, *Heresy*, 2009, 101 ff.

imagine how a substantive conversation⁶⁸ among equals can take place against such a background⁶⁹. Verses and commentaries like those above give Islamists a textual basis from which to justify an uncompromising attitude in the transitional context. Obviously, a post-conflict transition process is not only about interfaith relationships but about rebuilding a broken state and cleaning up the political debris left behind by an authoritarian and corrupt regime. Yet, against the background of recurring instances of religious sectarian violence and persecution of, for example, Christians once a non-religious authoritarian ruler in the Arab region is removed – examples: Iraq, Egypt and probably soon Syria – the question must be allowed whether an Islamist understanding, i.e. whether political Islam can be expected to form a solid basis for a transition based on the rule of law and human rights, among them freedom of speech and religion. It is here that a look at Lessing's play and its history as the background setting for the Ring Parable will be helpful as a contrasting point of view.

Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* as a contrast to traditional Islamic thinking

Lessing wrote the play as a counterpoint against the prevailing Islamophobia in the Christian society of his day, and it is of vital importance again after 9/11 and 7/7. The play is decidedly pro-Islamic⁷⁰. The setting is in Jerusalem during its occupation by Saladin after the 3rd Crusade. The central character is the wealthy Jewish merchant Nathan, whose entire family was killed in a pogrom carried out by the Templars. Shortly after their death he is entrusted by a Christian monk with a little Christian baby girl whose father had recently died in battle. He raises her under the Jewish name of Recha as a Jew. When Nathan returns from a long voyage, he finds that there had been a fire in his house and that Recha was saved by a young Knight Templar, the only one of twenty whom Saladin had let live because he reminded him of his brother, and they have fallen in love. Meanwhile, Saladin is in financial straits, because his campaign has emptied his coffers. He hears about wealthy Nathan and commands his

⁶⁸ Indeed, the previous Grand Imam of Al Azhar, al-Tantawi, during a visit to the Herzog-August-Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel in 1997 in the context of a Lessing event, reportedly said that doctrinal matters should be kept apart from the interfaith dialogue. See Wolfenbütteler Bibliotheks-Informationen [1997] vol. 22, No. 1-2. Regrettably, there exists no verbatim record or manuscript of the Grand Imam's address – email of Christian Hogrefe, Herzog-August-Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel, of 7 June 2012 (on file with the author). A request to Al Azhar for help in this context remained unanswered.

⁶⁹ In an email correspondence with the author of 18 June 2012 (on file with the author), Karl-Josef Kuschel expressed the opinion that while he disagreed about the overall evaluation of the Common Word which he viewed as a well-intentioned, positive and courageous attempt, he felt that the initiators were not doing enough to ensure its dissemination within the Muslim context. It may thus have been, in his view, more of a PR exercise for the West than an attempt at substantive reflection.

⁷⁰ For an exposé of Lessing's research about Islam and Arabs see George Pons, L'intérêt de Lessing pour le monde islamique, (1982) 10 Tijdschrift voor de studie van de verlichting, 41 ff.

presence in the Palace to find out whether he could obtain money from him. The conversation soon strays to Saladin asking him which is the true religion, and Nathan responds with the Parable of the Three Rings. The parable merits being reproduced here verbatim:

NATHAN: In days of yore, there dwelt in eastern lands a man who had a ring of priceless worth received from hands beloved. The stone it held, an opal, shed a hundred colors fair, and had the magic power that he who wore it, trusting its strength, was loved of God and men. No wonder therefore that this eastern man would never cease to wear it; and took pains to keep it in his household for all time. He left the ring to that one of his sons he loved the best; providing that in turn that son bequeath to his most favorite son the ring; and thus, regardless of his birth, the dearest son, by virtue of the ring, should be the head, the prince of all his house. You follow, Sultan.

SALADIN: Perfectly. Continue!

NATHAN: At last this ring, passed on from son to son, descended to a father of three sons; all three of whom were duly dutiful, all three of whom in consequence he needs must love alike. But yet from time to time, now this, now that one, now the third - as each might be with him alone, the other two not sharing then his overflowing heart seemed worthiest of the ring; and so to each he promised it, in pious frailty. This lasted while it might. - Then came the time for dying, and the loving father finds himself embarrassed. It's a grief to him to wound two of his sons, who have relied upon his word. What's to be done? He sends in secret to a jeweler, of whom he orders two more rings, in pattern like his own, and bids him spare nor cost nor toil to make them in all points identical. The jeweler succeeds. And when he brings the rings to him, the sire himself cannot distinguish them from the original. In glee and joy he calls his sons to him, each by himself confers on him his blessing. His ring as well - and dies. - You hear me, Sultan?

SALADIN (*who, taken aback, has turned away*): I hear, I hear you! - Finish now your fable without delay. I'm waiting!

NATHAN: I am done. For what ensues is wholly obvious. Scarce is the father dead when all three sons appear, each with his ring, and each would be the reigning prince. They seek the facts, they quarrel, accuse. In vain; the genuine ring was not demonstrable; (*He pauses for a reply.*) almost as little as today the genuine faith.

SALADIN: You mean this as the answer to my question?

NATHAN: What I mean is merely an excuse, if I decline precisely to distinguish those three rings which with intent the father ordered made that sharpest eyes might not distinguish them.

SALADIN: The rings! - Don't trifle with me! - I should think that those religions which I named to you might be distinguished readily enough. Down to their clothing; down to food and drink!

NATHAN: In all respects except their basic grounds. Are they not grounded all in history or writ or handed down? - But history must be accepted wholly upon faith - Not so? - Well then, whose faith are we least like to doubt? Our people's, surely? Those whose blood we share? The ones who from our childhood gave us proofs of love? Who never duped us, but when it was for our good to be deceived? How can I trust my fathers less than you trust yours? (...) - Can I demand that to your forebears you should give the lie that mine be not gainsaid? (...) The same holds true of Christians. Am I right?

SALADIN (*aside*): By Allah, yes! The man is right. I must be still.

NATHAN: Let's come back to our rings once more. As we have said: the sons preferred complaint; and each swore to the judge, he had received the ring directly from his father's hand. As was the truth! – And long before had had his father's promise, one day to enjoy the privilege of the ring. - No less than truth! His father, each asserted, could not have been false to him; of such a loving father: He must accuse his brothers - howsoever inclined in other things to think the best of them - of some false play; and he the traitors would promptly ferret out; would take revenge.

SALADIN: And then, the judge? - I am all ears to hear what you will have the judge decide. Speak on!

NATHAN: Thus said the judge: unless you swiftly bring your father here to me, I'll bid you leave my judgment seat. Think you that I am here for solving riddles? Would you wait, perhaps, until the genuine ring should rise and speak? But stop! I hear the genuine ring enjoys the magic power to make its wearer loved, beloved of God and men. That must decide! Whom then do two of you love most? Quick, speak! You're mute? The rings' effect is only backward, not outward? Each one loves himself the most? O then you are, all three, deceived deceivers! Your rings are false, all three. The genuine ring no doubt got lost. To hide the grievous loss, to make it good, the father caused three rings to serve for one.

SALADIN: O splendid, splendid!

NATHAN: So, the judge went on, if you'll not have my counsel, instead of verdict, go! My counsel is: Accept the matter wholly as it stands. If each one from his father has his ring, then let each one believe his ring to be the true one. - Possibly the father wished to tolerate no longer in his house the tyranny of just one ring! – And know: That you, all three, he loved; and loved alike; since two of you he'd not humiliate to favor one. - Well then! Let each aspire to emulate his father's unbeguiled, unprejudiced affection! Let each strive to match the rest in bringing to the fore the magic of the opal in his ring! Assist that power with all humility, with benefaction, hearty peacefulness, and with profound submission to God's will! And when the magic powers of the stones reveal themselves in children's children's children: I bid you, in a thousand thousand years, to stand again before this seat. For then a wiser man than I will sit as judge upon this bench, and speak. Depart! - So said the modest judge.

SALADIN: God! God!

NATHAN: Now, Saladin, if you would claim to be that wiser man, the promised one...

SALADIN (*rushing to him and seizing his hand, which he retains*): I, dust? I, nothing? God!

NATHAN: What is the matter, Saladin?

SALADIN: Dear Nathan! The thousand thousand years your judge assigned are not yet up. - His judgment seat is not for me. Go! Go! But be my friend.⁷¹

It finally transpires that Recha and the knight are actually brother and sister, and that their father was indeed Assad (Arabic for “lion”), Saladin’s younger brother who had been lost for a long time when he did not return from a trip, who had married a Christian noble woman and

⁷¹ Based on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, as translated by Bayard Quincy Morgan. In: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: *Nathan the Wise, Minna von Barnhelm, and Other Plays and Writings*. Edited by Peter Demetz. New York 1998. S. 231 – 235.

had lived under the name of Wolf von Filnek. The knight's proper name is Leu (old poetic German for "lion"), that of Recha is Blanda (Latin for "mild, sweet, amiable"). Thus a Christian knight who is the son of a Muslim like his sister, a girl baptised as a Christian and raised as a Jew, and a Muslim ruler are all members of one family.

The symbolism could not be stronger against the background of the rationale of the Ring Parable: All three faiths are members of one family. Indeed, this seems to have been the primary intention of Lessing in writing his Nathan. As Kuschel argues, Lessing wanted to impress upon his contemporary Christian audience that it was God's will that all three religions be accepted and regarded by each other as equals, not merely tolerated by whichever was the dominant religion in a certain geographical area or at a certain time⁷². The way for Lessing to achieve this result is twofold: He firstly posits that the true religion cannot be determined because all three of them are based on faith: not only faith in God, but also faith in the people in whose traditions we are raised. Secondly, flowing from the first and in a heretofore historically unusual twist, Lessing concludes that we have no reason to treat a person of another faith as in any way inferior, but quite to the contrary that the love of God should exhort the adherents of each religion to strive for good deeds and compassion towards and acceptance of other faiths. In order to fulfil this demand of God's love we must step outside of our own religious frame of reference and allow for the possibility that either the others are right or that we are all right (or all wrong), and that God may accept adherents of all faiths as long as they honestly follow their own. In other words, the heuristic process cannot proceed only from within one's own religion. One must learn to live with the tension of living one's own faith as if it were the right one and allowing at the same time for the possibility that it is either wrong or not the only right one. The depth of one's personal conviction is not a gauge of the degree of the trueness of one's religion. In consequence, it means we cannot impose our religion on others – or as the Qur'an says, "There is no compulsion in religion"⁷³. Only in this way will the "true" religion finally show itself – and it seems fair to assume that Lessing had no illusions about only one of them ever reaching that stage short of another direct divine intervention. This is where Nathan and the Qur'an meet in Sura 5:48, and where they clash with Sura 5:51. This is, consequently, where Islamists – and not only the extremists – go wrong from Lessing's point of view if they want to use Shari'ah law as a facet of political Islam for laying the foundation of the transitional process of an

⁷² Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Im Ringen um den wahren Ring*, 2011, 131 ff, 169 ff.

⁷³ Sura 2:256.

entire nation because they view themselves as being in sole possession of the ultimate truth which they (ideally) have to make everyone accept – and the more conservative they are, the more they go wrong.

The historical background to the Ring Parable

The above could be seen as yet another Christian or Western attempt to prove the inferiority of Islam as a model for living in the 21st century. While there are undoubtedly in my view insurmountable conceptual clashes between a traditional political Islam and an open secular society as we currently understand it, the point of setting out Lessing's play here is that its underlying theme is not new and possibly not even Christian or Western: There had been previous versions of the theme behind the ring parable, and according to some scholars⁷⁴ some of the earliest ones may actually have come from Muslim writers or portrayed Muslims as accepting that they share a hope with the other religions, rather than a certainty. Three of those shall be looked at more closely here⁷⁵.

The first story is set in the late 8th century in Baghdad and concerns a religious conversation between the Caliph al-Mahdi, known for his inner-Islamic persecution of Muslim heretics, and the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I. The textual source for this narration is Christian, but there appears to be no reason to think that the Muslim side's stance had been misrepresented by the author. The Caliph and the Patriarch engage in a lengthy theological discussion ending in a stalemate of arguments. The Patriarch then tells the Caliph the Parable of the Pearl⁷⁶:

“...in this world we are all as in a dark house in the middle of the night. If at night and in this dark house a precious pearl were to drop by chance among the people and all were to become aware of its existence, everyone would try to pick up the pearl. Not everyone would have it, but only one. While one may have the pearl itself, another may have a piece of glass, a third one a piece of rock or a clot of dirt, but everyone will be happy and proud to be the real holder of the pearl.”

The Patriarch goes on to state that with the dawn the true owner of the pearl would become known, and he would be happy and all the others sad and dismayed; in that sense the story

⁷⁴ Karl-Josef Kuschel, *ibid.* (fn. 72) 151 ff.; Iris Shagrir, *The Parable of the Three Rings: a revision of its history*, (1997) 23 *Journal of Medieval History*, 163.

⁷⁵ Reference is made to Kuschel, *ibid.* (fn. 72) 151 ff for the wider background to the following examples.

⁷⁶ The following are my translations from the text in Kuschel, *ibid.* (fn. 72) 152 - 154

remains behind the ambition of Lessing's version described above. However, the Caliph then reminds the Patriarch that "in this world, the owners of the pearl are unknown", a remarkable admission in itself for a Muslim, to which the Patriarch replies that one can know them in part, namely through "good deeds and pious action". The Caliph ends the dispute by saying "we have hope in God that we are the owners of the pearl and that we hold it in our hands". Kuschel emphasises the use of the word "hope", which by necessity denotes the acceptance that there is no certainty⁷⁷.

The second example is set again in Baghdad, this time in the 10th century, and is related by a man called Abu Sulaiman. The story concerns a sceptic who states that his scepticism is based on the realisation that all religions have equal claim and arguments. When asked why he then still adheres to his own religion, he recounts the Parable of the Caravanserai⁷⁸:

"I am like a man who went into a caravanserai to ...seek refuge in the shade on a sunny day. The landlord of the caravanserai brought him to a room without asking whether he liked it. While he stayed there, lo!, a cloud came and it began to pour down. In his room it began to leak from the ceiling and he looked for other rooms, but found that they also leaked. The yard of the house was covered in mud. So he decided that it was best to stay in his room, be at rest and not get his feet muddy by walking through the yard in order to find another room. ... So also I: I was born without reason, and then my parents brought me into this religion without me having the opportunity to test it beforehand. When I did I found that it worked like all the others and that it behoved me better to remain in it, rather than to disown it; because I could only have given it up and chosen another one by adopting the latter and preferring it to the former. However, I did not find any argument for the latter without immediately finding an argument that another could have held against it."

This example proceeds from human skepticism about our capacity of finding "the" truth. Here, the loyalty to one's own "inherited" religion is based on the absence of a better alternative⁷⁹, a theme reminiscent of Nathan's question about how we can distrust our own forefathers' traditions or ask others to distrust theirs. However, as was already indicated above, in order to be able to ask that question, we must first subject our own religion to the scrutiny through the eyes of others.

⁷⁷ Kuschel, *ibid.* (fn. 72) 154.

⁷⁸ My translation and adaptation from Kuschel, *ibid.* (fn. 72) 155 – 156.

⁷⁹ Kuschel, *ibid.* (fn. 72) 156.

The third example is that of Ibn Arabi, a Muslim mystic who spent the first part of his life in Muslim Spain in the 12th century and who died in Damascus in 1240. His attitude is brought out in one of his poems, and is based on mystical love⁸⁰:

“My heart has made room for any shape of faith.
It is a pasture for Indian wisdom,
a monastery for Christian monks,
a temple for idols,
a Ka’aba for a Muslim pilgrim,
the tables of the Torah
and the scroll of the Qur’an.
In religion, I am a follower of mystical love!
Whatever path its camels take!
There is my religion and my faith!”

It is difficult to imagine Ibn Arabi reciting this poem today and not being considered a heretic by the Islamists. As Kuschel points out⁸¹, Ibn Arabi, himself a devout Muslim, did not advocate the equality of all religions as such, but more likely wanted to express his own higher state of religious enlightenment. Nonetheless, one may read this poem of Ibn Arabi as an insight into the nature of God as all-encompassing love. Research on Lessing’s literary knowledge has found distinct interrelations between Lessing’s thought with the writings of the time of Al-Andalus and of such path-breaking philosophers as Ibn Tufail and Ibn Rushd⁸². These are only three examples, but they should signify clearly that in the earlier days of Islam, there was room for hope instead of certainty, and by implication, room for doubt instead of blinkered fanaticism. Today’s believers of all faiths need to remember that certainty of transmission does not increase with distance in time from the original source.

Lessing’s reception in Islam

The picture here, as far as one can see from reports about⁸³ the reception in Western media and literature, seems rather sporadic. A translation into Arabic by a Christian Arab, Ilias

⁸⁰ My translation from Kuschel, *ibid.* (fn. 72) 158.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* (fn. 72) 158 – 159.

⁸² *Ibid.* (fn. 72) 159.

⁸³ I was unable, based on command of language, to access any existing reports in Arabic or other non-European language script based materials directly myself. Anecdotal evidence from some of my Iranian colleagues

Nasr-Allah Haddad, already existed in 1932, and since 2005 we have at least one other new translation, by Fawziya Hasan⁸⁴. The 1932 version by Haddad uses an archaic form of Arabic which is hard to understand for the average reader of today, the 2005 translation by Hasan is apparently incorrect in many instances, in some cases it even distorts the meaning and seems to have been written with Islamic sensitivities in mind, for example, by renaming it “The Three Rings“ for fear of offending a Muslim audience by attributing wisdom to a Jew⁸⁵. A 2010 German PhD thesis by the Iraqi Zahim Mohammed Muslim engages in a study of Lessing’s discourse with Islam⁸⁶ and theatre productions in the wake of 9/11 but has little to say about the reception of Nathan the Wise in the Islamic world. Similarly, David G John⁸⁷ wrote about productions of Nathan in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in the 1990s, with mixed results. Kuschel refers to productions in Karachi, Pakistan, in 1995 as well as in Los Angeles in 1997 on the occasion of Mohammed’s birthday before a Muslim audience⁸⁸. A more recent, undated and brief paper by Abdullah Aldamagh at the German Department of the University of Damascus⁸⁹, which refers to the thesis by Muslim mentioned above, positively mentions the fact that Lessing used the literal translation of “Islam“ for his words “*Ergebenheit in Gott*“ (submission to God’s will), yet the author expresses understandable astonishment that it took 217 years for this significant fact to register in the Western literature, a sign of a lack of familiarity in Western literary studies with basic concepts of Islam. What seems to be missing is literature that engages in depth with the *substance* of Lessing’s project from a theological and political rather than from a literary, theatrical, sociological, historical or anthropological point of view.

seemed to confirm that at least in Iran, the Parable of the Ring was well-known in the more intellectual circles in Iran, but remained difficult to discuss in public. No such evidence was forthcoming from Arab colleagues.

⁸⁴ See the paper by Elisabeth und Gerd-R. Puin, Kritik einer neuen Übersetzung von Lessings Schauspiel „Nathan der Weise“ ins Arabische durch Fauziya Hasan, 2006, online at http://www.ha-bib.de/debatte/texte/Nathan_der_Weise.pdf.

⁸⁵ Ibid. (previous footnote). – See also Walter Koch, Zur aktuellen Bedeutung eines Bibliotheksfundes: Die Rezeption G. E. Lessings “Nathan“ in der arabischen Welt, 2007, online at www.ha-bib.de/aktuelles/iframenewsletter_2007_04.html.

⁸⁶ Lessing und der Islam – Eine Studie zu Lessings Auseinandersetzung mit dem Islam, 2010, online at <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/dissertationen/muslim-zahim-mohammed-2010-06-30/PDF/muslim.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Lessing, Islam and *Nathan der Weise* in Africa, *Lessing Yearbook* 2000, vol. XXXII, 245 (italics in the original)

⁸⁸ Ibid., 249 ff.

⁸⁹ Nathan der Weise, at <http://www.almani-sy.com/Download/Recherche/lessing-nathanderweise.pdf>.

Conclusion

We have tried to put the current resurgence of Islamist thinking into perspective in the Arab transition context, and elsewhere in the wider Muslim world, at the example of an increase in more fundamentalist approaches to religious and ethical practices. The problem that faces the reformers who often initiated the transition process for political reasons but without major religious overtones, namely students and intellectuals, as well as the Western support organisations who want to influence the process towards a more secular understanding of the rule of law, is not so much the theory of Islam and of Shari'ah, although there are certain issues which will always cause friction with theoretical Western or secular views. It is the disconnect between the representation of the theory in the cross-cultural and transreligious discourse and the practice of Islam, not infrequently a practice based on half-knowledge and inflexibility, resulting in the danger of a unilateral imposition of the Islamist position on all people in the region on the basis of what is perceived and presented as “divine“ command. The political reason for the re-Islamisation is often sought in the colonial history and the denigration of Islam over the centuries by the West and the colonial powers. Islamist approaches to reform are thus seen as an expression of cultural and religious self-determination in what is perceived to be “one’s own global corner“. Concerns of non-Muslim regional minorities or less radical Muslims are discounted based on idealised conceptions of the ethical foundations, advantages, functions and powers of Islam and in particular of the Shari'ah as an intellectually perfect construct – an idealisation frequently not borne out by everyday practice. Inflexibility can, however, also be a sign of insecurity or perceived lack of options and a reflexive response to criticism from outside, “outside“ here also encompassing proponents of a moderate or even disestablished Islam. The paper has tried to highlight the problematic relationship between the traditional Arab/Muslim religious thinking when it comes to the role of Qur'an, Sunna and Shari'ah and the general cognition patterns that exist based on the submission to untested family, ethnic and intellectual traditions, some of which may reach back to pre-Islamic times. Yet, they may have become a – now mostly unreflected – part of mainstream Muslim behaviour and rationalisation patterns through the functions of ritual and daily practice.

We have interrogated some examples of current Muslim attitudes to interfaith engagement with Christianity – whose adherents enjoys special status as people of the book – and found that even in *prima facie* expressions of good will, such as the 2007 *Common Word*, there are

undercurrents of an unflinching dogmatism. This dogmatism has been traced to a concern that traditional Islamic thinking is not able or willing to accept the need for self-scrutiny based on external frames of reference, rather than on the axiomatic stance that both the Qur'an and the Sunna are ultimately exempt from human intellectual critique and investigation because of their alleged divine and quasi-divine nature. External historical-critical research that questions these fundamental assumptions is discouraged among Muslim scholars or even receives hostile attention. This in turn leads to an undesirable situation where it is mostly non-Muslim scholars – or Muslims academically socialised in the West – in fields such as comparative literature, religion or law, often pejoratively meta-classified as “Orientalism“, who engage in the study of the creation and development of the Qur'an and the Sunnah and the impact that may have on the claim of Islam as the final revelation, with all the consequences this stance has entailed over the last 1,400 years. These “outsiders“ are in my experience routinely dismissed as lacking the necessary linguistic or cultural knowledge, for example, because they have not undergone the classical training for Muslim religious and legal scholars. While there may undoubtedly be some merit in that contention, it allows the traditionalists to deflect any sincere offer of cross-cultural conversation with the knock-down argument of lack of peer equality in the dialogue, even in cases where no such education inequality exists or where the non-traditional point of view might yield new insights. This attitude impliedly presupposes that anything which comes from outside and/or from an unconventional source is per se untrustworthy and scholarly flawed *bid'ah*.

In the context of a transitional scenario from the 12th century, Lessing's play Nathan the Wise was juxtaposed to the Islamist and traditionalist Islamic religious psychology, in order to show that there are ways of living one's own religion while accepting and not merely tolerating the potential validity of those of others. The important point to be made was firstly that Lessing wrote the piece with a decidedly pro-Islamic intention and based on his rather extensive knowledge – for his time – of Islam. Secondly, he could refer to previous versions of the narration which were set in a Muslim environment themselves. Thirdly, it was set in a scenario which would these days count as a post-conflict situation and can, fourthly, thus give an example of how to approach the matter of religious diversity in the pursuit of the Arab transition which will in all likelihood also be an Islamic transition. Current events in Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Libya and elsewhere do not allow for any reasonably safe prediction of how this transition will unfold. So far it seems that regrettably a reporter from Al-Jazeera, who visited Durham University some years ago, is being proven right in that he said that the

Islamic reformation will take a long time and cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. One would hope that the Muslims can learn from the mistakes committed during the Christian reformation and be wiser for it. Reza Aslan, an Iranian Muslim and author, writes in his “No God but God“:

“Ultimately, an Islamic democracy must be concerned not with reconciling popular and divine sovereignty, but with reconciling ‘people’s satisfaction with God’s approval’...And if ever there is a conflict between the two, it must be the interpretation of Islam that yields to the reality of democracy, not the other way around. It has always been this way. ... Now [Islam] must evolve once more. ... When fourteen centuries ago Muhammad launched a revolution in Mecca, ... [i]t took many years of violence and devastation to cleanse the Hijaz of its “false idols“. It will take many more to cleanse Islam of its new false idols – bigotry and fanaticism – worshipped by those who have replaced Muhammad’s original vision of tolerance and unity with their own ideals of hatred and discord. But the cleansing is inevitable, and the tide of reform cannot be stopped. The Islamic Reformation is already here. We are all living in it.”⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Reza Aslan, No God but God, 2006, 265 – 266.