

Robert Azzi, Still With His “Ask-A-Muslim Anything” Shtick (Part Two)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



5. “Could you comment on Muhammad’s marriage to Aisha when she was nine years old?”

Azzi: “Oh my goodness. What makes you think Aisha was nine years old?”

Questioner: “It says so, in the Hadith of Bukhari, 5, Book 58, number 234.” (A look of anguish passes quickly over Azzi’s face, as he realizes he’s now dealing with someone Who Knows Too Much.)

Azzi: Do all you folks know what the Hadith are? No? Okay, let me explain. They’re the stories about Muhammad, what he did and what he said. There are many different collections of Hadith, and some are considered more reliable than others. Bukhari is considered to be one of the two most reliable Hadith scholars.

Bukhari wrote what he did about Aisha being nine, but there’s several things to consider. First, marriage had to be between consenting adults. Marriage in Islam is a civil contract – the Arabic word is *meesaaq* (4:21), and it can only be between persons who are intellectually and physically mature enough to understand and fulfill the responsibilities of such a contract. That means they both had to be adults. And the girl certainly had to have reached puberty. Some Muslim scholars believe, on the basis of all the evidence, including the age of Aisha’s sister Asma, that Bukhari miscalculated Aisha’s

age, and that she was, in fact, 19.

I'm no scholar of the Hadith, but I know that all of them, including even Bukhari, could make mistakes. **I can only say that I would be flabbergasted and outraged if I thought Muhammad would have married a nine-year-old girl.** I find the work of modern Muslim scholars, who believe she was much older, to be pretty convincing. I think it's one of those questions to which we'll never get a final answer. The Islamophobes will keep saying "nine years old, nine years old," while the scholars of Islam will carefully weigh all the evidence, as to the onset of puberty, and as to when a girl was considered to be an "adult" capable of entering into a marriage contract. These modern scholars offer a more nuanced and plausible answer. And let's not forget that in Medieval Europe, for dynastic reasons, Christian girls of the ruling class could be married at the age of eleven or twelve to boys not much older. That might have some bearing on Aisha's real age. I was always taught that she was 19.

Yes, again in the back.

6. "I'd like to ask you about the Verse of the Sword. It reads as follows: 'When the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy, allow them to go their way. God is forgiving and merciful.' Of course, if they "repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy" means that they have become Muslims, saying the Five Daily Prayers and paying the Zakat. But what happens if they don't?"

Azzi:

Well, I see you've chosen one of the seemingly most disturbing verses in the Qur'an. I admit, the words, on the face of it, are deeply troubling. That's why Qur'an commentators are so important; they help us get beyond what seems to be the

literal meaning. We need the context to understand those verses correctly. Read over that verse. You are supposed to “slay the idolaters wherever you find them.” Who are the “idolaters”? They’re the people who were fighting Muhammad at that time. Fight those idolaters, do what you can to defeat them. It’s a kind of war-cry, designed to whip up fervor among your own troops. But the Islamophobes want you to believe, without the slightest evidence, that “idolaters” is supposed to refer to non-Muslims today, right now, and also to refer to all those people who, over the past 1400 years, were non-Muslims, even if they were on the other side of the globe. **Does this verse really mean Muslims should slay people who had never met a Muslim in their whole lives, much less tried to oppose them in any way? Doesn’t it make more sense to take this verse, as I do, and as all mainstream Muslims do, as referring only to enemies whom the Muslims were fighting 1400 years ago?** Or do you think it makes more sense to believe what the nut-jobs of ISIS and Al-Qaeda and their mirror images, the Islamophobes, maintain? Why should we take their word for it and assume that the word “idolaters” means all non-Muslims, everywhere, for all time, instead of referring only to the enemies they were fighting at that very moment? I regard that definition of “enemies” – everyone, everywhere, for all time, who wasn’t a Muslim – to be sheer madness. If that were true, why wouldn’t the 57 Muslim-majority countries be in a state of permanent war against all the non-Muslim countries? And why wouldn’t the millions of Muslims all over Europe and the United States be trying to “kill the idolaters” – the very non-Muslims with whom their kids go to school, with whom they work, with whom they play sports or collaborate with on community projects, who are their neighbors and, as I know from a lifetime of such unforgettable experiences in New Hampshire, their friends?

Just look around and you can see that the verses you referred to, and the others like them, must refer to specific enemies in 7th century Arabia. That’s why it’s so important, as I say,

that we not take the Qur'an literally or apply it to broadly. The Muslims who think those verses apply to non-Muslims today are the ISIS types. Nothing can be done to disabuse them of their view – they're fanatics – so they just have to be fought. Don't even try to reason with them. And we mainstream Muslims are fighting their nonsense, both inside and outside the Muslim community. Believe me, we are doing everything we can to consign the ISIS and Al-Qaeda madmen to the dustbin of history. And we are taking our case, too, to non-Muslims, so that they don't lose faith in us or what we stand for – a tolerant, inclusive Islam, the kind that flourished in Islamic Spain where Christians, Jews, and Muslims got along so well, in what used to be called the "convivencia." I hope that answers your question.

Any more? Remember, I want you to ask me anything.

7. "What do you think is the future of Islam in America?"

Azzi:

Oh, I'm very hopeful. Yes, I have my worries – I do recognize that there is a powerful campaign being waged against us. I once described myself, at a low moment, as feeling that I had a crescent on my front and a target on my back! You know as well as I do that people are deliberately being made fearful about this Sharia supposedly taking over from our Constitution, and instead of "the Russians are coming" of the Cold War, we now have "the Muslims are coming" of the War on Terror, a fear of fifty million Muslims suddenly appearing on our doorstep, and so on and so forth. It's all ridiculous, of course, but the scary thing is that such fears can spread so easily. It's that need to create "the Other" that has been the curse of Western civilization. And that's the reason I've decided to devote so much of my time to holding these Muslim town halls, to encourage people to literally "ask me anything." And just in case you're wondering about that bogeyman, the Sharia, I would be the first to defend the

Constitution if anyone tried to touch a hair on its magnificent 231-year-old head. As for the Sharia, that can safely be left to Saudi Arabia and Iran and Pakistan. They're welcome to it. But it's not for America. American Muslims count themselves blessed to be ruled by the Constitution and will accept no substitutes.

I think we – Muslims and those who defend them from the Islamophobes – are starting to win the information war. All over this country we've seen a groundswell of support whenever there is an attack on Muslims. We're especially pleased with how our Jewish and Christian brothers, and not just the progressive clergy, have been eager to stand with us against the haters. So have mayors and governors. And more people are coming to these Ask-A-Muslim events and finding out what the mainstream Muslims think. And they're starting to shut down the venues of the Islamophobes, who are no longer being permitted to spread their hate quite as easily as they did before. Twitter and Google and Facebook are doing their best to direct traffic away from the Islamophobes and other hate groups. I applaud them for it. And I've noticed – have you? – more and more of those signs, in English, Spanish, and Arabic, that people put on their front lawns, and that say "No matter where you are from, we're glad you're our neighbor." It's nice to see them showing up all over. After that terrible shooting at the synagogue in Pittsburgh, Muslims got busy raising funds online for the victims and their families. They raised \$150,000 for their Jewish brothers and sisters. That should mean something. Those were the real Muslims – not the terrorists– speaking.

Not only do I think the future is bright for Islam, that is the real, mainstream Islam, that if we just keep on spreading the truth and pushing back against the lies, I admit I wouldn't be surprised if others found in Islam the same source of peace and strength that I find in it – a spiritual refuge from the frenetic pace of our often too-worldly existence. I'm

not about to be a missionary for Islam – I think everyone should decide spiritual matters for himself – but I am a witness to the peace that Islam has brought me. My task, even my responsibility, tonight, and on other nights, is to answer questions about the faith of Islam. That’s enough for me. You deserve answers about anything that’s been unclear about Islam or, on the face of it, disturbing. The Qur’an wisely says – it’s 2:256 for those of you who want to look it up – “there shall be no compulsion in religion.” I agree with that – religion is a very personal choice. And I want you to know as much about Islam as you can, so you can make an informed choice.

8. “Mr. Azzi, you are a convert to Islam, as I understand it.”

Azzi: “Yes. My parents were Lebanese Christians.”

Question #8A: “And in your younger days, in the early and mid-70s, didn’t you spend a lot of time in Saudi Arabia, and even published a ‘Saudi Arabian Portfolio’ with an introduction by his Royal Highness Prince Saud Al Faisal, in 1978?”

Azzi: “Yes. It’s a fascinating country, and I was privileged to be allowed to shoot almost everywhere. The Saudi royals I met were actually salt of the earth types. I was just amazed at how down-to-earth and hospitable and generous they were. I think they’ve done a good job in holding that country together, when you compare it to the upheavals all around it, in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Egypt. The Al-Saud family must be doing something right.

Question #8B: “Well, did your doing all this work in Saudi Arabia, and becoming friendly with members of the Saudi royal family, have anything to do with your converting to Islam? That would surely have pleased them.”

Azzi:

No, not at all, I converted to Islam before working in Saudi Arabia. It's true, that the Saudi royals were wonderful to me, gracious hosts, and they extended to me every courtesy in making available parts of the country that no Westerner had seen – those are in my portfolio of Saudi photographs. I'm still in touch with some of the royals today. But I just thought Islam as I saw it practiced, and not just in Saudi Arabia, seemed to provide people with such inner peace, such a sense of security and community – there was one fellow in particular, a friend of mine, and a Muslim, whose example made me want to look into Islam, and the more I looked into it, the more I studied its teachings, the more I felt it was the right choice for me, and it certainly has been.

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