

That Mosque In Berlin, Or, Curb Your Enthusiasm

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, a homosexual imam from Algeria who now lives in France, and who opened a one-room mosque in Paris five years ago that admits homosexuals, is now working with Seyran Ates, the German-Turkish lawyer (significantly, she is a Kurd, an ethnic identity that does not, unlike the Arab identity, reinforce the hold of Islam) who has recently made news by opening a mosque in Berlin that welcomes LGBT Muslims. They hope to set up “inclusive” mosques elsewhere, including in Britain.

“Europe is the place where we can work on, what we consider to be, the reform of Islam,” he tells [the BBC reporter] during a visit to the new mosque in Berlin.

“Because we have freedom of speech and democracy and education and welfare.”

If “freedom of speech and democracy and education and welfare” for Muslims is available only in Europe, and not in Muslim countries, wouldn’t it make sense for Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed to look into what it is about the ideology of Islam that prevents these benefits – freedom of speech, democracy, education, welfare – from being enjoyed in Muslim lands? Might he want to dilate upon the theme? Might he possibly reconsider, as a consequence, his own adherence to Islam? But such an inquiry, at any level, doesn’t seem to have occurred to him.

As one can imagine, this tiny mosque that Seyran Ates opened in Berlin, consisting of one small room rented from a Lutheran church, has gotten a terrific amount of attention all over the Western world. It represents the hope, among anxious Infidels, that just around the corner a new, reformed Islam, one that will be peaceful, and tolerant, and answer all our prayers for co-existence, is about to appear, and spread. Today Berlin, tomorrow the world. The BBC claims that “[t]he Ibn Rushd-Goethe mosque is part of a growing movement known as inclusive Islam. There are now liberal Muslim communities and inclusive mosques all over the world – some in private homes, others in changing locations – but Ms Ates says the Berlin mosque is a major step forward for inclusive Islam, because it is the first permanent liberal mosque, with a sign on the door, open to anyone.”

Where is this “growing movement known as inclusive Islam”? Where are “these inclusive mosques all over the world”? The two mosques in Paris and Berlin? A third one that they are only “hoping” to open in Great Britain? Can anyone name even a half-dozen “inclusive” mosques serving, say, as many as a few hundred of the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims? Would the BBC care to name even five of these “inclusive mosques” all over the world? What the handful of “inclusive” mosques does is provide a false hope, that there is a wave of reform a-borning in Islam, when what few changes there are have only to do with who can worship at a “reformist’ mosque, and alongside whom,

and who can serve as imam – “reforms” having to do only with gender and sexual orientation of the imams and worshippers.

But, it must be insistently repeated, there has been no “reform” of Islam’s texts, no touching up to the figure of Muhammad, no change to anything having to do with the substance of Islam. And even if not two, or two thousand, but every mosque in the world were to admit homosexuals as worshippers and as imams, and were to allow men and women to pray together, this would make no difference as to how the world’s Muslims are taught – see the Qur’an, see the Hadith – to treat women and, especially, non-Muslims.

Will the Berlin mosque’s imams (assuming there will be several) take a stand denouncing Qur’an 4:34, which allows men to beat – albeit “lightly” – their disobedient wives? Will there be any attempt, at this “liberal” mosque where men and women worship together, to call for ending, in Islamic law, the unequal treatment of women under the Sharia? According to the Qur’an, a woman’s testimony is worth half that of a man. A daughter inherits half of what a son receives. A Muslim man can have four wives. Will these be discussed as part of this Berlin’s mosque “reforming” remit, or does Seyran Ates believe that her mosque’s “reforms” extend only to the question of who can be allowed to pray, or to lead the prayers?

Will the members of this mosque discuss, and attempt to challenge, the hostility, even murderous hatred, toward Infidels that the Qur’an and Hadith inculcate? They could start by considering those verses in the Fatihah that curse “those who have gone astray” and “those who have earned Allah’s anger,” traditionally understood, by all the major Qur’anic commentators (as, for example, Ibn Kathir), to refer to Christians (those who have gone astray) and Jews (those who have earned Allah’s anger). Perhaps in that Berlin mosque the imam, Seyran Ates, could perform a useful service, given how much media attention that mosque is being given, by having the imams (she is not yet an imam, but is studying to be one)

discuss those verses from the Fatihah, and forthrightly declare that while the weight of past authority took the verses to refer to Christians and Jews (though Muslim apologists have lately been denying that to audiences of non-Muslims), it was time to reject that interpretation, for the sake of a real, not imaginary, coexistence. Ates, and her obliging imam, could insist that those phrases do not refer to Christians and Jews, but to all those, whatever their faith, "who have gone astray" or "who have earned Allah's anger." This would be a welcome contribution to a nascent reformist tafsir, one intended to modify the meaning, and thereby to moderate the menace, of Islam.

Seyran Ates, at the "inclusive" mosque she founded in Berlin, might ask the imams to discuss in their Friday sermons (khutbas) those verses that describe Muslims as the "best of peoples" (3:110) and Infidels as "the most vile of creatures" (98:6). She and her chosen imams might insist that these are verses that Believers must "abrogate" if Muslims are to live peacefully with the Unbelievers. And because of her sudden fame as a Muslim "reformer," her remarks have a good chance of being reported in the Western media in full. What could then happen? Could mainstream Muslims, undoubtedly chagrined that she had brought these verses to the attention of the Western media (where she is already a star), own up to them, and then declare them immutable and impossible to be "abrogated," despite whatever Seyran Ates may think Muslims have a right to do? Should they reject Ates's view out of hand, the Infidels of the world will have learned a salutary, if disturbing, lesson about Islamic doctrine.

Or will there be Muslim scholars who will support her, and insist that those verses – 3:110, 98:6 – need to be properly "contextualized," claiming that such sentiments were useful in Islam's earliest days, when it was expanding through constant warfare, and the texts were written to whip up fervor some 1400 years ago against the enemies of Islam, by denouncing the

Infidel enemy of that period as “vile” in the same way as, in America, we once spoke pejoratively of “Krauts” or “Huns” during the world wars. An outcome most desirable, and also most doubtful.

That still leaves the duty of Jihad, discussed in so many Qur’anic verses, to be dealt with. The “inclusive” mosque in Berlin – assuming it survives – could attempt to go still further, beyond reinterpreting the Fatihah, and contextualizing 3:110 and 98:6, by insisting that Muslims wishing for true coexistence will have to abandon the long-accepted main meaning of Jihad as violent struggle against the Unbelievers. Instead, as people trying to transform the faith, they should resurrect that story, from a weak hadith, about the Greater and the Lesser Jihad, long cited by Muslim apologists to deny (falsely) that Jihad means Islamic holy war, and to insist that yes, that hadith, despite its source, was correct, the Greater Jihad is indeed that of an inward spiritual struggle.

Could any of this find enough Muslim takers to matter? Even if shouted down, and threatened, by the world’s mainstream Muslims, Ms. Ates and her handful of fellow reformers can, merely by bringing certain Qur’anic verses and the meaning they currently possess (and of which non-Muslims, unless they dare to visit such “Islamophobic” websites as Jihad Watch, have been largely unaware) to the attention of Infidels, perform a great service. For we non-Muslims will as a consequence have been informed about the real significance of those disturbing verses, not by too-often-dismissed (though completely correct) “Islamophobes,” but by Seyran Ates, for now a Muslim media darling in the West who, one hopes, might eventually dare to do more than she has so far attempted. And then we shall see how many Muslims really want to “reform” Islam.

To sum up: Imam Ates should try 1) to support readings that will strip the verses in the Fatihah of their anti-kuffar

interpretation; 2) to “contextualize” anti-Infidel verses wherever that is even remotely plausible, such as arguing that 98:6 refers not to all Infidels but to specific groups with whom Muhammad was warring at the time, as a way to whip up war fervor; 3) to argue that the many verses about waging Jihad against the Infidel enemy are descriptive, not prescriptive, in intent, and were meant to apply only to enemies some 1400 years ago, not to people today; 4) to elevate a weak hadith in order to support the view that the internal spiritual struggle is the Greater Jihad, and warfare against Infidels the Lesser Jihad.

If any of that could be achieved, it would be something to get excited about. That’s what real reform would mean. Seyran Ates and her fellow reformers would then be taking to heart, and by an act of supreme will believing, the same interpretations of disturbing verses offered by defenders of the faith as a way to protect Islam, but in a different spirit altogether. The language of these verses cannot be reinterpreted, but can plausibly be limited in their intended application. For what the apologists pretend to believe in order to turn aside criticism, Seyran Ates and other reformers should insist must be believed because only thus, with these verses safely “contextualized,” can the conditions be created for genuine coexistence, not just between Islam and the West, but between Islam and All the Rest. Such “contextualization” is certainly a tall, likely impossible order. But that doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be attempted.

As for now, with that Berlin mosque being prematurely hailed as a portent of wonderful things to come by way of “reform” in Islam, simply because it allows homosexual and LGBT worshippers to attend and even to officiate, it might be prudent to see if anything changes, for enough Believers to make it matter, in how certain texts are reinterpreted, and how Muslim views of Infidels are modified. In the meantime, curb your enthusiasm.

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