

'Whitewashing Islam, Defaming the West: A Case Study in Islamic Apologetics

by Joseph S. Spoerl

It is becoming increasingly difficult to have honest, empirically informed conversations about Islam, both in the academy and outside of it. As long ago as 1974, the great French scholar of Islam, Maxime Rodinson, observed that his field of Islamic Studies was degenerating into pro-Islamic apologetics. In Rodinson's words, "Understanding has given way to apologetics pure and simple."[\[1\]](#) More recently, American professor of Religious Studies Aaron Hughes has described an American Islamic Religious Studies establishment dominated by scholars who "have created an Islam that is egalitarian, progressive, and pluralistic, which they...label as 'authentic.'" In itself, there is nothing wrong with this: Muslims are free to develop Islam in any direction they choose. The problem arises when these Muslim scholars and their non-Muslim enablers "claim that rival presentations of Islam are bastardizations that are either based on Orientalism or Islamophobia (if one is a non-Muslim) or on misogyny or homophobia (if one is a Muslim that disagrees with them)."[\[2\]](#) Those who dare to point out the obvious fact that many arguably "authentic" elements of the Islamic tradition are not egalitarian, progressive, or pluralistic are subjected to a barrage of insults and often shamed into silence.

A good illustration of how this pernicious dynamic plays out at the grass roots level can be found right here in my home state of New Hampshire. On May 19, 2016, I attended a talk given by Robert Azzi at Transfiguration Episcopal Church in Derry, NH. The talk was entitled "Ask a Muslim Anything." Azzi is a local Arab-American Muslim journalist who has given the

same talk many times across New Hampshire and who writes regularly for local newspapers. Azzi also has served as an advisor to the faculty, students, and administration of Phillips-Exeter Academy, an elite prep school in Exeter, NH, where Azzi was especially close to former principal Tom Hassan (husband of NH governor and now US Senator-elect Maggie Hassan). Azzi speaks Arabic and has lived and travelled widely across the Arab world. He is passionate about defending Muslims and Arabs against unfair stereotypes. In itself, this is laudable. Arab culture is rich and diverse, and stereotyping is both unfair and dangerous. The problems arise when Azzi counters anti-Muslim bigotry with half-truths and untruths of his own.

Azzi subscribes to a progressive, pluralistic, tolerant, and peaceful form of Islam, but he engages in *ad hominem* attacks on anyone who dares to point out that his version of Islam is not the only one and that intolerant and reactionary versions of Islam also unfortunately have a strong claim to be considered authentically Islamic. Instead of fostering understanding of Islam, Azzi makes it impossible for his American audiences to understand what is actually going on in the world of Islam, because Azzi's version of Islam is in fact highly idiosyncratic and not representative of how a great many Muslims actually practice and profess their faith.

Not coincidentally, Azzi is one of the leading anti-Israeli activists in New Hampshire and [a champion of the BDS movement](#), that is, the movement to boycott, divest from, and sanction Israel so as to force Israel to admit millions of Palestinian "refugees" and give up its identity as a Jewish state.^[3] One of Azzi's rhetorical goals is no doubt to persuade American audiences that Israeli Jews have no reason to fear becoming a minority under an Arab Muslim majority in a future united state of Palestine. To do this, he whitewashes Islam and Arab culture. In this he is like [other radical anti-Israeli activists](#) from the BDS and one-state movements.^[4]

In fact, Azzi has a long track record of misleading American audiences about the Arab and Islamic worlds. In 1974, he wrote an article for the *National Geographic Magazine* in which he gave an unjustifiably rosy account of the position of Jews in Syria at a time when Syrian Jews faced severe persecution.[\[5\]](#) Embarrassed by the resulting outcry, the *National Geographic* was forced to publish a retraction a few months later.[\[6\]](#)

Azzi's pro-Islamic apologetics involve a pattern of inaccuracy that is common among Islamic apologists speaking to Western audiences, so it is instructive to analyze and refute his rhetoric. I do so in what follows, first dealing with the position of non-Muslims in the Islamic tradition, then war and terrorism, and finally with the position of women.

A. The position of Non-Muslims in the Islamic Tradition

When asked about Muslim attitudes towards Jews and other non-Muslims, Azzi answered by citing verse 2:62 from the Koran, which states, "Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians – whoever believes in God and the Last Day, and does righteousness – they have their reward with their Lord."[\[7\]](#) Azzi is entitled to his own interpretation of this verse, but he failed to inform his audience that mainstream Islam has never interpreted this verse as meaning that God finds the faith of Jews and Christians acceptable *after* the coming of Islam. Instead, Muslim scholars held that this verse only expresses God's approval of the Jewish and Christian faiths *until* the coming of Muhammad (ca. AD 570-632). With the delivery of the Koran to Muhammad, only Islam is acceptable to Allah.[\[8\]](#) This is confirmed by other verses in the Koran, e.g.: "The only true faith in God's sight is Islam" (3:19), and "Whoever seeks a religion other than Islam will never have it accepted of him" (3:85). This has always been, and continues to be, the mainstream Muslim position.[\[9\]](#)

In fact, Azzi takes verse 2:62 not only out of the context of

the Islamic exegetical tradition, but also out of its context within the Koran and within the life of Muhammad. According to the earliest extant biography of Muhammad, Sura 2 of the Koran is largely an extended diatribe against the Jews, who angered Muhammad by refusing to accept his claim to be a prophet.[\[10\]](#) The immediately preceding verse, 2:61, says of the Jews, "And abasement and poverty were pitched upon them, and they were laden with God's anger; because they had disbelieved the signs of God and slain the prophets unrightfully; because they disobeyed and were transgressors."[\[11\]](#) Haggai Ben Shammai, a leading authority on the history of Jewish-Muslim relations,[\[12\]](#) writes that this curse upon the Jews has a central place in the Muslim tradition concerning the Jews. According to Ben Shammai,

"The reference is actually to the Israelites in the wilderness, but to all of the Muslim exegetes, without exception, it was absolutely clear that the reference was to the Jews of their day. The Arabic word translated as 'pitched upon them' also means, literally, that the 'abasement and poverty' were decreed for them forever."[\[13\]](#)

Azzi led the audience to believe that Muhammad was tolerant and respectful towards the Jews he encountered in Arabia, especially in Medina, and that conflicts between Muhammad and the Jews were not theological but only political, provoked by Jewish treaty-breaking. None of this is accurate. Muhammad's conflict with the Jews was theological from the outset.[\[14\]](#) While in Mecca, Muhammad had taught his followers that his coming as a prophet was foretold in the Torah and the Gospel (see Koran 7:157). Upon moving to Medina, Muhammad for the first time lived among large numbers of Jews. The Jewish rabbis dared to contradict Muhammad's claim that the Torah foretold his coming as a prophet that the Jews must follow. Muhammad responded with fury, repeatedly denouncing the Jews as liars who distort the contents of their own scriptures. The

earliest biography of Muhammad, by Ibn Ishaq (ca. 704-767), says “the Jews are a nation of liars... a treacherous, lying, and evil people.”[\[15\]](#) Ibn Ishaq’s life of Muhammad, one of the most important sources of the Islamic tradition, is filled with such anti-Jewish invective. In the words of Jacob Lassner, a scholar fluent in the Arabic and Hebrew traditions, throughout Islamic history, “Wherever they might be, Jews continued to be blamed for rejecting the Prophet’s mission as did their earlier co-religionists, the Jewish tribes of Arabia.”[\[16\]](#)

Azzi cherry-picked a few nice stories about Muhammad from the traditional sources, without explaining to the audience that those same sources draw an overall portrait of Muhammad as angry and hostile towards all who rejected his claim to be a prophet and as willing to coerce people to convert to Islam.[\[17\]](#) In the most authoritative and erudite biography of Muhammad yet written, the German historian Tilman Nagel writes, “Nowhere in the Koran are other believers tolerated in their [religious] differences. Such ideas were entirely alien to Muhammad.”[\[18\]](#) Yohanan Friedmann, a leading expert in Arabic and Islamic history, writes, “From the very beginning of their history, Muslims have intensely believed that Islam is the only true faith, that it precludes the appearance of any other valid religion in the future and that it supersedes even those religions already existing at the time of its emergence.”[\[19\]](#)

In one of his more egregious historical distortions, Azzi told the audience that the great Jewish scholar Maimonides was the beneficiary of Islamic “tolerance.” (Maimonides lived from 1135 to 1204, not in the seventeenth century as Azzi wrongly suggested.) In fact, Maimonides’ own family faced death threats from Muslims pressuring them to convert, and his teacher, the Jewish scholar Judah ibn Sussan, was martyred in 1165 after refusing conversion to Islam. In a letter to the Jews of Yemen, Maimonides wrote of the Muslim Arabs,

“Remember, my co-religionists, that on account of the vast number of our sins, God has hurled us into the midst of this people, the Arabs, who have persecuted us severely, and passed baneful and discriminatory legislation against us... Never did a nation molest, degrade, debase, and hate us as much as they.”[\[20\]](#)

Historian Martin Gilbert observes, “For Maimonides, who knew about the Crusader attacks on the Jews of Europe, these words about Islam were a considered historical judgment.”[\[21\]](#) Azzi correctly noted that European Christians were violently anti-Semitic, often even more so than Muslims, but it does not follow from this that Islam was (or is) “tolerant” towards Jews and other non-Muslims.

The classical Islamic stance towards non-Muslims leads unavoidably to the related topic of the Islamic law of war. Classical Islam is so offended and threatened by unbelief that it mandates war against all non-Muslims. Joseph Schacht, a leading expert on Islamic law, writes, “The basis of the Islamic attitudes towards unbelievers is the law of war; they must be either converted or subjugated or killed...”[\[22\]](#)

B. Islam, War, and Terrorism

The Koran commands Muslims in verse 9:5 to conquer and convert polytheistic idolaters[\[23\]](#) and in verse 9:29 to conquer and humiliate “people of the book,” which means primarily Jews and Christians, but also Zoroastrians and Samaritans.[\[24\]](#) These two categories, pagans and “people of the book,” comprise every people on earth, so classical exegetes took these verses to be mandating universal war against all non-Muslims. In the words of historian Hugh Kennedy, verse 9:5 in particular “can almost be considered the foundation text for the Muslim conquests...,” with verse 9:29 playing a key role as well, so that “the Koran provided the ideological justification for the wars of the Muslim conquests.”[\[25\]](#)

Azzi asserted that it was only after the medieval Crusades that Islam became hostile towards the Christian world. This assertion is false (and only one example of Azzi's disturbing habit of blaming problems with Islam on the alleged prior misdeeds of non-Muslims [\[26\]](#)). As we have seen, ideological hostility to non-Muslims was present in Islam from the time of Muhammad on. In his classic study of *jihad* in Islam, Rice University historian David Cook points out that Islam developed very early into an imperialistic ideology with an alleged divine warrant to conquer non-Muslims. Long before the first crusade, Cook writes, "during the first several centuries of Islam the interpretation of jihad was unabashedly aggressive and expansive." [\[27\]](#) In his farewell homily, Muhammad told his followers, "I was commanded to fight people until they say there is but one God, and when they say it, their blood and their property is protected and they are answerable to God." [\[28\]](#) According to Cook, "there is not a shred of evidence" that early Muslim wars against the Christian Byzantine Empire were fought in self-defense. [\[29\]](#) Jihad in Islam is primarily offensive, imperialistic, missionary warfare, as historian Patricia Crone explains:

"In classical [Islamic] law *jihad* is missionary warfare. It is directed against infidels, who need not be guilty of any act of hostility against Muslims (their very existence is a cause of war), and its aim is to incorporate the infidels in the abode of Islam, preferably as converts, but alternately as *dhimmi* [i.e. humiliated tributaries], until the whole world has been subdued." [\[30\]](#)

The Koran prescribes that Islam is to be exalted above all religions (9:33, 48:28, 61:9), and the classical authorities in the Muslim tradition always understood this to mean military conquest and political domination over non-Muslims. [\[31\]](#)

The verses immediately following verse 9:29 (9:30-35) highlight the alleged religious perversity of Jews and

Christians as the reason for attacking them. Verse 9:29 commands Muslims to fight Jews and Christians “until they pay tribute out of hand, and they are disgraced.” The operative Arabic word here translated as “disgraced” is *saghirun*, which connotes being lowly, submissive, servile, humble, contemptible, despised, humiliated, or meek.[\[32\]](#) This verse calls for the imposition of a special tribute tax on Jews and Christians, the *jizya*. Mahmud ibn Umar al-Zamakshari (1070-1144), author of a standard commentary on the Koran, explains that “the *jizya* shall be taken from them with belittlement and humiliation...The collector shall seize him by the scruff of the neck, shake him, and say: ‘Pay the *jizya!*’, and when he pays it he shall be slapped on the nape of the neck.”[\[33\]](#) The greatest theologian in the history of Sunni Islam, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), prescribes that “on offering up the *jizya*, the *dhimmi* must hang his head while the official takes hold of his beard and hits [the *dhimmi*] on the protuberant bone beneath his ear [i.e. the mandible]...”[\[34\]](#)

In another standard commentary, Ibn Kathir (1301-1373), a highly influential Sunni Shafi scholar, says of verse 9:29 that it was sent to punish Jews and Christians for their dishonest rejection of Muhammad: “Had they been true believers in their religions, that faith would have directed them to believe in Muhammad, because all Prophets gave the good news of Muhammad’s advent and commanded them to obey and follow him.” Like al-Zamakshari and al-Ghazali, Ibn Kathir sees verse 9:29 as commanding that Jews and Christians be “disgraced, humiliated, and belittled.”[\[35\]](#)

The American sailor James Riley, shipwrecked and enslaved on the coast of Morocco in 1815, provides an eyewitness account of the *jizya* collection in that country:

“The Jews soon appeared....; as they approached, they put off their slippers, took their money in both their hands, and holding them alongside each other, as high as the breast, came slowly forward to the talb or Mohammedan

scrivener, appointed to receive it; he took it from them, hitting each one a smart blow with his fist on his bare forehead, by way of a receipt for his money, at which the Jews said, *Nahma Sidi* (thank you, my lord)... he that said, no [he could not pay], or was not ready, was seized instantly by the Moors, who throwing him flat on his face to the ground, gave him about fifty blows with a thick stick upon his back and posteriors, and conducted him away, I was told, to a dungeon... many of them changed their religion, were received by the Moors as brothers, and were taken to the mosque, and highly feasted..."[36]

This anecdote reveals an important truth, articulated by Yohanan Friedmann, namely, that "the basic purpose of the *jizya* is to force the People of the Book to embrace Islam; the intention (*taqdir*) of Qur'an 9:29 is 'until they embrace Islam or pay the *jizya* (*fa-yakunu al-taqdir hatta yuslima aw yu'tu al-jizya...*.'" [37] That is, from the Koranic point of view, payment of the *jizya* is a distant second-best to conversion, and it is made appropriately unpleasant so it will be an incentive to convert. [38]

What we call "radical Islam" is in many ways a revival of the ethos of classical Islamic imperialism in the contemporary world. [39] For example, Osama bin Laden wrote:

"our talks with the infidel West and our conflict with them ultimately revolve around one issue...and it is: Does Islam, or does it not, force people by the power of the sword to submit to its authority corporeally if not spiritually? Yes. There are only three choices in Islam: either willing submission [i.e. conversion]; or payment of the *jizya*, through physical, though not spiritual, submission to the authority of Islam; or the sword... The matter is summed up for every person alive: Either submit [i.e. convert], or live under the suzerainty of Islam, or die." [40]

We find a similar proclamation of classical Islamic imperialism in [the Iranian constitution](#), which states that the Iranian armed forces “will be responsible not only for guarding and preserving the frontiers of the country, but also for fulfilling the ideological mission of jihad in God’s way; that is, extending the sovereignty of God’s law throughout the world...” [41] The head of the Islamic State (a.k.a. ISIS or ISIL or Daesh) has openly stated the Islamic State’s aspiration to conquer “Rome” (i.e. Europe) and the whole world. [42] Its official magazine proclaims: “We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women ... and ... sell your sons as slaves at the slave market,” [43] and “Soon, by Allah’s permission, a day will come when the Muslim will walk everywhere as a master...” [44]

Azzi claims that terrorism has no roots at all in the Islamic tradition, but these quotations from three of the main sources of Islamic terrorism in the world today – al-Qaeda, Iran, and the Islamic State – show how wrong he is. Islamic terrorism is at least in part driven by the ideology of classical Islamic imperialism. This is especially important for Americans to understand. As historian Efraim Karsh points out,

“America’s position as the pre-eminent world power blocks Arab and Islamic imperialist aspirations. As such, it is a natural target for aggression. Osama bin Laden and other Islamists’ war is not against America per se, but is rather the most recent manifestation of the millenarian jihad for a universal Islamic empire...” [45]

Another aspect of contemporary Islamic terrorism is its contempt for the lives of non-Muslims, including non-combatants. This contempt is also [rooted in classical Islamic law](#), which gives only very weak and easily overridden protection to the lives of non-Muslim enemy civilians in wartime. [46]

In condemning terrorism as un-Islamic, Azzi cited a verse from

the Koran that allegedly says (in his words) "if you kill one person, you kill humanity." Azzi apparently meant Sura 5:32, which reads as follows: "From that time We prescribed for the Sons of Israel that whoever kills a person, except (in retaliation) for another, or (for) fomenting corruption on the earth, (it is) as if he had killed all the people." Note that this verse clearly leaves a loophole in the prohibition of killing: killing is wrong except in retaliation for killing another or fomenting corruption on the earth. Azzi did not mention this important exception, nor did he mention the immediately following verse (5:33), which explains what to do with those who "foment corruption:" "The penalty (for) those who wage war (against) God and His messenger, and who strive in fomenting corruption on the earth, is that they be killed or crucified, or their hands and feet on opposite sides be cut off, or that they be banished from the earth." Islamic terrorists, of course, presumably believe that they are retaliating against those who kill Muslims or that they are punishing those who foment corruption on the earth by waging war against Islam.[\[47\]](#) This was typical of Azzi's whole talk: he misled his audience by quoting a verse from the Koran partially and inaccurately, compounding the inaccuracy by taking the verse out of context.

Azzi also condemned suicide bombings as un-Islamic, on the grounds that Islam condemns suicide, but then he said, "We have to ask what causes the despair that leads to suicide bombing." He suggested that Muslim kids from Minnesota or Colorado or Palestine are driven to desperate acts of terrorism by anti-Muslim prejudice or discrimination. He also suggested such terrorist attacks are driven by mental derangement, on which he blamed the San Bernardino attacks. Here again, Azzi left out an important aspect of the story.

As noted above, radical Islam is rooted in the ethos of classical Islamic imperialism. The terrorist tactics of Iran, or al-Qaeda, or the Islamic State are motivated not merely by specific grievances against non-Muslims, but by the desire for

world conquest. Moreover, Islam might condemn suicide in the sense of intentional self-killing, [48] but it distinguishes this from suicidal bravery in battle, which it considers permissible and even laudable. [49] This distinction is based on the words of Muhammad himself, who taught that suicidal attacks against the enemy merit all the rewards of paradise. [50]

C. The Position of Women in the Islamic Tradition

When asked about the position of women in the Islamic tradition, Azzi began by acknowledging that women are not treated well in Islamic countries today. He attributed this to a misunderstanding of Islam. The world's most Islamic countries, it turns out, do not understand Islam! In Azzi's telling, the Koran is a feminist document, but the interpretation of the Koran was quickly hijacked by patriarchal males who wrote the commentaries on the Koran (the *tafsir*). Azzi was right to point out that there are Muslims who are writing feminist re-interpretations of the Koran today. But he was wrong to dismiss the traditional commentaries on the Koran so quickly. These were, after all, written by meticulous scholars who immersed themselves in the history of Islam and who were culturally and temporally closer to the milieu in which the Koran was composed than any modern exegete.

Azzi left his audience with the false impression that the Koran does not sanction anything that a modern Westerner would condemn as misogynist. In fact, the Koran condones the sexual enslavement of women (23:1-6, 33:50, 70:29-30), child marriage (65:4), polygamy (4:3) and wife-beating (4:34); appoints men as supervisors over women and commands women to obey men (4:34); says that the legal testimony of one man is worth that of two women (2:282); permits men to confine women till death for committing a lewd act (4:15); prescribes that a man shall inherit twice as much as a woman (4:11); implies that sons are superior to daughters (37:149); and gives a husband the right

“to put off any of your wives you please and take to your bed any of them you please” (33:51); the Koran also tells men, “women are your fields: go, then, into your fields whence you please” (2:223).[\[51\]](#)

Azzi apparently also meant to leave his audience with the impression that Muhammad, unlike the later commentators on the Koran, was a proto-feminist, but he conveniently ignored the earliest biographies of Muhammad. These biographies portray Muhammad as condoning [the rape and sexual enslavement of female war captives](#)[\[52\]](#) and quote Muhammad as telling men, “Lay injunctions on women kindly, for they are prisoners with you having no control of their persons.”[\[53\]](#) Tilman Nagel points out that the Arabic word used here by Muhammad (*al-awani*) has connotations of prisoners of war in chains.[\[54\]](#) Nagel argues that Muhammad aimed for a subjugation (*Unterwerfung*) of women by men that was in fact far more thoroughgoing than what the more free-wheeling customs of pre-Islamic Arabia had imposed.[\[55\]](#) As historian Robert Hoyland notes, “Considerable variety of marital custom is attested in pre-Islamic Arabia...”[\[56\]](#) Far from liberating women, Muhammad replaced this variety with uniformity and made Arabia even more patriarchal than it had been before the coming of Islam. The earliest extant biography of Muhammad gives us a graphic example of this in the person of one Mu’adh, whom Muhammad hand-picked to travel to Yemen (or Yaman) to serve as a Muslim missionary:

“Mu’adh went off to the Yaman and did as he was ordered and a woman came to him and said, ‘O companion of God’s apostle, what rights has a husband over his wife?’ He said, ‘Woe to you, a woman can never fulfil her husband’s rights, so do your utmost to fulfil his claims as best you can.’ She said, ‘By God, if you are the companion of God’s apostle you must know what rights a husband has over his wife!’ He said, ‘If you were to go back and find him with his nostrils running with pus and blood and sucked until

you got rid of them you would not have fulfilled your obligation.’” [57]

The author, Ibn Ishaq, a devout Muslim writing for a Muslim audience and using Muslim sources, expresses no disapproval of Mu’adh’s words. Nor does he report any objection from Muhammad.

This picture is confirmed by the traditional collections of Muhammad’s sayings (*hadith*). In particular, [Sahih Bukhari](#), the *hadith* collection of Muhammad al-Bukhari (810-870), “is accorded a rank in Sunni Islam just below that of the Qur’an.” [58] Here are some of the sayings of Muhammad as recounted by al-Bukhari: “It is not permissible for a man to be alone with a woman, and no lady should travel except with a Muhram (i.e. her husband or a person she cannot marry in any case, e.g. her father, brother, etc.).” [59] “The Prophet said, ‘After me I have not left any affliction more harmful to men than woman.’” [60] “When the Prophet heard the news that the people of Persia had made the daughter of Khosrau their Queen (ruler), he said, ‘Never will succeed such a nation as makes a woman their ruler.’” [61] According to al-Bukhari, Muhammad explained the inferiority of women as follows:

“Then he [Muhammad] passed by the women and said, ‘O women! Give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hell-fire were you (women).’ They asked, ‘Why is it so, O Allah’s Apostle?’ He replied, ‘You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious sensible man could be led astray by some of you.’ The women asked, ‘O Allah’s Apostle! What is deficient in our intelligence and religion?’ He said, ‘Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man?’ They replied in the affirmative. He said, ‘This is the deficiency in her intelligence. Isn’t it true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during her menses?’ The women replied in the affirmative. He said, ‘This is the

deficiency in her religion.’”[62]

The Islamic tradition also attributes the following statements to Muhammad: “It is not permissible for a woman who believes in Allah and the Last Day to allow someone into her husband’s house if he is opposed, or to go out if he is averse.”[63] “Whoever leaves her husband’s house [... without his permission], the angels curse her until she returns or repents.”[64] “Men are already destroyed when they obey women.”[65]

Since Islamic doctrine attributes *isma* to Muhammad, that is, divinely granted immunity from sin and error, his words and example are nearly as important as the Koran itself in forming the basis of Islamic law.[66] This, in addition to the Koranic verses mentioned above, is why Islamic law imposes such strict limits on female freedom.

Conclusion

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