MOUHANAD KHORCHIDE

Islam is Mercy

Essential Features of a Modern Religion

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For my parents Rawda and Nouh Khorchide

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PREFACE

When this book was published in Germany in the autumn of 2012, some people who associate Islam with negative aspects considered it a provocation. They questioned how Islam could represent a religion of mercy when images of violence, suppression and backwardness related to it could be viewed on a daily basis. It is indeed a fact that in modern Europe we face the challenge of a grossly distorted image of Islam in the minds of many people. In addition, many Muslims have no or only rudimentary knowledge of their own religion and therefore are in no position to counteract prejudices against Islam with positive impulses which could serve as assets to society. At the same time, this very lack of knowledge sometimes represents the ideal breeding ground for the development of fundamentalist orientations; while these groups are small in numbers, they are very loud and use any opportunity to noisily share their equally distorted image of what they consider ‘true Islam’ with the world. Their understanding of Islam is one which only serves to confirm many prejudices against this religion. Their invoking of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions also sheds a negative light on the latter. These so-called Salafists are particularly attractive to young

Muslims who feel rejected by European societies. To them, the Salafists can offer a sort of ‘refuge ideology’, giving them a certain power and superiority. What suffers in the end is Islam itself and the moderate majority of Muslims who seek to live a peaceful life. This is why I see a necessity to write a book about Islam which is accessible to non-experts without a list of theological sources and which represents Islam the way it wants to be represented: as a religion of mercy; “and we have only sent you [Muhammad], as a mercy to the whole of mankind” (Qur’ān 21:107). This book focuses on God as the Absolutely Merciful who invites people to share His eternal happiness; however, this is not meant as an ‘all-clear’ signal for sinning. God’s mercy is not at odds with His justice; on the contrary, justice is one aspect of His mercy, meaning that His punishment also forms part of His mercy. Both Muslims and non-Muslims gain from viewing Islam from this perspective of mercy, which is why reactions after the publication in the German-speaking world were overwhelmingly positive. I received many letters and emails from Muslims who thanked me, as reading the book had provided them access to their religion; an access which would enable them to develop a close relationship with God, to practise their religion more consciously, to live as faithful Muslims in a non-Muslim society, to develop their religiosity without being at odds with their everyday lives.

It is my experience that not everyone who poses as guardian of Islam really cares about it. I have experienced how we Muslims stand in our own way as our intentions are not straightforward. We miss out on many opportunities by fighting each other and very often forget where the real challenges lie.

Readers will notice that I quote many Qur'ānic passages and hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad. I do so to illustrate that it is necessary for Muslims to return to their primary sources. By no means do I want to skip Islamic tradition, even if some passages of this book read very critically. Only then will we be able to come to a topical understanding of Islam when we take Islamic tradition seriously. Muslim scholars have made great contributions over the last 1,400 years. Appreciating their work means taking their opinions seriously while picking them up and developing them further. I am convinced that Islam has great potential to serve as an asset for us as individuals and as societies. We must scratch the surface and reveal its treasures; if we stop looking for treasures, we will miss out on further precious contributions and silence Islam. In the here and now, Islam can only stay alive through Muslims. However, this requires our hearts to be alive in order to be places of divine love. This is why in this book I not only appeal to people's reasoning but also to their hearts. Readers may not agree with everything that is put forward in this book, but if I can

manage to make a few hearts pulsate with God’s love, then it has been a great success.

1 Introduction – Growing up with Contradictions

“Mr. Khorchide, what you’re saying there about Islam sounds very attractive! We’ve never looked at Islam that way before. Tell me, is this your interpretation, or are there other Muslims who see Islam the way you do? And what are the chances that this concept of Islam will take hold?” After almost every public lecture on Islam I am faced with questions similar to this.

As a theologist, I naturally aim to underpin my point of view with religious arguments. However, my understanding of theology and religion has been fundamentally influenced by my life history. Everything said in this chapter is meant to illustrate to you as the reader the many different ways in which people live Islam, why I have great reservations about traditionalist schools of Islamic theology, and why I have set out to examine a topical approach to Islamic theology. Personal experience is therefore the key to finding answers to any of the above questions.

My parents came to Lebanon as refugees after the occupation of Palestine in 1948. My father was only eight years old at the time, my mother one. Both grew up in

Beirut. My father attended a Christian school. This may appear odd, but in the Lebanon of the 1940s and 1950s it was quite common. With 18 recognised religious groups, Lebanese society is very pluralistic: the biggest groups are the Maronite Christians, the Shi'a Muslims and the Sunni Muslims. They share the country with the Druze, Roman Orthodox Christians, Melkite Greek Catholic Christians, Armenian Apostolic Christians, Alevi Muslims, Armenian Catholic Christians, Protestant Christians, and Coptic Christians as well as a small minority of Jews. Muslims make up slightly more than half of the population, half of them Sunnis and the other half Shi'a. Such plurality has been and still is to some extent the norm in Lebanon. In the 1940s, when my grandparents wanted to enrol my father in a school, their main priority was not the religious background of the school, but its quality. For Palestinian families in particular, living in Lebanon as refugees and under very poor conditions, education represented the most important investment in the future of their own children. My mother always talked about their Christian neighbours of that time, and about the various joint religious celebrations of the two families. The children were delighted to receive presents at both Muslim and Christian festivals and holidays, and my mother still remembers the presents she received on such occasions. At this time, it was completely normal in Lebanon that

Christians and Muslims lived side by side and considered each other equal citizens of one country, equal human beings. Inner-Islamic pluralism was also normal - two of my uncles married Shi’a women, being Sunnis themselves. This was no big deal, and did not merit any discussion. For my grandparents, the main criterion for finding a partner was education.

People were confronted with religious diversity on a large scale, from childhood onwards, allowing them to learn how to deal with it. The Beirut of the present day is still characterised by the close proximity of mosques and church buildings. My parents grew up in this religiously diverse society. I, on the other hand, grew up in a different country, where pluralism is an alien concept and even opposed - in Saudi Arabia. It was originally for economic reasons that my father decided to move to Saudi Arabia after having completed his studies in electrical engineering in Egypt at the end of the 1960s.

In search for good professional prospects, a job advertisement from the Saudi Ministry of Communication seemed to be just the right opportunity for him. After two years in Saudi Arabia, my father married my mother, who was 18 years old at the time and had just started studying sociology and psychology at the Arabic University of Beirut. My father was allowed to marry her under the condition that my mother be allowed to finish her studies. My father

agreed; however it was arranged that my mother move to Saudi Arabia straight away and complete her degree via distance learning. At the end of each academic year she flew from Riyadh to Beirut to sit her exams.

After only a year in Saudi Arabia, my brother was born. At the end of July 1971, my mother flew to Lebanon to sit her final exams. At the time she was pregnant with me, which is why I was born in Beirut. Basically, my parents are stateless, issued with Lebanese travel documents not recognised as a proper Lebanese passport. Being classified as stateless helped me in the mid-1990s – just like it had previously helped my brother – to be granted Austrian citizenship after four years of residency in Austria. With Austria having joined the European Union, the rules have now changed, and it would no longer be so easy for a stateless person to obtain Austrian citizenship as it was back then.

I grew up and went to school in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. In 1981, two years after the Iranian Revolution, I entered middle school. Religion formed a fundamental part of school education. From middle school onwards we had five different religious subjects: religious doctrines of Islam, Islamic law, Qur’ānic exegesis, prophetic traditions (Sunnah) and Qur’ān recitation. In terms of religious socialisation, ‘religious doctrines of Islam’ was most important, for one simple reason - this subject discusses

‘true belief’. It deals with the fundamental question of who is a Muslim and who is not. It was the success of the Iranian (Shi’a) Revolution of 1979 in particular, and the fear of it spreading to the states of the Arabian Gulf, which led people to put great emphasis on pointing out the alleged erroneous practises of Shi’a Islam. Many scholars would forever warn of the Shi’a danger threatening the entire Middle East. As children and teenagers, there was no question for us that we supported Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s - not because we understood any of it, but solely because in our heads it was all about the battle between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims. We had learned that Shi’a Muslims were defectors, disloyal to Islam, and aiming to destroy Islam from within. These kinds of anti-Shi’a doctrines were, and still are, widespread in Saudi Arabia; a propaganda machine against Shi’a Muslims is run via internet and satellite broadcasting. TV channels, such as Ṣafā and Wiṣāl, were created specifically for this purpose. On the other hand, anti-Sunni propaganda programmes from the Shi’a have also been on the increase in the last few years.

The subject ‘religious doctrines’ focused to a far lesser extent on non-Islamic religions, such as Christianity and Judaism, than on schools of Islam which were deemed to be erroneous. Runner-up in terms of suspiciousness after Shi’a Islam was Islamic Mysticism. Other religions were barely

mentioned, as it was clear that any other religion than Islam was heresy - no need to argue about that.

The Dogma of Religious Inclusion and Exclusion (Arabic walā’ wal-barā’a) represents the key dogma of the influential Saudi Arabian Salafists. The Salafists attach themselves to the first three generations of Islam (from the seventh to the ninth century), hence the term ‘Salafists’, derived from the Arabic (in English ‘the pious forefathers’). They consider the lives and actions of these three generations as an ideal model, which must be followed. However, in reality, they select a specific interpretation of this era - trying to legitimise their ideology. Historical facts are manipulated in order to declare specific points of view as Islamic. All Companions of the Prophet are deemed infallible. The unlawful coup d'etat of one of the Companions of the Prophet, Muʿāwiya ibn Abī Sufyān (who died in 680 AD), and the ensuing dictatorship in Islamic history, for example, are not acknowledged. Salafists consider any criticism of Muʿāwiya, who discarded nearly all Islamic values and whose dictatorship has been serving as a model to the Islamic world up to the present day, as an attack on Islam itself. Their ideology therefore plays a fundamental role in sustaining dictatorial regimes, in keeping them alive in the name of Islam. Any Islamic schools of thought contradicting their teachings are considered un-Islamic. They consider themselves the only

true fellowship of believers, as, in their eyes, they are the only ones following Islam as God intended it. They accuse all other Muslims of practising the “wrong” Islam. Such intolerance generates a dualistic worldview, with the world solely made up of believers and non-believers. This is why the Muslim community as a whole considers the Salafists to be intolerant and fanatic.

The Salafists see Islam as a purely doctrinal religion; their teachings are based on a literal interpretation of Islamic sources, never questioning the actual meaning of these texts. They completely reject any attempt to use reason as an independent source of gaining religious understanding. Both a contemporary interpretation of these sources and their historical contextualisation are strictly opposed. The Dogma of Inclusion and Exclusion states that the loyality of a Muslim (walāʾ) – including values such as love, compassion, the willingness to help others etc. – should only extend to other Muslims, and that it is a Muslim’s duty to shun any non-Muslims. The main danger of this dogma lies in the fact that it is linked to a claim to power. Only Muslims are granted dignity and respect. This is why most Salafists believe that a Muslim should not be allowed to work for a non-Muslim, as, in their opinion, this would amount to a degradation of the Muslim. The school subject ‘religious doctrines’ therefore rarely dealt with God, God’s actions or the spiritual aspects of the

relationship between a believer and God. Instead it concerned itself with the issue of ‘true belief’, i.e. the only genuine belief ultimately gaining the follower entry to paradise.

Every year during the summer holidays my mother took us children to Lebanon to visit the extended family. My father rarely accompanied us, as his work wouldn’t allow it - he generally stayed in Riyadh. In Lebanon, we first stayed with my paternal grandmother for a few days, and then spent the rest of the holidays at my maternal grandmother’s house.

My maternal grandmother had a Friday ritual, and I was often allowed to accompany her. In the morning she bought fresh bread and cheese, and around lunchtime, after Friday Prayer, she went to the front of the mosque, where poor men were gathering, waiting to be given some money and food. I was always delighted to be able to accompany my grandmother in her ritual when I was a child. Images of these poor men with ragged clothes are deeply ingrained in me. As a child, my feelings were mixed: on one hand, I felt pity for the poor men and their families; on the other, I was afraid of them, as they looked unkempt and appeared slightly scary to me. At the same time, I felt joy and pride at being able to help and make others happy; I also felt humble when the men bowed to express their gratitude, and I worried about my own situation and my own future.

The poor men not only came from the mosque, but also from the neighbouring church. It was on these occasions that my grandmother often said something to me which has had a long-lasting impact on me, up to the present day, “Look, these men have come out of the mosque, and these out of the church, these are poor, and so are these. This group is happy when we give them food, and this group is also happy when we give them food. Look, these are human beings, and so are these; they pray at the mosque and they pray at church, but they are all human beings - poor human beings, and we are able to help them! This is what God asks of us, and He rejoices with them because He feels pity for them, and He rejoices in us, as we’ve made Him and the poor men happy.” The expression on the faces of these poor men, regardless of whether they had come from church or from the mosque, was always the same - a pleading look asking for help, combined with a humble smile expressing gratitude.

Despite the fact that my grandmother was illiterate and could not approach Islam from an intellectual point of view, her faith was impressively profound. It was not rituals and superficialities which defined her belief, but actions; her understanding of God was very dialogical. She believed in a God who is right at people’s side, who is not indifferent to people’s suffering on earth; she believed in a merciful God whose actions are performed through people. She saw

herself as a medium for God’s actions and firmly believed that she could only please God by pleasing the people around her. According to her faith, God suffers and rejoices with the poor.

At the end of the summer holidays, we returned to Riyadh, back to a completely different world. It was not our world back then, and it still is not ours today. In Saudi Arabia, Egyptian, Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian and Jordanian families have their own social networks, just like workers from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and last - but not least - the Saudis themselves. While Palestinians, Syrians, Lebanese, Jordanians and Egyptians usually live with their families, the workers from Asian countries mainly live alone, their families having stayed back home. The Saudis’ social networks are less family-based, but run along different categories; gender segregation is an important feature of society, which leads to purely male and purely female social networks. Men and women are generally not allowed to sit together in coffeehouses and restaurants, leaving married couples very few opportunities for joint public activities; this is why many prefer to go out with friends of the same gender, leaving them many more options. Women usually go to the shops at the weekend, i.e. on Thursday (which corresponds to our Saturday), and men to the coffeehouses. Entering a shop in Riyadh on a Thursday, you could get the impression

of living in a country solely made up of women. Tribal structures also play a key role for Saudis, unlike the immigrant families and foreign workers. In addition, age is an important factor for the structuring of social networks.

When we were children and teenagers, we rarely met up with friends from school at the weekend, but usually with the children of our parents' friends. Our parents visited their friends and just took us along. Inevitably, the children of our parents' friends also became our friends. This continued until I left the country at 17 to study in Austria, as my parents worried that I would start to hang around with young Saudis at the weekend. The often lavish lifestyles of many Saudi families had a profound impact on the upbringing of these young people. I cannot recall a single time when we went to visit a Saudi family, or a Saudi family came to visit us. For my parents it was a peculiar concept to put guests into two separate, gender-segregated rooms. However, for Saudis this practise represents a deep-rooted tradition. In traditional Palestinian communities, similar to Syrian and Lebanese communities, all guests usually sit in the same room.

We mainly played football as children and teenagers, girls included. As teenagers, no visit was complete without a round of Monopoly. Only the savoury and sweet snacks my mother had lovingly prepared beforehand interrupted our conversations and games. The saddest moment was the

point when the door opened and our parents announced that we had to go home, “We’re leaving, put on your shoes and jackets.” Our own little world would collapse; a world which had been our haven for a few hours and which was our world. We were once again confronted with reality, and had to return to a different world - the Saudi world. A new week lay ahead of us, as these visits usually took place on a Friday (the Western Sunday), and we needed to get everything ready for school.

At school, in religious studies classes, I learned that such family gatherings were sinful. Playing Monopoly, which made us laugh and which we enjoyed so much, was also a sin. Not to mention the fact that the girls played football with us and talked to us, which was an almost unbelievable sin. At school, boys and girls did not only sit in separate classrooms; they were even in different buildings. No girls were ever to be seen, neither during classes, nor during breaks. Had it not been for my parents’ social contacts, which enabled me to get into contact with girls at weekends, my mother and sister would have remained the only women I ever had anything to do with in Saudi Arabia. It will not come as a surprise that the situation for boys from Saudi families is very different - young men grow up without ever having any contact with girls and women of the same age.

Religious studies classes confronted me with the Dogma of Inclusion and Exclusion. According to this dogma, the men from the church and the mosque were not equal after all. The truth was on the side of the mosque-goers, and God would lead them to paradise, whereas churchgoers would spend eternity in hell. Human beings were not equal - Muslims were superior to non-Muslims, and who was to be considered a Muslim and who was not was apparently established by religious doctrines, full of determining criteria for Muslims. These kinds of thoughts were to be passed on to me during religious studies classes. My teacher answered my question - why God condemned all non-Muslims to hell - by saying, “Because they have the wrong religion or, even worse, no religion at all. They deserve hell for not choosing Islam as their religion. On top of that, as non-Muslims, they’re bad people, wrongful, have no morals and are corrupted.”

My father was always very interested in politics. He possessed a shortwave radio kit, which he used to listen to the BBC Arabic station. Car trips with my father were earpiercing adventures, which often strained my mother’s patience to its limits. Broadcasts about corrupt Arabic regimes made my father particularly frustrated and angry. For the same reason, he was always frustrated by Friday sermons, as the imams never touched on social problems; they avoided criticising any existing social deficits. At the

same time, they emphasised that Saudi Islam was the only true Islam. Superficial aspects were turned into symbols which would allow people to distinguish between true and false Islam. One time, when the imam at our mosque was running late, my father was asked to lead the congregation in prayer. However, halfway through the prayer, my father was interrupted by a man who pushed him aside with the words, “You’re not a suitable imam, you’re wearing trousers and they’re even covering your ankles!” Salafists invoke the Prophet Muhammad’s prohibition of clothes covering the ankles, as this was considered a sign of arrogance at the time. Only at the time though! Several times I witnessed discussions about who should lead the next prayer along the lines of, “Let’s see who’s got the longest beard, he should lead in prayer.”

On the other hand, the differential treatment of native residents and foreigners in Saudi Arabia has always caused us great distress. Some hospitals will only treat native residents. Foreigners were not entitled to own apartments. With very few exceptions, there is no system for the naturalisation of foreigners. Moreover, back then foreigners were only allowed to study specific subjects at university etc. Even today, no pension system for foreigners exists. My father is now over seventy years old and still lives in Riyadh with my mother. Despite two heart attacks, he is still forced to work, as there is no pension provision

for him as a foreigner in Riyadh. Particularly embittering for my father is the fact that he contributed significantly to the construction of the Saudi State in the 1960s and 1970s, when the country was still an empty desert, without ever receiving any form of recognition for his work. My brother, whose lifetime ambition was to become a doctor, was denied the right to study medicine in Saudi Arabia, despite the fact that he had been born there. An academic education for us children (preferably medicine) was very high on my parents' priority list, ensuring good prospects for us in life. My brother was admitted to several German universities to study medicine, but as a stateless person he was denied a visa. However, we were not disappointed for long, because we were soon told about a neighbouring country of Germany where the same language is spoken - Austria. The Austrian embassy in Saudi Arabia did not hesitate and issued a visa for my brother. Two years later I followed him to Austria, and six years after that my sister came as well. We all had the same ambition - to study.

When I came to Austria, my first surprise was that, despite being a foreigner, I was allowed to access the national health system in my first year of residency. Back then, I discovered that for approx. €3.50 I could go to any doctor or hospital, just like my Austrian neighbours. This may appear insignificant, but for me it was an important and powerful experience. For me, as a 17-year-old, it was

not easy to concede that the Islamic country where I had grown up, where true Islam was a never-ending subject, did not grant me access to their health system, did not allow me to go to the same doctor as the Saudis, and excluded me from an academic education, forcing me to leave my family behind as a very young man; and all of these things, which Saudi Arabia had denied me, I was now offered in a “non-Muslim” country, by – as I had always been taught – “infidels”, considered morally corrupt and wrongful! This led me to question the meaning and purpose of religion in many ways.

During my sociology studies at Vienna University, I was fortunate enough to meet lecturers who were a great support to me throughout my university years. This included the supervisor of my doctoral dissertation, who had also been the supervisor of my master’s thesis. She is openly atheist, and we had a few conversations, in which she explained to me why to her it is plausible that the world may function without a God. In her eyes, the notion of God is a human construct, providing a better understanding of some of the world’s phenomena and answers to specific questions, such as about creation, death, the meaning of life etc. My supervisor lived with her mother and selflessly cared for her until she died. I could not stop asking myself how it should be possible that such a person, who lives an exemplary life and does no harm to anyone, who on the

contrary strives to motivate young people (like me at the time) and offers them opportunities for personal growth, should be condemned to hell for all eternity; as according to traditional Islamic theology, taught to me at school and later at university, this is the fate that awaits her as a non-believer. This was and still is incompatible with my common sense. During my university years I got to know many students and lecturers. They were more or less friendly, and more or less truthful, but this was in no way linked to their religious convictions. I just could not relate to some of the Muslims on my course. At some point, some Arabic students on my course discovered a casino and thought they could make a fortune there. For me, that was the beginning of the end of our friendship. A Muslim classmate always told me about his adventures stealing watches and jewellery, but often came along to the mosque for Friday Prayer. I found all of this very irritating. Why should my Austrian, non-Muslim supervisor be condemned to hell for all eternity, whereas this disagreeable person on my course, who stole from other people, was destined to enjoy paradise? Only because he was labelled ‘Muslim’? What kind of God has determined that and made it His will?!

According to traditional Islamic theology, all Muslims go to paradise, regardless of their actions in life, as long as they die a Muslim. They may have to go to hell for a specific amount of time, determined by God - in order to be

cleansed from their sins - but God may just forgive all sins, out of mercy and thanks to the intercession of the Prophet Muhammad. Many Muslim scholars believe that the intercession of the Prophet and the martyrs grant Muslims direct access to paradise.

I questioned the meaning and purpose of religion. What is it that God really wants from us? And what does this God want for Himself? Why bother at all? How is it possible that God lets people go to paradise who are unjust and treat other people as inferior, while people who treat others justly and with more respect are condemned to eternal hell? Because they carry the wrong label?! Because they do not call themselves Muslims?! Is it really only the labels God cares about?! Is it really enough for God that we believe in Him? Is it important to Him that our faith takes a certain shape or form? Does that mean it is God Himself that He cares about? Does He need us to worship Him, is that why He created us? So whoever submits to Him will be rewarded with paradise, and those who do not submit to Him will be taught a lesson in the next world, be shown who has the last laugh? Is it really important for God to demonstrate His power? Is God really that petty? My conclusion was - certainly not! God is no dictator, no Mubarak, no Gaddafi. God is intrinsically perfect as He is; He is not in need of our worship. God does not need

recognition of His perfection, neither from Himself, nor from others.

So why then did He create humankind? Before we examine this question, we need to clarify who is meant when we talk about God. Who is God? In order to find answers to these questions I decided to study Islamic theology in Beirut at the end of the 1990s. However, these studies raised more questions than answers. The books I was required to read as part of the course rarely offered answers. I started buying any books on Islamic theology I could find. It was not always easy to transport Arabic books from Beirut and Cairo to Vienna. I spent almost all the money I earned on books. My wife was a great support to me, which I am still grateful for. When I started working as a research assistant at the research department for "Islamic Religious Pedagogy" in Vienna in 2006, the issue of teaching qualifications required for teaching Islamic religious studies (a subject offered at Austrian state schools since 1982) kept coming up during my work. My doctoral dissertation, entitled "Islamic Religious Studies in Austria", came to the conclusion that the Islam taught in schools consisted mainly of lists of instructions on what is allowed and what is not. Religious studies classes are seen as a means of teaching divine laws, rather than as a means of supporting the religious development of pupils, and encouraging a religiosity they can then take charge of