

The Price of Dissent

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Individual disagreements on issues that affect our lives are common occurrences, but when such disagreement involves religion, the potential for things turning ugly and nasty is invariably increased. Faith invokes strong emotions. Disagreements with someone's entrenched beliefs can earn you pronouncements of apostasy—and even a death threat is a possibility, in fact such pronouncements are often accompanied by violent threats. Such has been the case with adherents of almost every religion at one time or another. Lately, though, this has become a predominantly Muslim phenomenon.

Most of the time, the death threats are not carried out but the few that are, make every threat equally scary. The murder of Dutch film maker, Theo Van Gogh, for making a short movie called "Submission", is still fresh in our memories. Just delivering a death threat to someone's door is enough to wreck their lives and mental peace. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a recipient of many death threats herself, writes, "People are always asking me what it's like to live with death threats. It's like being diagnosed with a chronic disease. It may flare up and kill you, but it may not. It could happen in a week, or not for decades."¹

I had been observing these demonstrations of intolerance by Islamists from a distance, but recently it hit too close to home for me when two of my friends, Farzana Hassan-Shahid and Tarek Fatah of the Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC), received a chilling death threat.² Someone left a voice message on MCC's answering machine saying, "This is a warning to Tarek Fatah and Farzana Hassan and to all the members of your Munafiq [hypocrite] organization. Wa Allah al-Azeem [by God who is great], I swear... on all 99 names of Allah, if you do not cease from your campaign of smearing Islam...Wa Allahi, Wa Allahi, Wa Allahi [by God, by God, by God], I will slaughter all of you."³

Hassan-Shahid and Fatah do not belong to the category of people who have received death threats for renouncing their faith in Islam. They are being victimized because they are moderate Muslims. The mission statement of their organization, MCC, states that they want to make Muslim communities equal and active partners in the development of a just, democratic and equitable society in Canada. Some of their views—for example, their positions regarding secularism and their opposition to Shariah laws in Canada—are quite different from those of fundamentalist Muslims, so the death threat to them, while sad and scary, is not really surprising.

A death threat, fundamentally, is an instrument to stifle speech though it is not the only instrument to achieve that end. Intimidations and accusations are also employed in the same pursuit and moderate Muslims, like Tarek Fatah and Farzana Hassan-Shahid, are no strangers to them. I, personally, am a witness to ad hominem attacks against Farzana, the likes of which I had not seen before in intellectual discussions. The most frequent charge leveled against moderate Muslims by Islamists is that they don't represent the larger Muslim community—as if the Islamists do. No matter how many times one claims that he/she is not attempting to be the representative of the entire community and all he/she is doing is voicing his/her opinion, the charge won't go away. The superfluous nature of this charge is apparently lost on the people who hurl it, but what is more important is to

understand the motive of this assertion. Is it a warning to individuals out there to not mistake moderate Muslims for mainstream Muslims, or is it saying that since one has different ideas than the larger Muslim community, one should not express those ideas?

Another frequent accusation is that moderate outfits like MCC bring divisive issues to the fore. Such accusations, once again, are attempts to dictate the agenda. The issues usually dubbed as 'divisive' are the ones which some shrewd Islamists do not want to discuss publicly in North America lest the incompatibility of their views on those issues with the norms of North American society is exposed. They would rather sweep the issues like homosexuality under the rug of 'divisive issues' than openly state their positions on them. Maybe there are some people who are genuinely concerned about the divisiveness but, seemingly, it hasn't occurred to them that there is nothing wrong in being divided over certain things. It is actually good for the outlook of a community. Had it not been for the moderate Muslims, the entire Muslim community would have appeared as a monolithic one. The moderate and progressive Muslims elevate the image of Muslim communities by bringing diversity of opinion to the discourse and by giving the Muslim communities an alternative outlook; one that is not homophobic, misogynist and intolerant. The diversity of opinion, however, is not that important to Islamists who generally do not encourage dissent and so the moderates are rewarded for their services with death threats.

One can dismiss the importance of such threats by calling them acts of fanatic minds but simple analyses of what culminates in a death threat presents a very disturbing picture. Most of the moderate Muslims either never speak out in the first place fearing Islamist backlash or bow out when the intimidation tactics are applied. The ones that decide to take on the challenges—who keep speaking despite all the efforts of stifling their dissenting voices—are usually the ones who end up receiving death threats. In this sense, a death threat is a metamorphosis of earlier efforts to silence the opposition. Once a death threat is made, all kinds of organizations instantly jump in to issue condemnations against the threat but what is sadly missed is that a death threat is the natural result of continuous negative propaganda targeted at a person or a group. If you keep saying that someone is defaming Islam just by opining about it, you can be rest assured that some fanatic somewhere will decide to do something about it. And some of the organizations who issue condemnations after the violent act are usually part of that negative propaganda, so they can't absolve themselves fully just by issuing a press statement deploring the act of making a death threat. If they are serious about curtailing death threats, they need to understand what John Stuart Mill meant when he said, "He who knows only his side of the case knows little of that." That would make them more appreciative of dissenting views and they would engage moderates in discussing the issues rather than trying to silence them by accusations of divisiveness and non-representation.

Probably the saddest part of this entire sorry state is the role played by the liberal-left of North America. The Left, unashamedly, allies itself with Islamists in North America in the name of politically correct cultural relativism that says that the social and moral values of immigrants, who constitute the overwhelming part of Muslim communities in North America, should be interpreted in the terms of the culture they have migrated from. Tarek Fatah aptly calls such attitude "racism of lower expectations". The real and unstated basis of this alliance, though, is the common anti-U.S. Administration rhetoric of the Left and the Islamists. It is quite ironic that the Left that is in constant struggle against the Christian Right on issues like

abortion, gay marriage, teaching evolution in public schools, etc. is engaged in this unholy alliance with Islamists who have an identical social agenda as Christian Right. For the sake of political expedience, the Left has deserted the very people who should have been their natural allies due to their progressive ideas. It seems that the Left has decided to completely ignore the plea of Salman Rushdie to support people victimized by Islamists, for these moderate and progressive Muslims, as Rushdie put it, are involved in the struggle for the soul of Islam.⁴

References:

1- Ayan Hirsi Ali, "Infidel", Free Press , February 2007, p. 346

2- The Toronto Star. March 22, 2007

3- The actual recording of the threat can be heard at
<http://muslimcanadiancongress.org>

4- Salman Rushdie, "The Struggle for the Soul of Islam", New York Times, July 11, 1993.

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