

Religious debate in Saudi Arabia: On Defining the “Other”

Rev. Bassam M. Madany

Historically, Muslims have regarded non-Muslims as *Kuffar*¹ i.e. non-believers. Of course other classifications were used, for example, Jews and Christians living within *Daru’l Islam*, were regarded as *Dhimmi*². They enjoyed certain rights within the overall Islamic Shari’a.

In day- to-day relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, the latter have always been looked upon as *Kuffar*. But due to the presence of non-Muslim workers in Saudi Arabia to help with its economy, some Saudi intellectuals and members of the royal family have called for a redefinition of non-Muslims, regarding them not as “*unbelievers*” but as the “*Others*.”

A French online newspaper reported on 23 June, 2005, on the recommendations of the **National Dialogue Forum** that took place in Saudi Arabia, and which dealt with the topic of a redefinition of the “*unbeliever*,” by regarding him simply as the “*Other*.” Here are excerpts from the article:

Several participants at the “National Dialogue Forum” being held at Abha, in Saudi Arabia, called on Wednesday, for a modification of the religious discourse, by adopting a less trenchant vocabulary. Thus, they proposed that the word Kuffar (unbelievers), that is normally used to designate non-Muslims, be replaced, in the media and in the sermons [at the mosques], by the term “the Others.”

Furthermore, they called for “a rejection of that type of education that teaches future generations hatred for ‘the Other.’” The participants at the meeting invited the religious institution to recognize its errors, and to correct them, especially in those areas of proselytizing and justice.

¹ *Kuffar*, the Arabic word for unbelievers; its singular form is *Kafir*.

² *Dhimmi*, an Arabic word that designated the status of Jews and Christians living within the Household of Islam, i.e. *Daru’l Islam*.

St Francis Magazine Nr. 1 Vol. III (June 2007)

*The Forum met again on Wednesday, bringing together around fifty persons, including women, 'ulemas (religious teachers), and intellectuals. They were to prepare for the fifth round of the **National Dialogue Initiative**. Their work has thus far insisted on the necessity of "knowing 'the Other,' in order to be successful in dialoguing with him." One lady participant at the Forum, as reported by the daily al-Watan, called attention to the "inequities resulting from the prohibition of the freedom to practise their religions as imposed on foreign residents of Saudi Arabia." She also called for "respecting these foreigners, dialoguing with them, and authorizing them to freely practise their beliefs."*

[Translation from French is mine: Bassam M. Madany]

The reference to the proceedings of the "**National Dialogue Initiative or Forum**" was not restricted to the Western press, but the daily Arabic online *Al-Sharq-al-Awsat* in its 24 September, 2005, issue dealt with the proceedings of the conference under this headline: "**On Defining 'the Other': A Discussion between Two Generations at a Preparatory Session of the National Dialogue Initiative.**" While this daily is published in London, it has close connections with Saudi Arabia, and is most likely financed by Saudi sources.

The preparatory meeting took place in Saudi Arabia, where the participants discussed the subject of the **Other**. The new Arabic term chosen to designate the non-Muslim was **Al-Akhar**. First, I would like to quote from the report, and then add my comments.

*"On Tuesday, 20 September, 2005, the preparatory meetings of the **National Dialogue Initiative** that took place at the Meridian Hotel in Jeddah, ended. A large generational gap surfaced at the close of the discussions. It became clear, during the meetings which had lasted for three days that the sixty-three adult participants were looking for an exact and proper definition of "**Al-Akhar**." At the same time, seventeen young men and women who participated in a training program, in conjunction with this meeting at Jeddah, had already completed their deliberations, having concluded that their relations with the "**Akhar**" must have one purpose only, that of calling him or her, **to convert to Islam**.*

*"The specific goal that had been set for these young men and women was to teach them the art of dialogue, and the proper means of communications. They were expected to learn the relation between dialogue and convincing the '**Other**' of one's point of view, without alienating him. However, as far as these young people were concerned, only the non-Muslim should be classified as "**Al-Akhar**," regardless of where he or she had come from."*

St Francis Magazine Nr. 1 Vol. III (June 2007)

What a revelation! I have no idea when or why “*The National Dialogue Initiative*” began in Saudi Arabia. But that several preparatory meetings under its umbrella had already taken place is something to ponder and reflect on. First, it is necessary that these discussions be placed within a historical framework that, for more than a millennium, had defined the relations between Muslims and all types of non-Muslims. Here is a brief summary:

Soon after the migration of Muhammad to Medina in 622 A.D., a new Islamic vocabulary came into existence. The Meccan believers who migrated to Medina were called, *Muhajiroun*. As for those from Medina itself who joined them and acknowledged the mission of the Prophet, they were designated as the *Ansar*, i.e. the *Partisans*. At first, the residents of Arabia, who were of the Jewish or Christian faith, remained in their particular religion, but their status as *Dhimmi*s required that they pay the Jizya tax in order to enjoy the “protection” of the Islamic *Umma*. However, before too long, all Christians and Jews were expelled from Arabia; but a Jewish minority continued to live in Yemen until recent times.

As the Islamic conquests gathered steam soon after the death of Muhammad in 632, all the conquered peoples of the Middle East, North Africa, and Andalusia (Spain) were treated according to the terms of the emerging Islamic *Shari’ah*. A *Dhimmi* had to pay the *Jizya*, as well as to submit to all the stringent requirements of *Dhimmitude*. This meant that his status was lower than that of Muslims. Another classification was made that proved to be detrimental to the unity of the growing empire. Non-Arab Muslims were called, *Mawalis*. Theoretically, they were considered on par with Arab Muslims, but not in practice. That created a tremendous resentment among them, and was a major factor in the violent downfall of the Umayyad Caliphate in 750.

Eventually, Muslim jurists divided the world into two segments: *Daru’l-Islam*, (the Household of Islam,) and *Daru’l-Harb*, (the Household of War.) The latter category included all the areas of the world that had not yet been conquered by Islam. It was legal to conquer such lands, and the means was war.

Up till about 1950, Muslims lived almost exclusively within their realms. So there was no question about what to do with the *Other*. Should they happen to be members of the *People of the Book*, i.e. Jews or Christians, they had the choice of embracing Islam or live under the regime of *Dhimmitude*. But if they were followers of a pagan religion, there was not much choice, they had to convert or else face persecution, and quite likely death. This happened in India over a long period of time.

The fact that Saudis are now discussing a new *modus vivendi* with the *Other*, indicates that a totally new situation in the history of Islam has surfaced. First, it was precipitated by the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia. This brought thousands of *Others* from Europe,

America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, to work on Saudi soil. Their presence is essential for the wellbeing of the Kingdom. Add to that, millions of Muslims from North Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Subcontinent rushed to work in Western Europe soon after the end of WWII. Such a totally new phenomenon for Islam has initiated some serious discussions among Saudi intellectuals, as they began to realize the full implications of the emerging globalized and inter-dependent world.

Thus far, I have sketched out the classical Islamic view of non-Muslims. I now return to quote from the article of 24 September 2005:

“The differences between the two groups did not consist only in their ages, or in the degree of their education. Their real differences consisted in their definitions of the ‘Other.’ Here it must be mentioned that the theme of dialogue initiative was ‘We and the ‘Other’: Toward a National Vision for Dealing with Western Cultures.’

*“The average age of the academicians, intellectuals, and businessmen and businesswomen who met at the main hall of the Meridian, ranged between the mid-thirties to the mid-forties. As far as they were concerned, the ‘Other’ may belong to various categories; he may be a Bedouin or a city dweller; a Sunni, or a Shi’ite, or a Kafir; a man or a women; a traditionalist or a secularist. In other words in their view, the term ‘Other’ should be understood **etymologically**. In that sense, it should not carry any baggage other than its literal meaning. At the conclusion of their meetings they arrived at several recommendations.*

*“In contrast, the ages of the students who participated in the learning sessions and who had come from Saudi secondary schools, ranged between sixteen and eighteen. They defined the **Other** as a **Kafir** or **Infidel**. For them, the term was not understood **etymologically, but culturally and religiously**. So, as far as they were concerned, the goal for learning the art of dialogue was restricted to **da’wa (calling)** i.e. inviting the ‘Other’ to embrace Islam, the true Pathway of Allah.*

The reporter for *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* emphasized the generational gap that separated the adult participants from the young people who felt no need for a nuanced definition of the **Other**.

*“The young adults arrived at this consensus: there was no reason at all to depart from the age-long outlook that had defined all non-Muslims, as **Others**. In other words, they saw life in terms of black and white. For example, an eighteen year old student from a school in Mecca who participated in the training sessions said: ‘the **Other** is anyone who differs from us in religion; so the purpose of our dialogue must simply be to ask him to embrace Islam. We should accomplish that*

through kind words coupled with an exposition of the principles of the Islamic Shari'ah.'"

The author of the report went on to explain:

*"The third preparatory meeting in Jeddah was related to the coming **Fifth National Dialogue Initiative** which was scheduled to take place at **Abha**, in the Province of **Asir**. As mentioned above, the students did not have the same outlook as the adults who participated in the discussions. Their differences may be the result of two contrasting milieus that surrounded their upbringings: the older generation having grown up within a conservative community. Now, some of them who may have studied or lived overseas would prefer to liberate themselves from the grip of the traditional restrictions that had governed relations with the **Other**. At the same time, the young generation who grew up in the space-age, and as a reaction to the allurements of modernity believes that the proper way to deal with the subject at hand is to return to the traditions of the past. It is this conviction which leads them to regard all **Others** as objects of **Da'wa**, i.e., the duty to invite them to embrace Islam. Unlike the adult intellectuals and business people who have to rub shoulders with many **Others**, both at home and abroad, these young adults are not the least interested in being accepted by those classified in the Shari'a as **Kafirs** or **Infidels**.*

The reporter ended his article by asking some crucial questions:

*"Is the next generation in Saudia to entertain the same thought pattern that surfaced among the young adults, namely that dialogue with the **Other** should take place only within the restrictions of the Shari'ah? In other words, dialogue for the young students always meant **Da'wa**. Is there any hope for the thoughts and deliberations of the adult conferees to be taken seriously in the future? For example, is there any room for a new classification of people that would place the **Akhar** in a neutral category, thus eliminating the stigma of **Kafir**? In other words, may we expect some changes in the status quo?"*

Thus far, I have allowed the reporter to share with us his musings. It is quite evident that two divergent points of view appeared in this report. One view is rather encouraging; as it indicates that some intellectuals and business people in Saudi Arabia are actually attempting to re-open the door of **Ijtihad**. They are suggesting the need for a new hermeneutic in the interpretation of the **Qur'an, Hadith, and the Shari'ah**. However, this door has been closed for around 500 years, and every attempt to re-open it since then, has eventually failed.

St Francis Magazine Nr. 1 Vol. III (June 2007)

With respect to the projected meeting at Abha, in Saudi Arabia, for the discussion of the *Other*, may we now entertain the hope for the resumption of *Ijtihad* in a milieu that has been dominated for decades by the radical *Wahhabi* school of interpreting the sacred texts? If we take seriously the conclusions of the young adults who participated in their own sessions, the outlook for any basic change vis-à-vis the “*Other*,” remains dim. I am afraid they represent a major section of Saudi public opinion. I may be wrong in this conclusion, but my study of past attempts at reforming Islam has convinced me that any real change is not on the horizon!

More than two years have passed since the meetings of the *National Dialogue Forum* took place. As I glance at the headlines of several Arabic-language online dailies, including *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, to my dismay, I find nothing more about the topic. Could it be that those who control the media and the intellectual life in Saudi Arabia have decided that it was too risky, at this time, to suggest a new definition of non-Muslims? Certainly the use of “*al-Akhar*” would have marked a move in the right direction for any genuine dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims in our globalized world.