

Was He Not a Human Soul?

The brutal manner in which the American reporter Daniel Pearl was killed is horrific enough.¹ It was even more repulsive to know that Mr Pearl was kidnapped, murdered, and mutilated simply because he was a Jew. As a Muslim who has been involved in fighting discrimination and hate directed at Muslims over the past few years, I thought I knew how destructive hate could be. But Mr Pearl's murder in 2002 brought home a chilling reality.

That "Muslims," ostensibly "fighting" for the liberation of their oppressed brethren, seeking to "embarrass" Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, would engage in such a barbaric act and murder a man simply because he was a Jew is an affront to Muslims everywhere, and is completely rejected by the very foundations of Islam. As for the bombing a few weeks earlier in Netanya, Israel—the murder of people who were engaged in worship, be it for Sunday service or Passover, is vile, and condemned in Islam. Muslims must denounce such acts in the strongest of terms.

Tariq Ramadan, a philosophy professor based in Switzerland, is one Muslim intellectual who has strongly criticized anti-Jewish sentiment among Muslims. Writing in *Le Monde*, he said: "Much like the situation across the Muslim world, there exists in France today a discourse which is anti-Semitic, seeking legitimacy in certain Islamic texts and support in the present situation in Palestine. This is the attitude of not only marginalized youth, but also of intellectuals and imams, who see the manipulative hand of the 'Jewish lobby' at each turn or every political setback . . . Nothing in

Islam can legitimize xenophobia or the rejection of a human being due to his/her religious creed or ethnicity. One must say unequivocally, with force, that anti-Semitism is unacceptable and indefensible. The message of Islam requires respect of Jewish faith and spirituality as noble expressions of ‘The People of the Book.’”

He continues; “Muhammad constantly taught respect for all human beings, with all their differences. One day, he stood up out of respect when he heard a funeral procession nearby. When told it was that of a Jew, he answered: ‘Was he not a human soul?’ It is the shared responsibility of Muslim intellectuals to articulate a comprehensive Islamic message that emphasizes personal responsibility and respect for others.”

Respect for others seems to be sorely lacking in parts of the Muslim world. Acts of terror and destruction by zealots is contemptible. Yet there is hope. In spite of her personal anguish, the words of Mr Pearl’s pregnant widow, Mariane, were inspiring: “Revenge would be easy, but it is far more valuable in my opinion to address this problem of terrorism with enough honesty to question our own responsibility as nations and as individuals for the rise of terrorism . . . [I hope] I will be able to tell our son that his father carried the flag to end terrorism, raising an unprecedented demand among people from all countries not for revenge but for the values we all share: love, compassion, friendship and citizenship, far transcending the so-called clash of civilizations.”

The universal values enunciated by Ms Pearl are richly entrenched in Islam. Muslims who live in the West are living proof that a society based on pluralism, social justice, and rule of law is not anathema to living the faith of Islam. Such social harmony was also successfully achieved during various periods of Islamic history.

We Muslims of the West have a duty to serve as examples to our co-religionists elsewhere. We must confront the binary

vision of “us” versus “them” with the reality of a prosperous civil society based on respect for oneself and others. We must counter xenophobia with the truth that we have found human kindness in our neighbours, friends, and co-workers of diverse backgrounds.

Excerpt from *Of Hockey and Hijab: Reflections of a Canadian Muslim Woman* by Sheema Khan
TSAR Publications 2009