

# Hypocrisy and Moral Schizophrenia

By

Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib

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## Introduction

It is strange how the human mind works. Perhaps it is well-known that man is created with a dual capacity – to do good and evil. It is this uniqueness that man is accorded with a status unlike other creations: “We have indeed created man in the best of moulds. Then do We abase him to be the lowest of the low...” (Q. 95:4-5) This dual propensity is unique to man. Yet, when one propensity cloaks upon the other, hypocrisy is produced.

Hypocrisy is, of course, not a new phenomenon. From the inception of Islam in Arabia in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE, Muslims had to grapple with the hypocrites (termed in the Qur’an as *munafiqun*), who threatened to dismantle the very foundations of society that the Prophet had tried to enact in Medina. But the nature of hypocrisy has evolved into a complex socio-psychological condition in today’s context. It has taken a new form, which is to be found in the abundance within the religious and the secular world. But it is the former that I am concerned about here. Hypocrisy within the religious community is as harmful, if not more, as those that occur in the secular world. It brings disrepute to our religious ideals and spirit. If left unchecked, religious hypocrisy may cause the abandonment of religion altogether in the future.

One of the most distinct forms of modern religious hypocrisy is a condition that is termed as *moral schizophrenia*. Perhaps, it will be useful if we begin our analysis with an illustrated example – which is my own personal experience that I encountered.

## An Initial Example: The Case of Suicide Bombing

Sometime back, I happen to be in a coffeeshop with a friend when news broke out that a dozen or so Israeli children were killed. Apparently, a Palestinian suicide bomber had blown himself up in a school bus. My friend jubilantly exclaimed that it served the Israelis right. When told that innocent school-going children were killed, my friend retorted that this is how justice works – Israeli soldiers kill Palestinian children, Palestinians kill Israeli children. I was not convinced. To my mind, this friend of mine has a warped sense of justice. But to him, the equation is simple enough to be understood. To him, this is what the Qur’an teaches – retributive justice; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.<sup>1</sup>

It upsets me that there was an absence of any ethical considerations in my friend’s argument. If Muslims are to live according to the ethical teachings of Islam, wherein lies the morality of killing innocent civilians?

## Moral Motives Versus Actions

My friend’s style of reasoning is not an isolated incident. Every now and then, we will witness inconsistent moral reasoning in various other issues. Examples are aplenty. It covers almost all area of discourses on Islam. Sometimes, it occurs not in the realm of thought, but in conduct and

actions. A Muslim man who attends public lectures and functions will be asked to sit separately from members of the opposite gender on the pretext of avoiding *fitnah* and sexual enticement. (Up till today, I am still puzzled as to how an Islamic lecture can trigger sexual fantasies in the mind of Muslims.) Yet, once he steps out of the auditorium or lecture hall, he mingles normally with members of the opposite gender and can even sit beside a lady, unperturbed, to engage her intellectually and with decorum.

Such phenomenon can be aptly termed as a clear case of *moral schizophrenia*. Schizophrenia, as we know it, is a medical term to indicate a condition in which a person develops contradictory or antagonistic attitudes within him. Usually, this disorder is characterized by loss of contact with the environment, deterioration in the level of functioning in everyday life and the disintegration of personality in the realm of feeling, thought and conducts. ***But in the context of a social analysis, it is a term used to describe a situation in which our moral motives are at odds with our physical actions.*** It represents a type of *bifurcated ethos* or *segmented thinking*.<sup>2</sup> As in the case of suicide bombing, the moral motive is to seek and enact justice to the perpetrators of cruelties. Yet, the return action of killing indiscriminately and targeting innocent civilians is an immoral and senseless act of violence – totally devoid of any moral content. Somehow, the moral motive is at variance with the (intended moral) act itself. It thus becomes a moral issue for us to analyze.

### Elements of Moral Schizophrenia

Let us take a closer look at some characteristics of moral schizophrenia.

***Firstly, a person who displays moral schizophrenia often practices double-standards – in actions and in thought.*** For example, we would readily condemn the American soldiers' treatment of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghayrib prison, but we were silent on Saddam Hussein's torture and treatment of his own Iraqis in the same prison when he was still in power. (I am not, of course, justifying nor supporting the American soldiers' inhumane actions.) Another example is in the realm of inter-faith dialogues. Often than not, whenever a non-Muslim quotes from the Qur'an to justify some distorted views (like call for violence and ill-treatment of women), we will quickly point to the need for one to understand the context of Revelation. We will then tell our non-Muslim friends that there is such a thing called exegesis and that one must follow the proper rules of interpretation. Yet, we ourselves do not impose the same standard when it comes to our methodology in understanding another faith or belief-system. Many Muslims would freely quote passages from the Bible, without any care for biblical exegetical rules, just to prove a point.

***Secondly, there is a tendency to double-talk.*** By double-talking, I mean commenting on the same issue in two diametrically opposite manner to two separate listeners. For example, I observed that in many inter-faith meetings, Muslims would reaffirm their commitment towards embracing plurality, accepting differences and working together to foster inter-religious understanding. But sadly, when these Muslims meet in an all-Muslim setting, the inherent difference and inferiority of the Other (vis-à-vis our superiority) is emphasized and reminded. In many situations, the Other is outrightly condemned to Hellfire. Thus, what is said in public meetings involving non-Muslims becomes a façade – often than not, a strategy of '*da'wab*' for the purposes of attracting non-Muslims to Islam. The so-called 'strategy' is, in fact, hypocrisy in action.

***Thirdly, a characteristic of moral schizophrenia is its inconsistent application of moral or ethical imperatives.*** Examples are again aplenty. In our religious discourse, there is an emphasis on the outer appearance or form, rather than the inner substance of a commandment. In other words, rituals are emphasized to the neglect of ethical values implicit within the act. If, for example, we

were to observe the discourse on *hijab*, discussions were focused on the type of *hijab* – whether it should be of a certain length, color or should a women’s face be exposed or not. Yet, very few discussions discussed on the notion of modesty and what constitutes modest dressing. How many Muslims will discuss on opulent dressing, which is a rather widespread phenomenon in our society? I am amazed that some *hijabs* can cost up to a few hundred dollars. I wonder if there is anything modest for a middle-income woman to walk in public and wearing such expensive piece of head-cover. Or, take a look at the discourse on food. Many Muslims are obsessed on the *halal* status of a food’s ingredients but say nothing of its nutritional values. When many fast-food outlets managed to acquire *halal* certificates, it was ‘proof’ that Islamic consciousness is thriving in our multi-cultural society. Yet, no one questioned the need of it for our community that had proven itself to be amongst the highest in diabetic and cholesterol indexes. *Halal* certifications become the sole criterion regardless of the cleanliness and nutritional values of a food.

**Fourthly, there is a clear indication of alienation.** Alienation is a condition where a person (or even whole society) is detached from current realities and unable to grasp life’s problems. An example of alienation can be found in the writing of a British convert of Zambian origin, Ahmed Thompson. In his popular book, *Dajjal: The King Who Has No Clothes* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1986), he condemned every modern system as *kufir* and controlled by the *Dajjal*. Significantly, despite the author’s condemnation of modern university system as “the apex of the *kaffir* educational conditioning system”, he managed to obtain a law degree in University of Exeter and a law diploma from City University of London – on top of residing in Britain itself. Such examples are rather common. There are many Muslim groups existing within the secularly governed Western nations and yet dishing out anti-West, anti-secular rhetoric. One such group is *Hiẓb ut-Tabrīr* who challenged the principles of democracy as *kufir* and yet existing within the democratic framework of British law.

### Salvaging the Situation

Having identified the problem of moral schizophrenia in our midst, it will be necessary to ask ourselves what can be done to alleviate the situation.

**First and foremost, it is pointless to adopt an apologetic front.** An apologetic front will only remove our attention towards addressing the real issue at hand. In other words, we must tackle the problem and not divert attention away from the problem. Many Muslims are contented to adopt a utopian mentality and not be grounded in reality. Books, tracts and flyers, and websites are dedicated to proving that Islam ensures women’s rights, Islam is not at variance with modern science, Islam promotes pursuit of knowledge etc. Yet, in reality, Muslim-majority countries are on the high-end of the poverty and illiteracy ladders. These do not include myriads of other significant problems like corruption, underdevelopment and violations of basic human rights.

To acknowledge that Muslims have problems (and this must not be confused with the unfair notion of ‘Muslims are a problematic group’), requires a sense of moral courage and integrity on our part. There must be, in sociological term, a sense of crisis within us. This sense of crisis carries within us three basic traits – courage to acknowledge a problem, ability to diagnose the problem and moral will to solve the problem.

**Secondly, we must eliminate a sense of in-group mentality.** In an in-group mentality, values are subjective and relative to individuals, depending on their allegiances. This mentality will breed two types of phenomena: (1) always wanting to find faults in an out-group but failing to see inconsistencies within our own group; and (2) always ready to condemn acts done by an out-group but justifying the same act that originates from our own group. In other words, justice is only for

our own kind and does not apply to others.<sup>3</sup> For example, while we criticize the demonization of Islam and the Muslims in Western-based media, we fail to criticize Muslims' own demonization of the Jews in our own literatures and discourses. Enter a local Muslim bookstore and you will find literatures devoted to 'prove' the evil propensity and conspiracies of the Jews.

**Thirdly, we must not put an overt emphasis on outward ritualistic appearances to the neglect of the ethical and moral dimensions within the act itself.** When we put an overt emphasis on *form*, we will encounter serious ethical conflicts in the realm of actions. A local university professor once observed a group of Muslims cursing puppies dying of thirst and hunger in campus simply because they consider dogs as impure creatures.<sup>4</sup> A similar situation was observed by Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl, a prominent Muslim jurist-intellectual in America, where a Muslim taxi driver refused to take in a blind passenger with a dog because he feared that the dog will 'dirty' his taxi.<sup>5</sup>

**Fourthly, there is a need to develop our own ethical consciousness.** Interpretations of religion and its meaning to our lives very often reflect our own orientation and worldviews. It is often only as moral as we are. As several scholars had pointed out, much of our religious laws had been stripped from its moral content – emphasizing and perfecting *practice*, not *appreciation*. In our community, for example, payment of *zakat*, is now seen as 'cleansing of one's wealth' rather than active social redistribution of wealth. Giving to charity is no longer about helping the needy; emphasis is put upon the rewards in the Hereafter. One local donation drive emphasized that each donation we make is akin to laying brick by brick our future castle in Paradise. Such rhetoric will only numb our moral and ethical consciousness. There is no longer an emotional attachment between the donor and the recipients' conditions. In other words, we give alms because we are required to under Islamic Law, not because there is a moral need for it.

If Islam is to play a major role towards progress and development in the modern world, then, let us confront the problem of moral schizophrenia in order to save the religion from ridicule and obscurity to the future generations.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, an unfair statement about the Qur'an. For a counter perspective on the so-called retributive justice as found in the Qur'an, see Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

<sup>2</sup> These two terms were used by Khaled Abou El Fadl in his book, *And God Knows the Soldiers: The Authoritative and Authoritarian in Islamic Discourses*. (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001)

<sup>3</sup> This is definitely against Qur'anic non-partisan notion of justice. See Q: 4:135.

<sup>4</sup> Shaharuddin Maaruf, "Negative Attitudes Towards Religion," in *One God, Many Paths: Essays on the Social Relevance of Religion in Malaysia*. (Kuala Lumpur: Aliran Publications, 1980)

<sup>5</sup> See Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Confession of the Books: The Search for Beauty in Islam*. (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001)