

Forum

Questions about Roger Scruton¹

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Roger Scruton, known for his good-natured conservatism and general attempts to defend traditional Western life, seems blind to the novelty of our globalized world as he conflates Islam with radical Islam and attacks Muslims as though all were Islamists. Genial style notwithstanding, his indictment of Islam and Muslims is inaccurate and his desire to deny Muslims the right to live as Muslims in their own or Western polities anything but good-natured. Alas, until Muslims become secular and agree to imbibe alcohol, Scruton will reject them as impossibly asocial.

He ignores that there are many faces of Islam varying in place and time as well as social milieu. That meshes with his devotion to viewing religious conviction through the lenses of bourgeois Western mores and deriding piety. Though appealing to populist sentiment, it does not rise to the standard of serious criticism or come near the scholarly obligation to give the arguments and the actions we oppose their strongest defense and then probe for what is weak.

Blatant errors abound in Scruton's article. Yes, Islamists or radical Muslims in Nigeria did argue that a woman who gave birth out of wedlock should be stoned for adultery. This capital penalty is prescribed in the Bible, the Qur'ān, and twenty-two states in the United States. But just as Jesus of Nazareth adroitly mitigated that penalty's application in his day, so

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do other polities today – Muslim and non-Muslim. Moreover, Muslim individuals and organizations around the world, as well as in Nigeria, protested this incident. Finally, Scruton passes over in silence that the punishment was never carried out.

Likewise, he wrongly confuses Islam with the Middle East when he berates Edward Said and Noam Chomsky, for being defenders of Islam and Muslims. To the contrary, their constant focus is upon the Palestinians and their cause. His remarks about Said and Chomsky, as about nationalism, ignore the reality that the issue is politics and political goals, not Islam or radical Islam.

Superficial reading also misleads Scruton. His explanation of the Qur’ānic verse 3:64 distorts the text. It does not command Jews and Christians “to take no divinity besides the one God and no lords from among each other” (Scruton, 36), but simply declares to “the people of the book,” that is, to Jews and Christians, what is central to Islam, namely, monotheism without priestly hierarchy. The verse urges Muhammad to speak as follows:

Say: O people of the book, come to a common terminology between us and you. We worship God alone and associate nothing with him; and we do not elevate any other than God as lords among us. If they turn away, then say: be witness that are Muslims.²

Let us not forget that the Qur’ān came explicitly to the Arabs, who had not received such a book. It consciously corrects opinions held among the people for whom it has been revealed, opinions having to do with God’s one-ness and His addressing humans through messengers who hold no elevated rank. Thus – while it opposes the Christian doctrine of Jesus being the son of God, the teaching about the trinity, and the opinion that some members of the faith are to be held in higher regard than others as prelates or priests over them – it does so for Muslims; and this verse is addressed only to Muslims. It offers no instructions or orders to Jews and Christians.

It is almost always misleading to quote Scripture as indicating why those committed to it act in particular ways. Those familiar with Hebrew Scripture know all too well that many verses harshly criticize the children of Israel. But such verses need to be understood in the context of the Tanakh, not cited gratuitously to score debating points. That said, Qur’ān 42:15 does speak directly to the issue of the relationship between Jews, Christians, and Muslims:

Therefore, call [to the faith] and stand solidly as you are commanded. Do not follow their desires, but say: I believe in the book that God has sent down; and I have been commanded to render justice among you.

God is our Lord and your Lord. [Responsibility for] our deeds is upon us, and for your deeds upon you. There is no contention between us and you. God will bring us together, and destiny is His.³

Another error prompted by superficial reading is Scruton's assertion (40) that Alfarabi sought "to recast Plato's Republic in Islamic terms, with the prophet as philosopher-king." Had this been Alfarabi's goal, he would hardly have deserved being called "second teacher" – second, that is, after Aristotle. Nor would such a clear thinker as Moses Maimonides have praised his thoughts as "finer than fine flour." Alfarabi, like many philosophers in his tradition was intent upon understanding prophecy – especially in fathoming what intellectual faculty allows prophets like Moses and Muhammad to bring forth laws. He was intent upon exploring the nature of rulership, not on forcing Greek philosophy into an Islamic template.

The cultural world we inhabit is not Judaeo-Christian, but Abrahamic. That was true in the days of Maimonides and is even more so today. Now, following upon colonialism and globalization, people of different cultural and religious traditions live together. They must seek a *modus vivendi* – one that does not force everyone else to be like us, but strives to understand others as they understand themselves and our own longings or aspirations as fully as possible. In this world, a bullying demand for conformity coupled with scorn for diversity will only prolong, and probably even intensify, the hostility we all wish to avoid.

Notes

- 1 Roger Scruton. "Islam and the West: Lines of Demarcation," *Azure: Ideas for the Jewish Nation* 35 (Winter 5769/2009): 33–49.
- 2 The translation is my own. The first "say" is a command in the second person singular, clearly directed to Muhammad. The second "say" is a command in the second person plural, addressed to the community of Muslims.
- 3 Again, the translation is my own. The verse is addressed to Muhammad and explains to him the proper attitude he – and, following his example, all Muslims – should take toward Jews and Christians.