

Yes!

North Carolina Senior Games 2008

Category: Literary Arts

Sub-Category: Essay

By Michael J. Watts

A stylized, cursive signature of Michael Watts in black ink, with a horizontal line through the middle of the letters.

Artist: **Michael Watts**

Title: **Yes!**

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Local Game: Johnston County Senior Games

Yes!

Occasionally my well-meaning friends forward to me E-mails to warn me about various dangers to my computer or to my general well being. Lately the theme seems to be the dangers of other people's religious beliefs. A recent message was entitled, "***Can a Muslim be a Good American?***" My answer must be a resounding "**Yes!**" I found the article's content to be overly simplistic, and I did not particularly agree with either the content or the writer's sentiments. Yet I really do want to be fair to people who, like the writer, hold such negative beliefs about Muslims, especially since I myself once held such views before taking the time to educate myself. I do not want to put down such persons with name-calling, or to make fun of them. I want to take seriously, not only their arguments, but also their honest feelings and religious beliefs. At the same time I cannot agree with them. And I believe that, ideally, the free and open sharing of views in the market place of ideas is the best way for people to arrive at the truth. In that spirit I offer here some of my observations with regard to the statements in my friend's E-mail:

"How and why do the Muslims hate us and everyone else so much?" Well, first of all, not "all" Muslims dislike or hate non-Muslims. I would venture to say that, in fact, most do not. But, unfortunately, some certainly appear to do so. And why might some Muslims dislike us? Perhaps those few do not like us because so many of us Americans of European heritage insist on disseminating negative stereotypes of Muslims by distributing uninformed articles like the one I am now reviewing. Perhaps also they do so because we so often treat Muslims with distrust, as if all Muslims were terrorists, or at least inferior, and not fellow human beings, with feelings and concerns just like the rest of us. Also, I think, some Muslims are somewhat offended by people of Christian heritage who live what Muslims would describe as materialistic or

immoral life styles, and they are offended by people who profess themselves to be Christians, but do not seem to take the tenets of their professed Christian faith very seriously.

“Doesn’t their God teach them to love?” Yes. Certainly. A Muslim friend has reminded me that continually in the *Qur’an* God is described as *“the All-Compassionate, the Most Merciful, the Peace and Blessing, the Guardian, the Utterly Just, the Ever Forgiving . . .”* And he says, “as Muslims we’re supposed to try to come as close to God as we can. This can be achieved by learning to be as ‘compassionate,’ and as ‘merciful’ as possible . . . Islam really asks all humans to imitate such characteristics of God.”

But **“Can a good Muslim be a good American?”** My answer again is **“Yes!”** Certainly they can, and they are. Muslims have been part of American culture since the founding of the Republic. Especially in the twentieth century, they have immigrated to this country, often fleeing oppressive and repressive governments, and they have assimilated into American culture, to the extent that it does not go against their personal faith beliefs. Likewise Jews, and Hindus, and Sikhs, and Buddhists, as well as Christians from all denominational traditions, and many, many others have come to this country and have assimilated in the very same way, while still holding fast to the tenets of their faith traditions. Muslim citizens participate in all aspects of American society, including holding political office and serving in military service.

“His allegiance is to Allah, the moon god of Arabia.” It is true that in the region in which Muhammad lived, worship of moon deities was once common. Indeed, moon-worship was a predominant form of religious belief for many centuries in the Middle East. Modern Biblical interpreters concluded many years ago that, long before our common spiritual ancestor Abram left Ur and Haran for Canaan, the patriarchal religion of the Hebrews was probably, in fact, some form of moon worship. Worship of the moon deity, *Sin*, was the predominant practice

in both Haran and in Ur. The Biblical record clearly suggests (Joshua 24:15) that Abram's leaving Haran for Canaan may indeed have been his break with that previous religion.

The *Qur'an* in many places is even more direct than the Bible in stating that Abram broke away from the idol-worship in which his forebears had participated. And the *Qur'an* also suggests that, indeed, people in the culture in which Muhammad was born had either departed from the worship of the one God, or had never recognized the one God. Perhaps before Muhammad's revelations, the word '*allah*' (= god) was once used to refer to a moon deity, but that certainly is not the way Muhammad came to use it, and Muslims never have used the term in that way. The *Qur'an* declares that Muhammad received Divine revelations that caused him to break from the worship of those moon deities. Muslims would thus deny vehemently that their religion has ever had anything to do with worship of a moon deity.

The very word '*allah*' in Arabic, like the related word '*el*' in Hebrew, simply means, god—any and every deity a person might worship. But as used in Islam, the term simply refers to the one and only God, the Creator of the Universe. In the view of Muslims, they are worshipping the very *same* one and only God that Jews and Christians also profess to worship. But Muslims, like Jews, do not, of course, accept the idea of a "Trinity," which, to them, suggests that Christians actually worship **three** gods.

"No other religion is accepted by Allah except Islam (Qur'an, Surah 2:256)."

Certainly, if a person believes that his or her religion is the only true one, as so many (but by no means all) adherents of most religious traditions do, then this is exactly what one might expect. But the writer fails to note that, in Islam, **all** who truly follow the one God, including Jews and Christians, who in the *Qur'an* are referred to as "People of the Book," are considered to be in a sense, "Muslims" also, because they "submit" or "entrust" themselves to the very same one and only God. (The word *Islam* means "submission" or even, "absolute personal trust," and thus is

akin to the Christian's "saving faith" or "belief."). Thus, Muslims do not classify Jews or Christians as "unbelievers," "disbelievers," or "pagans."

"His allegiance is to the five pillars of Islam and to the Qur'an." The writer is in error. The "Five Pillars" are the prescribed religious practices by which a Muslim expresses or illustrates his or her devotion to God, and not "beliefs" to which a Muslim gives "allegiance." Those practices include professions of faith in the one God of all, daily prayers, charitable giving to the poor, periodic fasting, and a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime if the believer is physically able to do so. *Shia* Muslims add additional "pillars," including calls to live a virtuous life, to refrain from vice and evil, and to encourage others to do the same. None of these practices should be objectionable to any adherent of any other faith. A Muslim's "allegiance" is to the one God, and not to a sacred Book, or to certain religious practices, just as the allegiance of a Christian or a Jew is, or should be, to the one God, and not to a sacred Book, or to certain religious practices.

"His allegiance is to Mecca, to which he turns in prayer . . ." Not so. A Muslim's prayers in the direction of Mecca express and illustrate his or her devotion to the one God, the Merciful and the Compassionate One. And this is no more unusual than the fact that Jews, for example, bury their dead facing Jerusalem, as indeed, in prior centuries, many Christians also did. A Muslim's allegiance is solely to the one God.

"His allegiance to Islam forbids him to make friends with Christians or Jews." Perhaps the writer has been so unfortunate as to have never become personally acquainted with a Muslim. I have been privileged to have many friends of other faiths, including Muslim friends, who readily socialize together with Christians and Jews. I have frequently participated in the activities of the Triangle Interfaith Alliance in Raleigh, where Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Bahais, and many other people associate in friendship, share potluck meals, enjoy music and art presentations, and work together in cooperative ventures like Habitat

for Humanity, to make our community a better place. Indeed, we often discuss in a friendly atmosphere our various religious and political concerns about what is taking place in our world, being fully aware of, and respectful of, our occasional differences of opinion. Occasionally I even receive Christmas cards from Muslim friends as well as Jewish ones. In the course of such associations my Muslim friends have become very dear to me.

“He must submit to the mullahs (spiritual leaders), who teach annihilation of Israel and destruction of America, the great Satan.” A Muslim is not bound in allegiance to any religious leader. A Muslim’s sole “submission” is to the One God of us all, the Compassionate and the Merciful One, and not to any religious leader. Unfortunately, some few Muslims, and some fewer Muslim leaders and teachers, against the teaching of the *Qur’an*, do sometimes preach violence and annihilation of Israel or America. But few of them reside in this country. The writer might find isolated instances of such views in some areas in America, but they would be rare.

“He is instructed to marry four women and to beat and scourge his wife when she disobeys him (Qur’an, Surah 4:34).” This *Qur’an* passage makes **no** mention at all of four wives, and Islamic teaching never asserts that God **compels** a man to have four wives. It is true that Muhammad did **allow** his followers to have a maximum of four, but only if they could support that many and treat them all with equal respect. It is true that Muhammad himself had multiple wives, and that some Muslims in other countries do. But multiple wives are not a common phenomenon in Islam anywhere in the world today, simply because most Muslim men cannot afford that many.

Muslim practice about “disciplining” wives sounds harsh in theory, if it is taken literally. But the *Qur’an*, like the Bible, is an historically conditioned book, closely tied to ancient cultural practices. (Of course, many of my Muslim friends would disagree with this.) Not everything in it can be applied literally in today’s world. I am sure there are some more “fundamentalist” Muslims who do put such ideas into practice literally, just as some more “fundamentalist” Christian men

take pretty literally the Bible's admonishments that wives should "submit" to their husbands. But there is no reason for us to assume that all Muslim men do those things, any more than there is reason to assume that all Christian men do. And the evidences are that the majority do not.

"He cannot accept the American Constitution since it is based on Biblical principles. . . ." The writer nowhere cites any proof that the American Constitution is based on "Biblical principles." And to which specific "principles" of the Bible is the writer referring? In fact, our Constitution never mentions the word God. It is true that the Declaration of Independence does refer to the Creator, but does **not** refer to the God of any specific religion, Christian or otherwise. Many of the most prominent "founding fathers" of our country held religious views that modern evangelicals would consider at best, "unorthodox," and at worst, "heretical" and repugnant. But our Constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief and practice to all, and prohibits any religious test for either citizenship or for holding public office. It is indeed, a wonderful document, that any Christian or Muslim can appreciate. But of course, the Constitution, like the Bible and the *Qur'an*, is not meant to be worshipped.

" . . . and he believes the Bible to be corrupt." It is true that the general view of Islam is that the Bible's "original" text was somehow "corrupted" over the centuries. Indeed, as one who has enjoyed the activity of translating Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek Biblical texts myself, I can testify that no two Biblical manuscripts are exactly alike. In addition to the task of translating the Biblical words in the originals, the translator has first the task of deciding just **which** words in **which** manuscript are the original ones, and thus, the ones that need to be translated. Devout scholars from every Christian tradition and from every spectrum from "fundamentalist" to "conservative" to "liberal" must face the same decisions—just **which** words are the originals belonging to the sacred text. The *Qur'an*, itself, however, also, in my humble opinion, and in the conclusions of many scholars, has a somewhat confused textual history. Unfortunately, devout

Muslims, for the most part, have been unwilling to admit this, at least publicly, and thus have deprived the world of needed Muslim scholarship in the area of *Qur'an* textual criticism.

“Islam, Muhammad, and the Qur'an do not allow freedom of religion and expression.” It is true that, in most Middle Eastern countries, Christians and Jews and Hindus and Buddhists and Bahais, etc., often are treated as second class citizens, but in most of those countries it is fully legal for non-Muslims to practice their religion, so long as they do not try to convert Muslims. Saudi Arabia is an unfortunate exception. However, the majority of Muslims today live outside the Middle East, and there are often fewer restrictions on persons of other faiths in places like Turkey, Bangladesh, and Indonesia (the most populous Muslim country), for example, than in the Middle East.

“The Christian’s God is loving and kind,” [implying that the Muslim’s “Allah” is not] . . . “Allah is never referred to as ‘heavenly Father,’ nor is he ever called ‘love’ [as in the Letters of John in the Christian New Testament] . . . ” Certainly Islamic culture and tradition are somewhat different from Christian culture and tradition. But they are not **so** very different. I don’t know that “Heavenly Father” is a traditional term in Judaism either. Does that mean we should throw potshots at Jews because their terminology is different from that of Christians?

The *Qur'an* does speak of the requirement that people love the one God, more than of the requirement that people love each other. But a typical Muslim is one who, having entrusted himself or herself to the God, desires to imitate the character of God. And God’s character is constantly proclaimed—“the Most Merciful One, the Most Compassionate One.” **That** is the character a good Muslim is expected to imitate.

Consistently in the *Qur'an* Muslims are urged to act justly in their relationships with others. Such justice is also a hallmark of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, in which God’s people are also commanded to love God, and to love each other (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18b). But

just as in the *Qur'an*, the exhortations in the Hebrew Bible to act justly toward others (e.g., Amos 5:14-15, 24; Micah 6:8; Isaiah 1:27; 5:16) are even more prominent than the commands to love others. In these emphases, both the Hebrew Bible and the *Qur'an* resemble more nearly the Letter of James in the New Testament, with its exhortation (James 1:22), "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only," rather than the Letters of John in the New Testament with their message to love others. Yet the differences between James and John are more differences of emphases rather than of substance, and the same, I believe holds true about the differences between the *Qur'an* and the Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible and the New Testament in this regard.

This situation sort of reminds me of the remark a Jewish friend made to me about the State of Israel. He said that Israelis have noticed that every year the US publishes a new "Love" postage stamp. He said that would be unlikely to happen in Israel. It is not that love is not important to Israelis. But rather it is that, unless the force of love is put into action and not just feeling, it seems to be a rather tame concept to them. He said that if Israel ever got around to having a postage stamp celebrating some virtue, it would not be the Hebrew word *'ahavah*, "love," but rather *tzedaqah*, "justice." Again, this is not so much a difference of real substance, but of emphasis. Muslims would agree with that sentiment entirely.

So, "**Can a good Muslim be a good American?**" Again, my answer must be a resounding "**Yes!**" I hope my words are not offensive to those who heretofore have agreed with the writer of the article. These words are certainly addressed in love. I have always said that there are two kinds of love in our world. There is, "I love you," and there is, "I love you anyway." The latter, I think, is the kind of love that God, the One God of Christians, Jews, and, yes, of Muslims, too, has for us sinful human beings. I think it is the best kind. It is with that attitude that I offer this response.