

Plea for a rational debate

For many Canadians, *shariah* signifies nothing more than a momentary flash in the continuous flow of news from the many sources they access daily.

For a week or two last September, there was a flutter of interest in whether Islamic Law might be applied in the arbitration of domestic disputes among Muslims in Canada. The matter was settled by the Ontario Liberals.

Or was it?

For Muslims, can the question of the establishment of the sacred law of Islam be settled by the decision of a humanly-elected government? Shahina Siddiqui wrote in a letter to Dalton McGuinty soon after the Ontario decision that Muslims would “continue to seek faith-based mediation and arbitration” whether their right to do so was recognized or not.

Siddiqui added, “In hindsight we can see that in post 9/11 era there will never be a rational debate about matters concerning Muslims or Islam—not with ‘secular’ Muslim groups and Islam-hating journalists and columnists and with Canadians in general leery, even scared to bits, about Shariah/Islam.”

In other words, nothing was settled. Siddiqui felt that prior to the decision no significant sharing of helpful information about shariah occurred among Canadians. Before a meaningful public discussion of the issues could begin, a political action shut it down.

Siddiqui’s disappointment also seems to relate to Canada’s schizophrenic approach to faith commitments. On the one hand there is an awkwardness in talking about matters of religious conviction. On the other hand is a forthrightness bordering on insult when the reigning wisdom of the day is contradicted by other truth claims.

Canadians seem skittish about discussing issues which arise from a particularist vision. The Muslim claim related to shariah, of course, is that Allah—the one God and Creator of the universe—sent down guidance for humanity through the Qur’an and especially through the words and actions of the prophet of Islam. Some are at a loss as to how to converse with what they consider an alien epistemology.

A second source of awkwardness is the fear that any definite statement about cultures and religions may be judged politically incorrect. Accusations like ‘racism,’ ‘intolerance’ or ‘arrogance’ have come to carry a stigma so damaging that for some they could mean a loss of employment. Even when statements about religions have nothing to do with these negative motivations, the accusation of an editor or letter-writer can make it appear so to readers unfamiliar with the issues. This scares away many who are qualified to make an intelligent contribution.

At the same time, if a religious conviction is seen to contradict society’s current plausibility structure, the gloves come off. If shariah is judged to work against the rights of women, for example, no condemnation is considered too harsh.

In either case, the overall effect is to shut down free public discourse.

What would Siddiqui’s ‘rational debate’ look like? It would mean taking time to consider the significance of shariah for Muslims. It would mean resisting the temptation to trivialize the issues due to impatience or disdain. It would need to combine an honesty about one’s own faith commitments with a respect for the partner in the dialogue.

Shariah in fact provides a great opportunity for Canadians to discuss an issue of practical importance in which religious conviction is involved. This series of columns will explore the roots of shariah to account for its worldwide appeal to Muslims. It will also face squarely some of the problems which shariah poses for non-Muslims. It will conclude with a reflection on how people can benefit from interaction with ideas from a religion not their own.