

*COURIER-JOURNAL, JULY 2, 2017*

## **Is “Compassion” the go-to “Safeword” for Muslims?**

On April 20, 2017, the Louisville Islamic Center (LIC) - the oldest mosque in Louisville - was “renamed” the Louisville Islamic Center of Compassion, with Karen Armstrong performing the ribbon-cutting ceremony. I had opposed this act (Letter to *Courier-Journal*, April 19, 2017) on Islamic theological grounds which could only be mentioned briefly due to space limitation. Considering the profound importance of this matter to Muslims who constitute 1.6 billion inhabitants of the earth, I am writing this Op-Ed piece to elucidate my perspective as a Muslim American who has spent more than four decades in teaching Islamic Studies and has also engaged extensively in bridge-building between Muslims and other Americans in the post 9/11 era.

Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, is grounded in belief in God. Muslims hold the Qur’an to be God’s Word and the highest source of authority in Islam. Every chapter of the Qur’an (except 9) begins with the invocation “In the Name of God, the Infinitely Merciful, Infinitely Compassionate.” This invocation is repeated by Muslims as they engage in their everyday activities such as the five daily prayers, partaking of meals, or other significant actions.

God has many Names – Sufis often refer to 99 of them - but God’s most beloved Names “*Rahman*” and “*Raheem*” (both from the root-word “*Rahm*” meaning “womb”) refer to Compassion in the highest degree. In two remarkable verses (Chapter 6: 12, 54), the Qur’an has proclaimed that “God has willed upon Himself the law of Mercy and Compassion.” This expression is not used in the Qur’an with reference to any other divine attribute according to the eminent translator and exegete of the Qur’an Muhammad Asad. The exceptional quality of God’s Mercy and Compassion is further stressed in Chapter 7: 156 in which it is stated that God’s Compassion overspreads everything; also in Prophet Muhammad’s well-known oral tradition that God’s Compassion outstrips His Wrath.

The theme of God’s Mercy and Compassion which is universal and without boundaries is one of the grandest themes of the Qur’an reiterated in many verses. The overwhelming majority of Muslims in the world believe that Mercy and Compassion are the essence of God and, therefore, of Islam embodied in every “Islamic” institution. Adding the words “of Compassion” to the name of LIC is, therefore, theologically redundant. It is also religiously offensive to Muslims since it implies that an Islamic Center which does not explicitly mention “Compassion” in its name lacks an attribute that lies at the core of their religion.

In her remarks on the “renaming” of the LIC, Karen Armstrong pointed out that the Qur’an was a reminder that Islam “was about Compassion, always.” However, in her view, since Muslims were going through a difficult time when “some people” thought “that Muslims are all terrorists,” the new name of the LIC “will be a beacon to people as they will drive past this sign.” I have known Karen Armstrong for many years and have co-presented with her on a number of

international panels. I have high regard for her as an historian of religion and as the originator of the Charter of Compassion which has had global impact. But I was deeply disappointed that she did not see the deeper implications of what she supported.

Certainly Islamophobia, like other forms of religious bigotry and racism, needs to be addressed. But should this not be done by educating non-Muslims about the normative teachings and practices of Islam rather than by requiring that Muslims adopt names that violate the substance and dignity of their faith? The “re-naming” of LIC was in actuality a “re-branding” - it was essentially an act of defensiveness, and history shows us countless examples of what happens when besieged minorities are forced down the downward slide of apologetic behavior.

As I see it, what was wrong with the “re-branding” of the LIC as the Center of Compassion is precisely what needs to be redressed in the US at this time when so many minority groups feel that they have no choice except to use “safewords” in order to protect themselves from discrimination or harm. In the aftermath of the LIC “re-branding” I have heard many young Muslims lament that now they will have to go around declaring that they are “Compassionate Muslims” rather than “regular Muslims” so that they are not labelled as terrorists.

“*Shura*” or mutual consultation is theologically essential in all matters that affect the common good of Muslims. However, the nine Muslims who currently constitute the LIC’s Board of Directors decided to ignore it and did not even elicit the opinion of the Center’s subscribing members - of whom I am one - about taking an action that was likely to have profoundly negative ramifications for local Muslims, including the other twenty-four Islamic Centers in Louisville. This makes their action all the more unacceptable in the light of principles that are fundamental to Islam as well as American democracy.