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Losing My Jihadism

By Mansour al-Nogaidan

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BURAIDAH, Saudi Arabia Islam needs a Reformation. It needs someone with the courage of Martin Luther.

This is the belief I've arrived at after a long and painful spiritual journey. It's not a popular conviction -- it has attracted angry criticism, including death threats, from many sides. But it was reinforced by Sept. 11, 2001, and in the years since, I've only become more convinced that it is critical to Islam's future.

Muslims are too rigid in our adherence to old, literal interpretations of the Koran. It's time for many verses -- especially those having to do with relations between Islam and other religions -- to be reinterpreted in favor of a more modern Islam. It's time to accept that God loves the faithful of all religions. It's time for Muslims to question our leaders and their strict teachings, to reach our own understanding of the prophet's words and to call for a bold renewal of our faith as a faith of goodwill, of peace and of light.

I didn't always think this way. Once, I was one of the extremists who clung to literal interpretations of Islam and tried to force them on others. I was a jihadist.

I grew up in Saudi Arabia. When I was 16, I found myself assailed by doubts about the existence of God. I prayed to God to give me the strength to overcome them. I made a deal with Him: I would give up everything, devote myself to Him and live the way the prophet Muhammad and his companions had lived 1,400 years ago if He would rid me of my doubts.

I joined a hard-line Salafi group. I abandoned modern life and lived in a mud hut, apart from my family. Viewing modern education as corrupt and immoral, I joined a circle of scholars who taught the Islamic sciences in the classical way, just as they had been taught 1,200 years ago. My involvement with this group led me to violence, and landed me in prison. In 1991, I took part in firebombing video stores in Riyadh and a women's center in my home town of Buraidah, seeing them as symbols of sin in a society that was marching rapidly toward modernization.

Yet all the while, my doubts remained. Was the Koran really the word of God? Had it really been revealed to Muhammad, or did he create it himself? But I never shared these doubts with anyone, because doubting Islam or the prophet is not tolerated in the Muslim society of my country.

By the time I turned 26, much of the turmoil in me had abated, and I made my peace with God. At the same time, my eyes were opened to the hypocrisy of so many who held themselves out as Muslim role models. I saw Islamic judges ignoring the marks of torture borne by my prison comrades. I learned of Islamic teachers who molested their students. I heard devout Muslims who never missed the five daily prayers lying with ease to people who did not share their extremist beliefs.

In 1999, when I was working as an imam at a Riyadh mosque, I happened upon two books that had a profound influence on me. One, written by a Palestinian scholar, was about the struggle between those who deal pragmatically with the Koran and those who take it and the hadith literally. The other was a book by a Moroccan philosopher about the formation of the Arab Muslim way of thinking.

The books inspired me to write an article for a Saudi newspaper arguing that Muslims have the right to question and criticize our religious leaders and not to take everything they tell us for granted. We owe it to ourselves, I wrote, to think pragmatically if our religion is to survive and thrive.

That article landed me in the center of a storm. Some men in my mosque refused to greet me. Others would no longer pray behind me. Under this pressure, I left the mosque.

I moved to the southern city of Abha, where I took a job as a writer and editor with a newly established newspaper. I went back to leading prayers at the paper's small mosque and to writing about my evolving philosophy. After I wrote articles stressing our right as Muslims to question our Saudi clerics and their interpretations and to come up with our own, officials from the kingdom's powerful religious establishment complained, and I was banned from writing.

The attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, gave new life to what I had been saying. I went back to criticizing the rote manner in which we Muslims are fed our religion. I criticized al-Qaeda's school of thought, which considers everyone who isn't a Salafi Muslim the enemy. I pointed to examples from Islamic history that stressed the need to get along with other religions. I tried to give a new interpretation to the verses that call for enmity between Muslims and Christians and Jews. I wrote that they do not apply to us today and that Islam calls for friendship among all faiths.

I lost a lot of friends after that. My old companions from the jihad felt obliged to declare themselves either with me or against me. Some preferred to cut their links to me silently, but others fought me publicly, issuing statements filled with curses and lies. Once again, the paper came under great pressure to ban my writing. And I became a favorite target on the Internet, where my writings were lambasted and labeled blasphemous.

Eventually I was fired. But by then, I had started to develop a different relationship with God. I felt that He was moving me toward another kind of belief, where all that matters is that we pray to God from the heart. I continued to pray, but I started to avoid the verses that contain violence or enmity and only used the ones that speak of God's mercy and grace and greatness. I remembered an incident in the Koran when the prophet told a Bedouin who did not know how to pray to let go of the verses and

get closer to God by repeating, "God is good, God is great." Don't sweat the details, the prophet said.

I felt at peace, and no longer doubted His existence.

In December 2002, in a Web site interview, I criticized al-Qaeda and declared that some of the Friday sermons were loathsome because of their attacks against non-Muslims. Within days, a fatwa was posted online, calling me an infidel and saying that I should be killed. Once again, I felt despair at the ways of the Muslim world. Two years later, I told al-Arabiya television that I thought God loves all faithful people of different religions. That earned me a fatwa from the mufti of Saudi Arabia declaring my infidelity.

But one evening not long after that, I heard a radio broadcast of the verse of light. Even though I had memorized the Koran at 15, I felt as though I was hearing this verse for the first time. God is light, it says, the universe is illuminated by His light. I felt the verse was speaking directly to me, sending me a message. This God of light, I thought, how could He be against any human? The God of light would not be happy to see people suffer, even if they had sinned and made mistakes along the way.

I had found my Islam. And I believe that others can find it, too. But first we need a Reformation similar to the Protestant Reformation that Martin Luther led against the Roman Catholic Church.

In the late 14th century, Islam had its own sort of Martin Luther. Ibn Taymiyya was an Islamic scholar from a hard-line Salafi sect who went through a spiritual crisis and came to believe that in time, God would close the gates of hell and grant all humans, regardless of their religion, entry to his everlasting paradise. Unlike Luther, however, Ibn Taymiyya never openly declared this revolutionary belief; he shared it only with a small, trusted circle of students.

Nevertheless, I find myself inspired by Luther's courageous uprising. I see what Islam needs -- a strong, charismatic personality who will lead us toward reform, and scholars who can convince Islamic communities of the need for a bold new interpretation of Islamic texts, to reconcile us with the wider world.

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