

Moroccan Islam:

A Unique and Welcome Spirit of Moderation and Tolerance

Professor Kenneth Honerkamp
Fr. Michael D. Calabria

Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service
Georgetown University



Center for
**Contemporary
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مركز الدراسات العربية المعاصرة



MOROCCAN ISLAM –

A Unique and Welcome Spirit of Moderation and Tolerance

O people! We created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware.

The Holy Qur'an (al-Hujurat 49.13)

INTRODUCTION:

EMBRACING RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

By Fr. Michael D. Calabria

From its inception in seventh-century Arabia, Islam has fostered belief in God (Allah) expressed in lives of devotion, righteousness, and justice. What began as a small movement among the Arabs of Mecca within a few decades of the Prophet Muhammad's death (632 CE) over time attracted adherents from the Straits of Gibraltar in the West to the Indus Valley in the East: a community of believers that included Arabs, Egyptians, Persians, Berbers, sub-Saharan Africans, and Turks. Islam spread into a world populated by Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Hindus, as well as Buddhists and Jains. Human diversity was not, according to the Qur'an, an aberration, but was intrinsic to God's creation. One's value in God's eyes was not determined by the nation or community with which one identified but by the quality of one's relationship with God and neighbor:

Surely those who believe (in the Qur'an), and those who are Jews and the Christians and the Sabians, and who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord: on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (*al-Baqara 2.62*)

Muslims were to be a "middle" or balanced community (*al-Baqara 2.143*) who did not force their religion on others, for as the Qur'an states "there is no compulsion in religion" (*al-Baqara 2.256*), but were to give witness to others by the example of their faith. From an early date, Muslim scholars took seriously the Qur'anic verse which says that God taught humanity by the pen (*al-'Alaq 96.4*), producing lengthy commentaries on the Qur'an which served not to eliminate diverse interpretations of the text but to document the range of opinions in order to arrive at the most authentic understanding.

Muslims were to secure religious freedom not only for themselves but especially for Jews and Christians, the so-called *ahl al-kitāb* (People of the Book) (*al-'Imran 3.64*) with whom Muslims shared a common

ancestor in Abraham. This was exemplified by Muslim rule in Jerusalem where Jews and Christians were permitted to worship in their holy places alongside those of Muslims. In the Muslim capitals of Damascus and Cairo, Jews and Christians served Muslim rulers in important administrative positions, and Christian architects and artisans worked alongside their Muslim co-workers in the construction of mosques.

Beginning in the eighth century, the Umayyad rulers of the Iberian peninsula created a society characterized by *convivencia* in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims worked together in common artistic and intellectual pursuits, most notably the translation of Greek philosophical and medical texts into Arabic, scholarship that would later serve as a catalyst for the European Renaissance. (One might also point out that the contemporary ‘Abbasid caliphs also employed Christian translators of Greek texts, following the establishment of Baghdad as their capital.) In subsequent centuries, when Spain fell to Christian rulers Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon, Jews were expelled from the kingdom and fled to Muslim realms in North Africa where their communities flourished until the mid-twentieth century.

Today, this spirit of Islam which embraces cultural and religious diversity remains a vibrant part of Moroccan culture and society.*

THE MOROCCAN CULTURAL HERITAGE

By Dr. Kenneth L. Honerkamp

The policy for which we have opted in Morocco consists in consolidating a democratic approach allowing for the modern management of the affairs of the Moroccan people in a way that is fully consistent with the teachings of our glorious religion.

His Majesty Muhammad VI, First International [Sufi] Conference on Sidi Chikr, Marrakesh, September 10, 2004

For more than 1400 years, Moroccan culture has exemplified its commitment to moderation through a pragmatic yet spiritual path within its Islamic religion. Morocco’s unique spirit of tolerance is rooted in its historical heritage, authentic values, and principles of open-mindedness and concord, and cultural enrichment through the mutual exchange among individuals, communities, and civilizations.

These values are richly attested to in what has become perhaps the best known Islamic text in Morocco after the Qur’an; the 700-year-old *al-Murshid al-mu‘īn* (The Guiding Helper) by ‘Abd ul-Wahid ibn ‘Āshir (d. 1631). This didactic poem of 317 verses deals with the jurisprudence (*fiqh*) of Imām Mālik (d. 795), the theological doctrine (*‘aqīdah*) of Imām al-Ash‘arī (d. 938), and the Sufism (*tasawwuf*) of Imām al-Junayd (d. 910). In Morocco, *Murshid al-mu‘īn* is memorized by children and among the Sufi orders to ensure that each Moroccan possesses a minimum of religious knowledge and sense of duty. Diffusing this essential knowledge ensures that religious knowledge will not, on the one hand, be compartmentalized among a religious elite, or that one facet of religious experience does not dominate the others.

To understand Morocco’s commitment to tolerance, it is useful to examine these key facets of Moroccan Islam.

THE SCHOOL OF JURISPRUDENCE OF MĀLIKĪ MADHAB

Let us first examine the tolerance demonstrated between the various juristic schools (*maddhabs*) of Sunni Islam. Tim Winters of Oxford University considers that one of Islam's greatest achievements over the past millennium has been its internal intellectual cohesion. He maintains that from the eleventh century almost to the present day, in spite of the clash of dynasties, over time Sunni Muslims cultivated an attitude of religious respect and brotherhood among themselves.

Dr. Muhammad Tawil of the Qarawiyyin University of Fes, Morocco ascribed this social and devotional unity in Morocco to the influence of the school of jurisprudence known as the Mālikī *madhhab*. He said, "They used it to settle their disputes, unify their voices, secure their nation, and protect themselves from dispersion and disagreement due to the particular qualities by which it is distinguished." He goes on to argue that the Mālikī *madhhab* was the most accommodating school of jurisprudence, due to its inclusive nature (although some scholars would broaden that claim to include others). This inclusiveness, Dr. Tawil believes, is founded upon its breadth in both the area of legal theory (*usūl al-fiqh*) and in the area of legislation (*fiqh*).

Dr. Tawil characterized the Mālikī *madhhab* by the abundance of its legal sources represented in the Qur'an, the custom of Muhammad (Sunna), consensus of the scholars (*ijma'*), legal analogy (*qiyās*), unspecified interests (*al-masālih al-mursala*), and others. The diversity of these legal sources and their broad applicability has assured that Moroccan scholars of the law continue to respond to issues as they arise with scholarly review and legal extrapolation. According to Dr. Tawil, the Mālikī *madhhab* is characterized by the absence of strictures that lend it an openness that permits it to evolve and renew itself in an atmosphere of resilience, liberality, and facility, with moderation and temperance, and within a logical and rational nature. The Mālikī *madhhab* also categorically rejects ascribing unbelief (*takfīr*) to a Muslim because of a sin committed or because of heresy. Dr. Tawil asserts from the Mālikī perspective that there is no obligation to enjoin the good and forbid evil in matters in which there is disagreement. It also guards against factional and sectarian strife. This, according to Dr. Tawil, is an important source of what makes the Moroccan faith community a tolerant and open community that allows for opposition from those who hold opposing views. This openness is enshrined in Morocco's Constitution.

This characteristic tolerance is also rooted in the Mālikī school's adherence to the creed of Imām al-Ashcārī, followed in Morocco for centuries. This is the most inclusive of the creeds as it defines the Muslim community as all those that pray in the direction of Mecca (*ahl al-qibla*). Among its key precepts is that it also categorically rejects ascribing unbelief (*takfīr*) to any of the *ahl al-qibla* because of a sin committed or because of heresy—a far cry from the practice of jihadists today.

Moroccans who are guided by this perspective realize that unity is not uniformity, and that diversity of opinion is an essential aspect of human nature fully incorporated within the framework of traditional Islam. By learning and adhering to the consensual core tenets of the creed of al-Ashcārī, Moroccans have long been able to distinguish between the core of Islam and casual differences that have led to strife and religious discord in the Middle East.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUFISM OF AL-JUNAYD

Sufism has from the earliest times established its teachings upon correct comportment or manners (*adab*) and ethical behavior (*akhlāq*). Al-Junayd, mentioned in the *al-Murshid al-muʿīn*, was renowned as the Master of the Folk of the Sufi Path, and portrayed Sufism as a process of purification that he likened to a journey. This focus on ethical conduct as the guiding principle behind Sufi pedagogic methodology has always resonated within the Moroccan context. Moroccan Sufism today continues to foster the values of tolerance, solidarity, and selflessness, and it discourages placing oneself above others.

Another facet of Moroccan Islam that is unique to the nation is that Moroccan scholars are committed to both the study of the Law and Sufism. They understand the two to be complementary to each other and not in conflict with one another. This has not been the case in the Muslim lands of the Middle East. Perhaps for this reason more than any other, Morocco is known throughout the Muslim world as the home of respect for and scholarship in the law while maintaining a broad and harmonious perspective on Sufi principles.

MOROCCAN ISLAM TODAY

In addition to fostering intra-faith tolerance and cooperation between jurists and Sufis, Morocco is heir to the multi-faith traditions of Andalusia, in which Muslims, Christians, and Jews participated in a vibrant intellectual discourse on the multi-faceted themes of their faith traditions. King Muhammad VI, who ascended to the throne in 1999, recognizes the importance of fostering dialogue and cooperation between peoples of these three faiths. He has made this an important part of his national policy and vision, thereby strengthening the reputation of the monarchy as a fair and just government.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs is also active in educational programs for women. In fact, Morocco is a pioneer in training women as spiritual counselors working in mosques and communities. It also updates and revises the country's curriculum for religious instruction and facilitates the publishing of Islamic scholarship. King Muhammad regularly hosts international conferences on Mālikī jurisprudence and Ashʿarī theology, and the proceedings are televised broadly, reaching Muslims worldwide.

The King is also a tireless supporter of Sufism, and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs maintains Sufi shrines and *zāwiyyas* (primary schools). The King also has sponsored conferences dealing with the lives and teachings of stellar Sufi personalities who exemplified Moroccan spiritual ideals over the centuries. At the opening address to the First International Conference on Sidi Chiker in 2004, Muhammad VI said, "What has distinguished Moroccan Sufi scholars from others is their propensity to give priority to social, educational, and moral aspects of society. They have sought in particular to teach the Holy Qur'an and spread its precepts through an approach that addresses the hearts of believers and enhances their trust in the Almighty's mercy, for His mercy is boundless."

The best known of the King's efforts to demonstrate the relevance of Moroccan Islam is what are known as the Hassaniyya Lectures (*Durūs al-Hassaniyya*) that take place during the month of Ramadan. International Muslim scholars (men and women) present lectures on timely topics, all drawn from Qur'anic and Prophetic sources. These lectures are televised nationally and internationally. A major outcome of these events is the dialogue and exchange of ideas among scholars.

Among the most important impacts of the Hassaniyya Lectures is the influence they exert on Sub-Saharan African expressions of Islam. A scholar from Nigeria commenting about Islam in his country said, “The Moroccans are our spiritual masters (*shuyūkh*), our Islam came from them, we follow the jurisprudence of Mālik and the theology of Ash‘arī, we read the Qur’an in the Warsh recitation [a method attributed to ‘Abd Allāh al-Qurashī al-Misrī al-Qayrawānī (d. 812)], and we follow the Moroccan Sufi master Sidi Ahmed Tijani (d. 1815).” This relationship with sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates the influence of Moroccan Islam beyond the nation’s borders.

Another particular facet of Moroccan Islam that supports the nation’s awareness and respect for a diverse Islamic perspective is the veneration of the members of the family of the Prophet Muhammad (*al-shurafā’*). The present dynasty traces its roots back to the family of Muhammad through the saintly figure of Mawlāy ‘Alī Sharīf (d. 1659). However, there are multiple lines claiming lineage to the Prophet; some point to the founder of the original dynasty of Morocco, Idrīs ibn ‘Abdallāh (d. 791), while others trace their line back to perhaps the best known of Moroccan holy men, Mulay Abd al-Salam ibn Mashīs (d. 791). These figures were venerated because their legacies have helped to preserve over the centuries cultural ideals and ethical values that distinguish Moroccan society from other traditional Islamic societies. The three distinctive facets of Moroccan Islam discussed above constitute an integral part of the daily life of the Moroccan people without impinging on a political process, another particular characteristic of Moroccan Islam.

THE STRATEGIC BENEFITS OF SUPPORTING MOROCCO’S UNIQUE CULTURAL ETHOS

It is evident from this brief essay that Morocco’s cultural values, its deeply held religious practices, and its continued support for moderate discourse has helped to create a hospitable environment for greater understanding and comity, especially in these troubled times of transition. The United States has much to gain from encouraging Moroccans to persevere in their efforts to promote tolerance and amity within the region and beyond. Specific ways in which the U.S. could help strengthen such commitments include the following:

- Include Morocco as a partner with Turkey as a major anchor country in the Global Fund for Community Engagement and Resilience in the Sahel region of Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Encourage exchanges among faculties and professors from Morocco and the U.S. with the purpose of initiating projects that broaden understanding and scholarship across disciplines.
- Encourage the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to extend its efforts of publication and distribution of the many valuable scholarly works it publishes.
- Increase student exchanges at all levels (but particularly among graduate and Fulbright scholars) to improve academic programs and generate more options for learning.
- Sponsor annual conferences, held alternately in the US and Morocco, to review papers and research that supports the values of moderation and tolerance.
- Award competitions among US and Moroccan graduate students and academics on scholarly papers on relevant topics.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kenneth L. Honerkamp

Professor of Arabic, Islamic texts, Shar'iah (Islamic Law), North African Sufism

Kenneth Honerkamp is a graduate of the Quarawiyyin University of Morocco, the University of Georgia, and the University of Aix-en-Provence, France, and has worked extensively in the manuscript libraries of Morocco. He does research in the fields of Islamic Law and the integral relationship of *sharī'a* and Islamic mysticism, or Sufism. He has edited and translated several previously unpublished works of Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 412/1021). His critical edition of the *Rasā'il al-kubrā* of Ibn Abbad of Ronda (d. 792/1390) is being published by Dar al-Mashriq in Lebanon. He presently holds the position of associate professor in the Department of Religion at the University of Georgia at Athens.

Professor Honerkamp studied with scholars of Islamic Law, Qur'an commentary, and Arabic grammar in the northwest frontier of Pakistan. Along with his years in Morocco as a student and then a professor at the Faculty of Arabic Letters, his years of residency in the Muslim world have afforded him an understanding of Islamic faith and practice within the context of daily life. Professor Honerkamp continues to conduct the 'Maymester in Morocco Program' with UGA students in Marrakesh, Fes, and Rabat.

Rev. Michael Calabria, OFM

Chaplain-in-Residence, Georgetown University

Rev. Michael Calabria, OFM is a Franciscan friar of Holy Name Province. He has degrees in Near Eastern Studies (B.A., John Hopkins), Egyptology (M.A., Brown), Library Science (MLS, Columbia) and Divinity and Theology (M.Div./M.A., Washington Theological Union). After ordination he taught Arabic and Islamic Studies at St. Bonaventure University from 2003 to 2012, and is currently pursuing his doctorate in Arab and Islamic Studies with the University of Exeter, U.K.

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Center for
**Contemporary
Arab Studies**

Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service
Georgetown University
241 Intercultural Center
37th and O Streets N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20057

202-687-5793
<http://ccas.georgetown.edu>