

## Secularist seeks clarity on sharia law

By Goldwin Emerson

[gandiemerson@rogers.com](mailto:gandiemerson@rogers.com)

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In the early days of the seventh century, laws and punishments were much harsher than they are today. Crucifixion, burning at the stake, flogging, dismemberment, and other forms of torture were accepted practice in many parts of the world. Sometimes, these punishments were ordered by kings' courts, by slave owners, by religious courts, or by groups or individuals who had sufficient power over those upon whom they could exercise their control.

It was in this period of history that the prophet Mohammed was establishing the beginnings of the Muslim religion. In order to guide adherents in the correct path, sharia law was established and came into use in Muslim religion. For Muslims, correct morality is based upon the commandments of Allah. Today, Muslims still look to sharia law as the correct path to follow. Some Muslims adhere more closely to the harsher version, or the 9<sup>th</sup> century Hanbali interpretation, of the original codes. The Hanafi version of sharia law is more liberal and incorporates, or at least allows, more gentle interpretations consistent with morality practiced in modern developed countries.

In its harshest form, sharia law applies to many aspects of one's personal life and can include punishments such as stoning to death for adultery, or for de-conversion from Muslim faith. The death penalty also includes non-traditional interpretations of the Qur'an. Other severe punishments consist of amputation of hands or feet, imprisonment or flogging. While these punishments seem horrible to many of us today, they were consistent with the punishments by both Muslims and non-Muslims of the early 7<sup>th</sup> century.

In present times, it is generally the case that the strictest forms of sharia law apply in countries where Muslim populations are predominant. These include Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria and to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia, although there are exceptions to this general rule. Strict dress codes for women frequently apply in Muslim countries, although often these dress codes are a matter of cultural expectations rather than requirements set out in sharia law.

Sharia law seems foreign to my own understanding of the manner in which many citizens in the Western world presently think about fair and just laws. As a secular thinker, sharia law codes seem harsh. Strict religious dogma seems to be out of touch with mercy, kindness, love and compassion that one hopes to find in modern religious thought.

While I hold a secular point of view, I have friends from many religions, including Muslims, with whom I have courteous and respectful conversations. I know from personal experience how frustrating it can be to have people from other religions criticizing my secular humanistic beliefs when I don't feel they really understand how or what I think. I regret hearing from critics who believe that secular humanists cannot be moral or ethical. I know how it feels to be characterized as someone who, by virtue of my beliefs, is thought incapable of comprehending or caring about ethical concerns. So I offer a sincere invitation from those who understand sharia law to help me understand where I am mistaken in my concepts. I admit to having limited knowledge of how sharia law can fit into modern democratic thinking. As usual, I welcome your comments and corrections when they are offered in a respectful manner. I am not asking here for long quotations from the Qur'an. Rather, I look for explanations in simple everyday language. How can sharia law fit well with the patterns of everyday living in the Western world's modernized democratic concepts. Much of Western values that are important to Western world thought are as follows:

- Freedom of speech.
- Equality for women and men in work and in matters of law.
- Free and fair democratic elections.
- Equality of education for both females and males.
- Freedom of choice in religion.
- Marriage and divorce laws protecting the interests of both women and men.
- Freedom of information required to vote in an informed manner.
- Fair and just treatment in courts of law regardless of one's religious preferences.

These are the ideas I value in the Western world. Should I feel threatened by sharia law?