

## ***“We should all be striving for the same things”***

Whig Column

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All of us select certain historical events and individuals to buttress our current arguments. I want to add to public knowledge the lesser known movement of reforms – the tanzimat - and tell you about the Grand Vizier of Ottoman Empire - Khayr al Deen of Tunisia.

During the 1800s as the Ottoman Empire [1299-1923] declined and Europe became a great threat, efforts were made to reform the Empire, even if a bit late.

Sultans and their viziers initiated a program of reforms – the tanzimat. One of the leading proponents of tanzimat was Khayr al Deen, a Circassian by birth who lived from 1822 to 1890, and was the Prime Minister of Tunisia and Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire.

It may seem odd to raise this example of reforms that obviously did not stop the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire to the onslaught of European domination. The point is not about the fall of an empire but about a far-sighted Muslim leader.

Khayr al Deen’s book on political philosophy - *The Surest Path*, published in 1867 - addresses how Muslims can learn from the European political and ideological challenges. He states that Muslims would be ill advised if they persist in their opposition to learning from others just because the others are non-Muslims. His writing is free of defensiveness, and he does not think a return to the golden age of Islam will solve the problems facing people in the 1800s.

He was proud of the past but looked forward to changes. He wrote from within the Islamic tradition and did not accept all ideas uncritically. He accepted two sources of law and saw no contradiction between secular human law based on reason and God-given Law.

He wanted to implement those aspects of the European governance models which he felt would benefit Muslims in the Ottoman Empire - liberty, including equality before the law; security; economic development; learning via libraries and scientific academies; and freedom of the press.

I know this is a different world, but his approach to new ideas is applicable for us today.

We are familiar with the challenges facing Muslims: racism and anti-Muslim attitudes, the deplorable state of their countries, and the tensions within individual Muslim communities.

These challenges have led to varying responses from Muslims. A popular one is to demand a return to the halcyon days of early Muslims, with an insistence on a monolithic single interpretation of Islam and on being more traditionally religious and absorbed with the minutiae of the faith. An alternative response, as proposed by Khayr al Deen, is to be open to what is beneficial for our own development, whether this be from the past or from others around us.

Today, in contrast, there are world-wide Islamic organizations whose rallying call of “Islam is the solution” to absolutely everything closes minds to other ideas. They talk of a return to a fantasized Islamic state which they think was created by the Prophet Mohammed. Their version of such a state would have religion and politics integrated so that their interpretation of ‘sharia’ would govern all aspects of living. It is unclear what they think of the current examples of religious-based Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Their values are traditional for the family and for society, and their position on women is highly conflicted; it calls for women to be equal with men before God but not equal with men in society or the family.

Though these organizations claim to accept democracy as a good system of governance, they do not clarify important details such as where minorities fit in within this religious framework. They only say that neither a woman nor a member of a minority can be the head of state.

For example, would Canadian Muslim organizations whose vision is to have “Islam and Islamic values prevail in Canadian society” agree that these values are already part of the Canadian framework?

According to my interpretation of Islam, Islamic values of social justice, compassion and equality of all are exactly the values upon which Canada is based. Add to these values the ideal of democracy and liberty, and I’d say that is what we should all be striving for, no matter what our religion is – Muslims and non-Muslims alike.