

## Two Chameleons--Christianity and Islam<sup>1</sup>

Jos Strengholt

**Note by Editor of Sophie**

*Strengholt challenges the proposition that Islam is a political ideology. When we view Islam as a political ideology, we misinterpret it as a religion, we fail in our love for our neighbour and we encourage the development of a hostile image. The above moves us from our definition of political ideology to a self-fulfilling prophecy that our Muslim compatriots will radicalize. This is the proposition advanced in this article by Strengholt, an Anglican priest in Egypt.*

**Abdallah Schleifer was born in 1935 as “Mark Schleifer” into a secular Jewish family in New York. He converted long ago to Islam. He originally came into contact with this religion as a student in Morocco. Recently he said to a group of young students at the American University in Cairo that he does not understand the reason anyone should currently convert to Islam. His bitter criticism was that it has all been turned into politics. He himself became a Muslim because he had become acquainted with Sufism, a spiritual and mystical form of the religion.**

*Is Islam a Political Ideology?*

**The question whether Islam is merely a matter of politics has been popularized by the Dutchman Geert Wilders. We know his approach: “Islam is nothing but a political ideology.” I hope and expect that Wilders will be acquitted from the accusations served against him. We must carefully protect the freedom in The Netherlands to say whatever we wish about other religions or political ideologies.**

**However, that does not prove that Wilders’ declarations about Islam are true and beneficial. When a Christian speaks about another religion, she must demonstrate respect for the adherents of that**

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<sup>1</sup> Jos Strengholt, "De Islam is een toverbal," Sophie, 3/2011, pp. 18-21, bimonthly of the Stichting voor Christelijke Filosofie (Foundation for Christian Philosophy) in The Netherlands. Translated from Dutch by Jan H. Boer with Anneke Boer serving as translation consultant.

religion. An important way to show this respect for your neighbour is to speak the truth about that neighbour and his religion or political ideology. I believe that Wilders fails at this front.

To prove that Islam is a political ideology in an objective, calm manner is an thankless task. Initially the declaration sounds reasonable: Just look at all these politicized Muslims! There are examples everywhere, including The Netherlands. But if you reflect further on this proposition, it becomes clear that it deserves to be rejected. You need merely to unravel the statement “Islam is a political ideology.”

The little word “*is*” in the proposition “Islam *is*...” already suggests that Islam is *nothing but* a political ideology. That is to say, it is not a religion. In addition, the global reference to Islam<sup>2</sup> leaves a similar impression. It suggests that Islam can be described clearly, that there is only one version.

### *The Difficulty of Defining Christianity*

During the past thirty years I have intensely busied myself with Islam, Christianity and the interface or common ground between them. I have observed in the course of my contacts with Muslims how difficult it is for them to describe the Christian faith correctly. That is, of course no surprise, since we Christians we tumble all over each other in the bickering over the question just what is the correct Christian faith. Do we find the true version in Rome, Geneva, Moscow or, perhaps, in Toronto? Christians have great difficulty to determine the kernel of the faith together. This situation totally confuses Muslims.

If, for example, a respectable Dutch newspaper like *Het Parool* speaks condescendingly about a political party (SGP) with which it disagrees as a “*polder Taliban*,” then the people of the Veluwe, the turf of the SGP, feels insulted—and rightly so. A comparison between the SGP and radical Salifists is just dead wrong. When respectable secular journalists of *The Parool* can so lose their way in misunderstanding “our own” SGP, how then must we as Dutch, or for that matter any other people, be on our guard in trying to judge Islam? It would be sheer *hybris* as outsiders to point to one of the many colours of Islam

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<sup>2</sup> The Dutch speak of “*de Islam*” (“the Islam”).

and to declare that to constitute the true Islam, while Muslims themselves, like us Christians, are internally divided about the true nature of their religion.<sup>3</sup>

### *Violence Texts in the Qur'an and the Hadith*

Among themselves, Muslims have great differences of opinion about the “true Islam.” Islam harbours not only schools that inclined towards politics and activism, but it also contains conservative streams and mystical Sufi movements. It is divided into Sunnites and Shi'ites. In short, Islam comes in all sorts and sizes. Like Christianity, it is like a camelion that changes its colours depending on circumstances or, without sounding flippant or insulting, like a lollipop that changes its colour as its owner keeps sucking away at it. Was it green? Blue? Red?

In recent months Salafists, Muslims with a political orientation, have attacked tens of mosques in Egypt and brought serious destruction. The anger of Salafists was directed especially to the graves of mystical “saints” to whom Sufis like to pray because of their alleged mediating powers. According to Salafists, praying at such graves is a mortal sin. In addition, Salafists are particularly active in achieving the right political structures for Egypt—about which they themselves entertain differences of opinion. They are interested in politics because of their conviction that the Government has the duty to protect the “true Islam” and to attack all deviating sects.

Also on basis of their rock-solid conviction that they are acting according to “true Islam” and that they interpret the Qur'an and the Hadith correctly, Salafists have during recent months burns down churches and attacked Coptic Christians. However, a very populist Islamist preacher, Dr. Amr Khaled, condemned these attacks on basis of the same Islam. According to him, “Islam discourages the imposition of opinions on others in a violent manner. The Holy Qur'an says we must think and act without any violence.”

Muslims will sometimes throw Biblical texts at me left and right to prove their position without the burden of an adequate

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<sup>3</sup> During the course of my writing the 8-volume series *Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations*, there is nothing of which I was more and always conscious as this point. This is the reason I am translating this article. For the series go to < [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) > or to < [www.SocialTheology.com/Islamica.htm](http://www.SocialTheology.com/Islamica.htm) >.

**understanding or knowledge of the interpretive history of the context of the passage. This realization encourages me to adopt a more modest attitude and not point too quickly to Qur'anic texts to "prove" the essence of Islam. It is clear that Muslims among themselves differ greatly over the interpretation and application of their own holy books.**

**For understanding Islam in its present variations, it is much more reasonable and important to see how Qur'anic texts have been used and interpreted through the ages and how that is done today by the Ulama, the educated theologians, in their differing schools of thought.**

**To understand Islam it is definitely not enough to select a series of violence texts from the Qur'an and then to declare, "Don't you see it? Islam wants to eliminate all Jews and Christians." If this were true, then we need to explain how it was possible that Jews and Christians were not eliminated while living among Muslims for many centuries. Perhaps the issue is much more complex so that we also need to examine the exegetical history of these passages.**

**The same question holds for the caliphate. Does Islam really teach that all Muslims everywhere are to live in one global jurisdiction under one single Khalif? For centuries Muslims have not been concerned about this. Though contemporary Salafists attach great significance to this matter, this does not mean that Islam teaches this. I know many Muslims who completely reject the notion of a united Islamic empire as a component of the core essence of their religion.**

*Muslims Pray*