

# Washington State University professor Reinterpreting Sharia becomes a question



## EXCLUSIVE



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So, to put it in a nutshell, you are more of a reformer or revolutionary when it comes to the declaration. The next question concerns Sharia law. One can argue that for any specific people, the divine law is the natural law, and vice versa, and therefore, completely rational. However, through Western dominance, what was once considered natural in many societies is now considered unnatural. In some Islamic societies, for example, there are now movements at work to abolish some parts of the Sharia law, which are deemed unnatural. Do you know of any such movements, and how do you think they would play out? There are different voices like even in Afghanistan now with the Taliban taking over Afghanistan again. There are, to some degree, voices not necessarily to abolish some parts of Sharia law but to reinterpret and reapply it at least. I think that this is where we get into hazy lines. The lines are not always so clear but abolish is a very strong word.

There's also the whole debate over ijihad, how you can possibly reinterpret and reapply Sharia law in new, different ways, etc. So, I think that's a part of the broader, more

complex conversations that can go on.

So, we might say that some people are looking to abolish particular interpretations, and that is related to Sharia law, but that would remove the question by one layer and create a more complex layering of the question. The abolishment would not be of the Sharia law itself; it would be of the interpretation of the Sharia law and its application. So, I think in that way, it's much more complicated.

They would claim this is still Sharia law, but it's another version of Sharia law. Or they might even say, "This is the true version of Sharia law in contrast to what was the outdated version of Sharia law."

Yes, exactly. We're back to the reformer mindset. So, it's more complex and complicated, I think, than just all-or-nothing. What do I think would play out? I think it's already played out many times in many ways. I'm a historian. So, I never like to talk about the future and predict it. We can't predict the future, especially as a historian. Historians do not like to even think about trying to predict the future. But based on the past, again, it's

very complicated. It's a scale, a continuum from the most extreme left — if you want to use the word left — to the most extreme right. And different people in all different places formed nuclei of groups. These people have enough in common that they can work together for at least the time they are trying to accomplish the purposes of reform, whatever they may be. That always involves debate, tensions, and conflicts to differing scales. Sometimes it's all-out revolutions; sometimes it's just ongoing dialogue at programs, interviews, etc. So, unless we talk about maybe one specific society and its dynamics — for example, about Iran, Saudi Arabia, or even America with regard to the anti-Sharia laws — then it becomes a very broad, complicated question.

Sometimes this effort at re-interpretation of Sharia law in a way that it could accommodate modern values, or whatever it is they are seeking to accommodate, gives rise to really strange — if not weird — combinations of Islam and things that normally can't be construed as Islamic. Do you find such cases to be legitimate efforts or absurd ones? Can they actually

be understood within the framework you are referring to?

Well, this becomes a question of epistemology at its most rudimentary level. It concerns the source of knowledge and the ideas of divine revelation — like how you're talking about divine law in relation to natural law. And then we also have common law and statutory law and positive law.

We can break down the conception of natural law as divine law into two different categories. I'm speaking very simplistically here. You can have a faith in God and believe that God reveals His will and His laws to humanity. But the question becomes, "How does God reveal His will and laws to humanity?" That's the key question.

It's in the instrument. It's in the means of God revealing His law. You believe that God reveals His laws through direct divine revelation to prophets and Imams. And then, these prophets and Imams tell us what the proper interpretation is. Then, some might argue that we have to discern God's real nature through the natural, created world and accept that the divine revelation may not be perfectly understood by human receptors and we need checks and balances. So, they

become these different positions in terms of how one proceeds this whole process of God revealing His will and His law to us.

I think that this is where the issue lies more deeply. Because in the eyes of these people, they are not interpreting divine law in the strictest kind of prophetic sense, where God talks to the prophet or the Imam, and they speak the word of God. They're seeing it in more complicated terms. It allows for greater kind of flexibility and leeway in the interpretations.

And you get into the debates over how much that then becomes their own wishes and desires and what they want the law to say. Then, they try to find a justification for attributing it to God, to divine sources versus this whole idea of the divine revelation.

So, are they natural or unnatural? It depends upon your underlying views of the divine revelation and what is true and false in relation to those kinds of issues. Does that make sense?

Yes, that makes sense. It makes it easier to understand why they're thinking the way they are thinking.

Good. I'm trying to understand