

# Schwartz's Words of Mass Distortion

Aftab Ahmad Malik\*

IN HIS RECENT article: *Is California an Islamic Republic?* (The Family Security Foundation, Inc., October 25, 2006), Stephen Schwartz, in his tireless search for an opportunity to profess his undying patriotism, has written a personal attack against Hamza Yusuf Hanson. The nominal basis for his attack is an article in a Saudi newspaper, in which Hamza Yusuf “was described as ‘the mufti of California.’” It is not clear how accurately this was translated for him, particularly as he later states that “It is Hamza Yusuf Hanson who is dishonest, when he calls himself, ridiculously, ‘the mufti of California,’ and when he claims to be a Muslim moderate.” Schwartz’s claim then, is that Yusuf has been called or has called himself the mufti of California and, therefore, Schwartz claims, “propagandizes for the Islamicization of America,” based on how Yusuf has “built himself up as a major Western Muslim leader.”

My immediate response is to question why Schwartz has searched out this reference (of questionable accuracy) to denounce Hamza Yusuf. Why does he go to such pains to try to convince his readership that Yusuf is an extremist who does not speak for the majority of Muslims? The implication of course, is that Schwartz is a moderate Muslim (struggling for plurality) and in fact speaks for the majority of mainstream Muslims. In fact, Schwartz has a long record of denouncing other Muslims as either being Islamists, Jihadists, or Wahhabis—all words that the public has been taught to “understand” represent three incarnations of everything evil in the world today. While the reality remains that many Americans still cannot make sense of Islam, Schwartz’s

simplistic articles only offer a dangerous black and white view of a complex landscape. I find it astonishing that Schwartz, the executive director of the Center for Islamic Pluralism cannot even recognize the plurality *within* the Muslim community itself, and rather than acknowledge this, he demarcates disperse communities into moderates versus extremists.

Schwartz's unabashed attack on Hamza Yusuf is at best misguided and at worst libelous. His continued character assassination of one of the most distinguished, loved, and brilliant Muslim scholars in the Western world is enough to discredit him in the eyes of many mainstream Muslims. The respect that Yusuf commands from numerous sectors of the Muslim community throughout the world is unquestioned; it is based on nearly fifteen years of studying with scholars throughout the world, in a tireless effort to grasp the depth of traditional Islamic scholarship. Schwartz himself wrote a moving obituary of the late "famous Sufi teacher" and scholar, Shaykh Muhammad Alawi, in which he highlights the authority that Alawi commanded. And it is this very same Muhammad Alawi that is counted among the teachers of Hamza Yusuf, who was awarded a handwritten diploma by the Shaykh—something that Alawi rarely did—conferring upon Yusuf the licence to teach the Islamic sciences, which include Sufism.

I find it lamentable that Schwartz maintains this misguided assertion that Hamza Yusuf is dishonestly portraying himself as a Sufi and hiding ulterior motives that only Schwartz has been able to decipher (the rest of the gullible world has failed to recognize these ill-intentions). Surely this, above and beyond his other outlandish claims, clearly indicates that Schwartz is a man with an agenda and far from a serious or scholarly commentator on Islamic affairs. I question Schwartz's intentions because he is most

likely aware of and has met many contemporary Sufi shaykhs from America to Great Britain; West Africa to the Middle East; the Subcontinent to the Arabian peninsula, who confirm and acknowledge Yusuf as being counted among the *qawm*—a sufi term that refers to “the people [of spiritual excellence].” Could Schwartz’s accusations stem from such a superficial fact that Yusuf does not dress like a Sufi shaykh, but wears western clothes? (I have actually met some individuals who criticize his ability to be a shaykh precisely because of this.) Or, perhaps Schwartz is irked by the fact that Yusuf is invited by a wide range of people to speak to diverse audiences, some of whom may not see eye-to-eye with the spiritual tradition of Islam?

Ironically, back in 1997 at Stanford University, the late expert on Sufism, Annemarie Schimmel, Hamid Algar of the University of Berkeley, and Hamza Yusuf spoke on the theme of “Sufism and its influence on Europe.” In closing the program, Yusuf stressed that Sufism was an *integral* part of Islam, stating that “in the tradition of Islam Sufism has always been part of the traditional Islamic curriculum in every single Muslim university.” He continued to remark that he knew of “no period in the Islamic tradition in which Sufism was not taught in the universities and not seen as an important and fundamental aspect of the tradition of Islam.” More ironic yet is the fact that this favorable write-up of the event was (and remains) posted on the Naqshbandi.org website, a prominent Sufi group that operates under the auspices of the Sufi sage, Mawlana Shaykh Nazim al-Haqqani. If we believe, as Schwartz proposes, that Yusuf decided to transform himself from a “radical” Muslim preacher into a spiritual Sufi, the author of the lengthy article would not have concluded by saying that this event took “great courage” and was a “courageous stand” in the light of the fact that (at that time) Sufism was

perceived by many Muslims as something alien to Islam—clearly a result of the strength of a Wahhabi-brand of Islam.

I actually agree with Schwartz on one issue: it is ridiculous for Hamza Yusuf to call himself “the mufti of California”; I daresay that Yusuf would consider it ridiculous as well. I doubt that Schwartz’s reference to the article in the Saudi newspaper is accurate. But I would correct Schwartz on the role of a mufti. He confusingly defines a mufti as a “religious judge, directing sharia courts in Sunni Muslim countries,” (one would think a fairly substantial position of authority), then says that California does not need a mufti, “because Sharia governs such minor aspects of Islamic life as the issuance of halal butchers’ licenses...and the propriety of certain financial transactions.” Schwartz reveals his ignorance of the sharia, not to mention the role of a mufti. Then he goes on to clarify (for those unaware!) that California does not have sharia courts.

By way of clarification, a mufti fulfils a role that goes beyond merely declaring meat *halal*. The role of a mufti is more akin to that of a rabbi and an imam to that of a cantor. A rabbi explains Torah and Mishnah to his congregants and the function of a mufti is to explain the Qur’an and the Prophetic way to his followers; this can relate to everything from how to prepare oneself for prayer to whether insurance is a *halal* financial transaction. A mufti gives non-binding legal opinions and has no state authority, nor can his opinions be enforced by the state in most matters. Muslim nations often appoint a Grand Mufti, as in Egypt, but most muftis actually have no state affiliation. Muftis are also noted for their intellectual ability and moral character. Indeed, the late Dr. Zaki Badawi of London was, in one of his obituaries, referred to as the “Grand Mufti of Islam in England.” There were no sensationalist headlines the following day that sought

to explain how all along, Zaki Badawi the mild-mannered moderate Muslim, was a stealth Islamist by night, because it simply would not be true. Rather, the title was bestowed upon him as a *mark of respect and acknowledgement of his intellectual prowess, authority and admiration he had earned from many people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike* in the UK.

In his article, Schwartz has manipulated the facts in order to create a fictional scenario in which a fictional character (only nominally based upon the real Hamza Yusuf) has a fictitious aim of establishing an Islamic republic in California. The only credence that Schwartz has that lends itself to this mythical construct is a quote by Zaid Shakir (who he inaccurately refers to as Ziad Shakir), in which Shakir remarked that he would “like to see America become a Muslim country.” Had he known Shakir personally, Schwartz would have understood the inaccuracy of his explanation. Shakir’s remark is no more than an imitation of the Prophet Muhammad’s words: “Love for humanity what you love for yourself.” Shakir, a dedicated savant and intellectual giant, said that to love what he loves (and clearly, Zaid Shakir loves Islam), how could he not wish for other people to enjoy what he enjoys from Islam? As the late Betty Shabaz remarked, only people of violence read violence into Malcolm’s words and I would add that only those who want to feed the current climate of fear, announce it wherever they can.

Hamza Yusuf has been vociferous in the past as well as the present, on the topic of those who seek to subvert the lands in which they live, and has said in no uncertain terms that these people should leave—if they wish to live under Islamic law, there is nothing preventing them from moving to those lands in which it is the rule of the land. At the same time, Yusuf has not made secret his views on what he sees as the ailments of the

society in which he lives. There is gross inequality in the distribution of wealth, the educational system is not producing rounded human beings, and there are areas in America where there is intense racial tension and segregation. While Yusuf has openly criticized the country's foreign policy, he has emphasized that foreign policy should not be seen as synonymous with the American people; this is a message that he has particularly stressed when speaking in the Middle East. The problem we face is that despite the Internet and talk about a global village, there still remains a huge gulf between the West and the Muslim world.

To be patriotic (and Schwartz implicitly implies that Yusuf is not), does not mean to turn a blind eye to injustices. To be loyal or zealously support one's country can be dangerous if it is merely another name for crude nationalism. True patriotism—to truly have a great love for one's country—would include exercising one's judgment, evaluating policies, and engaging in discussions. When Yusuf says that most Americans do not comprehend Islam or that racism is a real concern, he is not revealing a conspiracy of hate toward America. These are issues that have been debated for decades by many (non-Muslim) social scientists and (non-Muslim) religious/political commentators. It is only at the mercy of Schwartz's pen that such concerns are twisted and morphed into a sinister and threatening menace. In an environment that is plagued by a virtual avalanche of tracts, writings, and publications that express unrestrained animosity to Islam and Muslims, written by so-called experts on Islam (the vast majority of whom do not read, write, or speak Arabic), the quest for sanity and balance seems lost within a quagmire of suspicion and self-appointed "moderate" Muslim leaders. The only losers in the end will

be the principles of equity, integrity, and justice. When these are lost, what reigns is anarchy, and this will ultimately lead to the perpetuation of hate crimes.

\*Editor of *The State We Are In: Identity, Terror and the Law of Jihad* (Bristol: Amal Press, 2006) and Visiting fellow at the Center of Culture and Ethnicity, University of Birmingham (UK).