

**ISLAM:
A DEFINITIONAL ESSAY WITH
COMMENTARY**

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ISLAM: CONCEPTS, DEFINITIONS, AND COMMENTARIES

INTRODUCTORY REMARK

The subject of Islam is one of the most contentious topics in the world today. For some adherents of Islam, any criticism of Islam, the Koran, and the Prophet Mohammed is blasphemy. Such a position forecloses all debate. Even within Islam itself such a mind set has led to competing insistence by some, backed by threats and acts of violence, that they are the only “true” Muslims.

The following definitions and commentaries strive to be informed, respectful but also unvarnished. To understand Islam or any other religion and culture does not mean making excuses for them. The discussion deliberately juxtaposes sources permeated by an abiding love for the faith of Islam (Nasr, Ahmed) with others quite critical of Islam as religion (Spencer) and of what has been called “radical Islamism,” a term designed to distinguish an extremist political/ideological movement within Islam from the overarching faith itself (Lewis).

This section should be read against the background of the definition of fundamentalism provided earlier in this manual. But Akbar Ahmed reminds us of the limits of the term “fundamentalist.” Since every Muslim ultimately believes in the fundamentals of the religion such as the Koran they are “technically all fundamentalists” (Ahmed 2003: 157). Instead he suggests distinguishing between “exclusivists” or dogmatists who create boundaries and insist on absolute group loyalty and “inclusivists” capable of seeing human civilization as one in the light of compassion and justice (Ahmed 2003: 18-19). On the one hand, this is reasonable, wise, and humane counsel, music to the ears of moderates. On the other hand, it begs the crucial question of how “inclusivist” of others Islam can really be and remain Islam.

ISLAM

Islam, alongside Judaism and Christianity, is one of the three major monotheistic religions of the world. All three are often referred to as Abrahamic religions, sharing in the prophetic traditions of the Old Testament. “Judaism and Islam share the belief in a divine law that regulates all aspects of human activity” (Lewis 2003: 5). Traditional Judaism and Islam also share an emphasis on the meticulous performance of ritual. “Christians and Muslims share a common triumphalism” (Ibid.). Thus interpreted, Islam is not a complete negation of the Judeo-Christian tradition but, in the view of Muslims, the correction, superceding, and completion of that tradition. In a sense, “Christendom and Islam are two religiously defined civilizations that were brought into conflict not by their differences but by their resemblances” (Lewis 2003: 43).

A strong exception to such an interpretation is taken by Alain Besancon who argues that the Ibrahim/Abraham of the Koran “takes part in Muslim worship by building the Ka’ba temple and instituting pilgrimage to Mecca. Far from Muhammad sharing the faith of Abraham, it is Abraham who holds the faith of Muhammad” (Besancon 2004: 45). As the Koran itself states (Sura 22: Verses 78-79), the Muslim observance of faith is “the faith of Abraham your father” (Dawood 2000: 340). That interpretation reduces the Judeo-Christian tradition to an interlude followed by a return to the “straight path” of Islam, as original religion. Even the Issa/Jesus of

the Koran “promulgates the same message as the earlier prophets... which is Islam” (Ibid.). Thus the Koran is not a “retroactive endorsement” of the truth of the Bible (Besancon 2004: 48) but a clear restatement of the one true Islamic faith preceding the Bible.

In Arabic the word “Islam” means complete surrender or submission to the will of Allah, the word for God in Arabic. Each individual human being’s surrender to God must be willing and active, not merely passive. The goal is becoming a perfect servant (*abd*) of God, totally reconciled to His Will. “The attitude of Islam toward freedom is based on this metaphysical reality” (Nasr 2002: 292). Real freedom is not to be found in individualism. Rather, religion in general and Islam in particular enable humans “to gain freedom *from* the self and not to abet the freedom *of* the self”(Nasr 2002: 291). The object is the release from human limitations and passions and consequent freedom from “the prison of our limited egos and our never-ending passions generating unending waves of unreal wants and desires, which are then turned into needs”(Ibid.). Nasr here betrays a mystic, esoteric inclination whose anti-materialism is not representative of the preferences of Islam’s more worldly oriented majority.

Following Islam leads to different conceptions of the balance between rights and responsibilities than those of Western societies. All rights “issue from the fulfillment of our responsibilities to God and His creation” (Nasr 2002: 299). Human responsibilities to God and Islamic society precede human rights. This prioritizing is a matter of fundamental principle in Islam and “its acceptance dominates the cultural and intellectual landscape” (Nasr 2002: 278). Under such an interpretation the Western notions of inalienable and universal human rights is a “Judeo-Christian invention.”

Despite the obligation to submit, humans, nonetheless, are given free will and thus are capable of rebelling against the Will of God. In that sense, “God took a gamble by creating human beings (Ahmed 2003: 3). But the free will of humans is undermined by strong implications of predestination.

As religion, Islam represents a total way of life and its message, regarded by Muslims as the final true and correct revelation, is of universal validity applicable to all time, all places, and peoples. Islam thus has been and continues to be a religiously driven globalization movement in its own right. However much Muslims oppose the Western version of “globalization,” they do not oppose globalization as such as long as it occurs on their religious and civilizational terms. “The idea of a common humanity is central to the Muslim perception of self” (Ahmed 2003: 10). Approximately 1.3 billion people worldwide currently follow Islam.

Islam refers not only to a religion (like “Christianity”) but also to the civilization (akin to the term “Christendom”) which necessarily develops if the precepts of Islam are followed. As civilization Islam’s great glory days are associated with the original community (*umma*) under the guidance of the Prophet Mohammed and the rapid expansion of the reach of Islam roughly in the first three centuries following the death of Mohammed in A.D.632.

Islam’s history is seen by its adherents as the history of the unfolding purpose of Allah’s Will for his sacred community. “The history of non-Muslim states and peoples conveys no such message...” (Lewis 2003: xix). The end of all human history will be marked by divine

intervention. Both Christianity and Islam “understand history as a linear process that embodies God’s intentions for the world” (Johnson 1997: 130) and “humans have a responsibility to assist the realization of those intentions through their beliefs and their behavior” (Ibid.).

Islam, similar to other great religions, makes the assertion that the scientific method and the rational mind do not and cannot encompass the totality of meaning, knowledge, and understanding. Neither can the material world lead to inner spiritual peace. To the extent that the scientific revolution, the ascent of reason over faith, and the accompanying secularization are associated with the West, Islam has come to regard these Western imports, now accelerated and accentuated by “globalization,” as threats to itself as a religion and to the cultural identity of Muslims. Furthermore, the substitution of the sacred “Kingdom of God” by the secular “kingdom of man” to use Augustinian terminology, is antithetical to the very concept of submission in all things to God’s Will, a fundamental premise in and of Islam. Muslims, alongside believers from other religions, point out that secularism can manifest itself as a dogmatic and intolerant ideology in its own right. The 2004 ban on Muslim headscarfs (as well as conspicuous displays of Christian crosses and Jewish skullcaps) in France’s public schools, intended to defend the secular French Republic, is cited as an example of secular intolerance.

Islam’s “theocentric world view” constantly reminds humanity of its responsibilities to God. Thus, Islam “can also be a major force, perhaps the most powerful on earth, to oppose the process of the desacralization of both human beings and nature, a process the result of which is the monumental crisis we now face” (Nasr 2002: 299-300).

Theologically Islam has a rich intellectual tradition with various schools of thought debating such great questions as the nature of God, the relationship between faith and reason, the connection between faith and good works, and the question of predestination versus free will.

MUSLIM

A Muslim is a believer in and follower of the religion of Islam. “Muslim” in Arabic implies much more than mere passive belief in God: it ultimately requires active surrender and submission to the Will of Allah.

For Muslims God is infinite, unique, indivisible, all-powerful, source of all existence, creator and sustainer of the universe, who is just but also compassionate and merciful. Indeed, the most frequently used names for God in the Koran are *Rahman* (Beneficent) and *Rahim* (Merciful). He transcends all creation yet is immanent, that is inherent in all creation, near and present. While, according to traditional sources, the Koran gives 99 names for God, revealing different aspects of God, God’s essence remains ultimately unknowable to humans. Some Muslims strongly criticize mystical strands in Islam associated with Sufism which suggest the possibility of a human experience of closeness to God.

God created man (Adam) out of clay with the purpose, according to a *hadith* (tradition), to be known. Alongside being God’s willing servant, man is to be God’s viceregent (*khalif*) on earth. As caliph, humanity’s duty is to “implement the vision of God on earth through their behavior and organization of society” (Ahmed 2003: 77)

In Islam man's great sin is not "original sin," requiring redemption as it does in Christianity. Instead, it is human forgetfulness of man's primordial nature as God's creation and servant and taking on other interests and priorities besides total submission to God's Will. Separation from the source of all good is the root of evil. The belief expressed by Muslims that all humans are originally "Muslim" (and thus all past prophets were Muslim) is understandable against the background of the above view of man's primordial nature. In a sense no one "converts" to Islam but "reverts" to it, given Islam's perceived status as the primordial religion. Disbelievers who have rejected the message of Islam and thus their primordial human nature are *kafirs* or infidels. Islam does make theological allowances for those possessing a non-Islamic monotheistic faith in God as believers (*mumin*). But there have also been periods when movements, groups, and individuals in Islam employed the term infidel so loosely as to include members of the Islamic faith not in agreement with them.

In eschatological terms, against the background of today's often secular, materialist, even atheist world, Muslims retain a strong and vibrant belief in the afterlife, in *maad* or "return to God" upon death. As Seyyed Nasr argues, "the reality of the afterlife is so intense for Muslims, even today, that the moral dilemma of a just God creating an unjust world so much discussed in the West does not seriously arise for them. They remain aware that our judgment of any life on earth is based on only a small segment of the total arc of life..." (Nasr 2002: 245). This acute awareness of the very limited span and value of earthly existence is one of the factors feeding the logic of martyrdom.

THE KORAN (*QURAN*)

The Koran is the "alpha and omega" of Islam. It is the root of Islam's laws, philosophy, ethics, literature, and art. It contains religious dogma and law as well as practical guidelines for daily living.

Koran means recitation or discourse. All of creation is a "book" (*kitab*) in which the presence of Allah can be read (Nasr 2002: 12). The Koran specifically is the book of the final, true revelation. The Sacred Scripture of Muslims, it is regarded as the literal word of God as revealed to the Prophet Mohammed, through the agency of the Archangel Gabriel, starting in 610 A.D. and continuing for the remaining two decades of Mohammed's life. The Koran is not merely divinely inspired human authorship. Mohammed is not its composer, merely its mouthpiece. Many Muslims believe that the Koran is eternal and uncreated, its existence in heaven, in toto, predating its revelation to Mohammed.

All aspects of the text are considered sacred including chanting and calligraphy. Its 114 chapters (*sura*) and over 6000 verses (*aya* - meaning sign or miracle) have many levels of meaning, both worldly and spiritual, some known only to God. One key distinction is made between *batin* the inner, esoteric, and hidden meaning of the Koran and *zahir*, the manifest, exoteric, and literal meaning.

The Koran was not written down by Mohammed himself but uttered by him, memorized by companions, a common feature in a society with strong oral traditions, and written down by scribes. But it is a "single book promulgated at one time by one man" (Lewis 2003: 8) unlike the

Bible which is a multi-author compilation of books stretching over many centuries. One interpretive challenge is that the organization of the Koran by chapter of descending length does not match the chronological sequence of the revelations to and by Mohammed. Some recent non-Muslim critical scholarship of the Koran, using historic and linguistic scholarship techniques already applied to the Bible, would argue that the Koran may be a book attributed to but not promulgated by one man, given evidence of retroactive tampering by Mohammed's successors. Such a suggestion, of course, is regarded as blasphemy by Muslims and such scholarship lies well beyond the pale of acceptability in the Muslim world.

The Koran's poetic elegance, its rhythmic and mesmerizing qualities in Arabic was an important part of facilitating early promotion of the message, given the high esteem in which poetic elegance was held in Arab society (Nasr 2002: 24). Its memorization still brings great honor and esteem to an individual and even forgiveness of the sins of several generations of his family. The earliest definitive version dates back to the time of the third caliph, Uthman, some two decades after the death of Mohammed.

Muslims regard Jewish and Christian scriptures such as the Old Testament and the Christian New Testament as holy books but the Koran corrects, completes, and supercedes the message of previous sacred texts. Muslims believe that the revelations in Jewish and Christian holy books are incomplete, that they have been distorted and misinterpreted. Thus the Koran is the final, complete, immutable, correct, and verbatim revelation of the word of God. It is often pointed out by moderates within and outside Islam that Muslims consider Jews and Christians as "people of the book" (*ahl al-Kitab*). It is thus particularly sad to see the rise, against the background of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, of an especially virulent form of anti-Semitism in contemporary Islam, a religion which, unlike Christianity, and despite violent early clashes with Jewish communities during Mohammed's life time, had a history of according considerable protection to Jewish communities in its midst.

But critics warn that "of all the contemporary expressions hinting at a consanguinity between the Qur'an and the Bible, the falsest may be 'religions of the Book,'" an expression of Islamic origin (Besancon 2004: 48). "It refers, rather, to a special legal category, 'people of the Book,' that provided an exception for Christians and Jews to the general rule of decreeing death or slavery for those who refused to convert to Islam" (Ibid.). This legally defined category of people were allowed to live in Muslim lands as *dhimmis*.

In a sense it is also a mistake to compare the Koran to the Old and the New Testament: "a more profound comparison would be with Christ himself" (Nasr 2002: 23). The Koran is the revelation. An important corollary ensues: textual criticism becomes blasphemy and theological debates using reason (*kalam*) become suspect or even forbidden. As the literal word of God the Koran is not to be read metaphorically or as a parable. The notion, for example, of a "Mohammed Seminar" akin to the "Jesus Seminar" whose members debate what Jesus did or did not say is ludicrous.

The Koran cannot be treated as a historical document subject to continued interpretation, deconstruction, and updating. Unlike the Bible it is not a progressive revelation: its divine message as a whole is believed by Muslims to have existed from the beginning of time and to

have been infused in the first human, Adam. While, in a very limited fashion, some earlier Koranic passages can be abrogated by later ones, the absence of the idea of historical progression in revelation such as from the more violent “eye for an eye” Old Testament to the New Testament’s Sermon of the Mount makes an evolutionary interpretation of the Koran difficult if not impossible. The Christian dogma has been progressively altered to allow for allegorical and metaphorical rather than literal interpretations of the scriptures. Textual exegesis is no longer blasphemous. Such an evolution, if it is even possible, has yet to take hold with regard to the Koran. Previous attempts to use reason in the encounter with God and de-emphasize the literal meaning of the Koran such as practiced by the Mutazilite movement dating back to the early 8th century C.E. and which became the official religion of the Abbasid Caliphate, did not fare well or last very long.

The Koran does not reveal a new God. According to Islam, God had previously revealed himself to humankind through prophets and, more importantly, through messengers of universal significance such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Yet those messengers are depicted quite differently in the Koran than in the Old and New Testaments. Jesus is revered by Muslims as the greatest of all messengers before Mohammed but most definitely not as the only begotten Son of God. Indeed, given the absolute indivisibility of God, the Christian trinitarian notion of deity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is blasphemy to Muslims. The Koran’s makes abundantly and repeatedly clear that God did not beget a son (see for example Sura 2: 115; 4: 171-172; 5: 71-74; 6: 101; 9: 30 etc and ultimately Sura 112). Testifying to God’s oneness (*tawhid*) “lies at the heart of the credo of Islam” (Nasr 2002: 3) and is the “central theological concept of Islam” (Ruthven 2000: 431). Significantly, *tawhid* is proclaimed in deliberate fashion in the face of Christianity (and on Jewish holy ground) on Jerusalem’s Dome of the Rock atop the Jewish Temple Mount using Sura 112: “God is One, the Eternal God. He begot none, nor was He begotten (Dawood 2000: 604).

It should be noted that the word of God was revealed in Arabic. The Koran itself points out that fact repeatedly (see for instance Sura 20: 113). Thus the Arabic language is an integral part of the perfection of the Koran. This gives Arabic extraordinary status as the language of revelation in the entire Islamic community, well beyond its Arab core, and for the world. It encourages the study of Arabic as necessary to grasp the full meaning of the Koran. This status for Arabic as the sacred language is reminiscent of the status of Hebrew in Judaism not of that of Latin in Christianity since the latter is merely a liturgical language while Aramaic was the language that Jesus would have spoken.

In addition to the Koran there is another fundamental source of Islamic doctrine. Mohammed is credited with saying that he leaves two things behind: the Koran and his example, the *Sunnah*. In the Koran, Allah speaks through Mohammed, in the *Sunnah* God acts through Mohammed. The *Sunnah* is the Koran in action through the life of Mohammed depicted in minute details. The Koran is the revelation, the *Sunnah* the practical application in a “model” human’s life. This turns Mohammed’s doings and practices, however mundane, into divinely ordained imperatives.

The *Sunnah* as a whole is composed of *hadiths* (also termed *hadis* for singular or *ahadis* for plural). The *hadiths* (traditions) are reports of the practices, teachings, and sayings of the

Prophet not recorded in the Koran but instead gathered in canonical collections over time. Every “tradition” has a text and a chain of transmission which must be traced back to a Companion of the Prophet. The *hadiths* are classified according to various degrees of reliability. Very early on there arose disagreements on the authenticity of many “traditions.” Eventually six collections became recognized as the most authentic, reliable, and trustworthy. “They form, after the Quran, the most important source of everything Islamic and constitute, in fact, the first commentary upon the Quran,” (Nasr 2002: 37) essential to understanding the Koran. Individual traditions make up the *Sunnah*. Muslims are called on to model their lives on the *Sunnah*, the example of the Prophet.

The existence and sheer detailed nature of the “traditions” gives Muslims tremendous confidence in “knowing” with certainty even of the most intimate details of the Prophet’s life, placing the historical reality of his life beyond all question and doubt. Yet, to more skeptical non-Muslim scholars a nagging question persists: how much detail about the Prophet’s life was retroactively invented, given the proliferation of “traditions” after the death of Mohammed. The ability to point to a supportive “tradition” could be vitally important for the status of an individual or the legitimacy of a factional interest. The great traditionalist al-Bukhari, writing over 200 years after the death of Mohammed, collected some 700,000 “traditions” of which he accepted only some 7,000. The first definitive biography of the Prophet by Ibn Ishaq, written over 100 years after Mohammed’s death, is above all a chronologically arranged collection of “traditions.” Thus, it is as reliable as the traditions it uses. And those, especially the ones compiled in canonical collections, are beyond questioning in the eyes of Muslim believers.

Doctrinal sources also include consensus developed by leading scholars and guardians (*ulama*) of Islamic traditions on issues on which the Koran, *Sunnah* and the “traditions” offer no guidance, inference by analogy, and precedential rulings.

THE PROPHET MOHAMMED

For centuries, Christians referred to Islam as Mohammedanism and to followers of Islam as Mohammedans. This appellation is deeply resented by Muslims because it confuses the messenger with the message. Yet, the confusion is understandable from the vantage point of outside observers for two reasons: first, Christians themselves are labeled as followers of their “messenger” Jesus Christ and, second, the centrality of the messenger Mohammed in Islam is utterly overwhelming both in the Koran but especially in the *Sunnah*.

Mohammed is human not divine, chosen by God as the final messenger, the terminal “Seal of Prophets” but not the first and only one, given previous messengers such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Mohammed, a messenger of “uncompromising monotheism,” has been called a worldly man who preached engagement in the world not detachment from it. This worldliness is reflected in the Muslim attitude that “it is not the world that is to be hated but unbelievers. Proper submission to God does not entail withdrawal from the world to wait for God’s action but taking power in the world to foster good and prevent evil” (Johnson 1997: 89).

On the basis of the *Sunnah* it can be argued that we know his life in great detail and the generally accepted version of Mohammed’s life is oft repeated (though even a summary is

beyond the scope of this section). Mohammed was raised in the household of his uncle Abu Talib. Abu Talib, it should be noted, was the father of Ali, the fourth caliph, the first Imam of Shiism, and husband of Fatimah, the daughter of Mohammed and of his first wife Kadijah. All sources agree Mohammed was monogamous during his marriage to Kadijah, a wealthy woman 15 years his senior, his sponsor and one of his first adherents. When she passed away Mohammed was fifty years old. Mohammed's subsequent married life became a bit more lively.

Mohammed's revelations did not sit well with the powers that be in Mecca, his residence. Just prior to seeking safety in Medina with his followers, Mohammed is believed to have taken a "nocturnal journey" to Jerusalem as well as a celestial journey which placed him in the presence of the Divine. In fact, Jerusalem, not Mecca was the first direction Muslims faced in prayer. This direct link between the Prophet and the city of Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam after Mecca and Medina, represents a Jewish-Muslim religious dimension which is one of the main contributing factors to the intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian Arab conflict whose ultimate focal point remains the Jewish Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock located atop that mount.

The Prophet is seen as God's most perfect human creature and for Sufis he represents "Universal Man," the human model and exemplifier of virtues. Akbar Ahmed describes him as *insan-i-kamil* or the "perfect person" (Ahmed 2003: 106). As the standard against which all humans are judged, he is beyond judgement. He enjoyed special privileges and sanction from God such as, for example, with regard to the number of his wives and the rationale for his marriages to them after the death of his first wife and the end of his monogamous relationship. This elevated status makes any criticism of Mohammed effectively impossible, a reality reinforced by the tradition which says that Allah does not love a person who does not love his messenger. Indeed, it is a sign of disrespect to mention Mohammed's name without the ensuing benediction "peace and blessings be upon him."

The extremely high sensitivity of Muslims toward the Prophet may be gauged comparatively and hypothetically. Christians have been subjected to such movies as "The Last Temptation of Christ" or Monty Python's "The Life of Brian." Any such satirical treatment of Mohammed would surely result in a global explosion of anger and violence that would make the Salmon Rushie "Satanic Verses" affair utterly pale by comparison. Interestingly, while satirical treatments of Christianity are often celebrated as daring intellectual and artistic avant-garde achievements by the West's "intellectual elites," Muslim believers regard such attitudes by the West's intelligentsia as another sign of the West's moral bankruptcy.

In terms of overall human behavior, Mohammed's life is upheld as the supreme human model, a basis for unity in the Muslim world. Yet a close reading of the "traditions" can leave the impression of a man with an extensive (and questionable) sexual life, obsessed with his reputation, vindictive toward ideological and intellectual opponents (such as poetess Asma bint Marwan) and ready to order and personally dispense death to unarmed captives by the hundreds (the Banu Quraiza tribe). In fact, one wonders why such a detailed record of Mohammed's life, which paints a far from flattering portrait, would have been kept. But such are the misguided criticisms of infidels. Seen through the assumptions of Islam, the life and doings of Mohammed not only make sense, they are holy. What the Prophet does is moral not because it conforms to

some abstract sense of morality but because it conforms to the Will of God.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF THE FAITH

To fulfill the duties of vice regency and create a just society on earth, humanity must follow “two categories of behavior and ensure balance between them” (Ahmed 2003: 5). The first emphasizes rituals and prayers to establish, as necessary base and starting point, a close relationship to God through the practice of the pillars of Islam while the second deals with broader social action.

In Islam the practice (orthopraxy) of the faith and the timely and proper performance of rites and rituals is of such importance as a duty for believers that it can even trump doctrinal matters and considerations (orthodoxy). There are good reasons for the development of conformity in overt practice and ritual behavior in the absence of an overarching single, hierarchical, and absolute clerical authority (such as the papacy) and in the presence of the great diversity of the peoples under Islam.

The following “five pillars (*rukun*) of Islam” represent that practice:

1. “There is no god but God and Mohammed is the messenger (prophet) of God.” This is the “*shahada*” or declaration of faith which, if voiced formally and with deliberate intent, amounts to conversion to Islam. The first part of this pronouncement is a clear statement of monotheism while the second part embraces Mohammed as the “Seal of Prophets.”

2. Formal prayer (*salat*) and associated ritual ablutions performed five times daily using verses from the Koran. The prayer times vary with seasonal changes in sunrise and sunset. Friday is the day for congregational prayer. *Wird* denotes private prayers in addition to *salat*.

3. For Muslims everything belongs to God including any and all personal wealth. It is a Muslim’s responsibility to give alms (*zakat*) in support of the less fortunate. Such alms are a fixed proportion of income and capital, in the 2.5-3% range, payable annually. They neither include nor preclude additional voluntary contributions (*sadaqa*). Such giving has been a key source for the founding and endowment (*waqf*) of Islamic public institutions, both religious and social.

4. Another pillar of the faith is fasting (*sawm*), particularly dawn to sundown fasting and abstention from conjugal relations during the month of Ramadan. It was during Ramadan that Mohammed is believed to have received the first of the revelations from God later to be written down in the Koran. Ramadan ends with one of two major holidays in Islam, the feast of *Id al-Fitr*, the breaking of the fast.

5. A fifth pillar is an at least once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca, Islam’s most sacred city and birthplace of Mohammed. (“Exhort all men to make the pilgrimage.” Sura 22: 27) The *hajj* must be performed by all Muslims able physically and financially to do so. The *hajj* occurs during the 12th lunar month of the Islamic calendar, thus occurring at different times of the solar calendar year. Its ultimate focal point is the *Kaba* in Mecca. The *Kaba*, Islam’s

holiest shrine, is a cube-shaped stone structure believed by Muslims to have been erected by Abraham and his son Ismail. Built into the *Kaba* is a black stone symbolizing the covenant between God and humanity. Pilgrims seek to touch and kiss the stone. Islamic tradition varies as to whether the stone was given to Abraham or even to Adam. The end of the *hajj* is celebrated by the festival *Id al-Adha* a major celebration in Islam.

The *umra* is a lesser pilgrimage to Mecca which may be performed at any time of the year. Additional sites such as tombs of saints are the object of pilgrimage for some Muslim denominations. But such practices are strongly opposed by Sunni Wahhabis as idol worship. Indeed, Wahhabi “reformers” destroyed the tombs of Kadajah, Mohammed’s wife and of Fatimah, his daughter.

Alongside emphasis on the pillars of Islam, great weight, reminiscent of the Old Testament, is placed on regulating everyday human activity such as the consumption of food (prohibition of the consumption of pork and alcohol) and sexual activity such as the prohibition against sexual relations outside marriage (*zina*).

For Sufis, proper performance of rituals is the precondition for reaching higher levels of religious awareness. For Akbar Ahmed, proper ritual performance creates the conditions for achieving the second category of behavior namely in the realm of social action. Islam is more than performance of rituals. Indeed, “reducing a sophisticated civilization to simple rituals encourages simple answers” (Ahmed 2003: 156). Ahmed, a moderate Muslim, lists the most important of these behavioral goals as *adl* (justice), *ihsan* (compassion), and *ilm* (knowledge), the latter being the second most widely used word in the Koran after God (Ahmed 2003: 6). For bin Laden and radical Islamists unfortunately the realm of social action involves rather less moderate concepts, goals, and behavior. As Ahmed is forced to admit in their regard, “piety and virtue are judged by political action... not moral integrity or spirituality” (Ahmed 2003: 156).

MOSQUE AND MADRASA

The mosque (*masjid* in Arabic meaning “place of prostration”) is the Muslim house of communal worship. The first mosque was built in Medina. Mosques should be oriented toward Mecca. In addition to religious worship, mosques serve as important locations for political and social activities. Thus, as was the case during the Iranian Revolution in the late 1970s and continues to be the case today across the Muslim world, mosques can provide a ready made infrastructure for opposition to a political regime. Given the inability of even dictatorial regimes in Muslim majority countries to close mosques and thus eliminate this organizational and educational infrastructure, “the more oppressive the regime the more it helps the fundamentalists by giving them a virtual monopoly of opposition” (Lewis 2002: 133).

In this context, another very important institution often associated with the mosque is the *madrasa*. Traditionally these schools for religious studies were centers of higher scholarship and advanced learning. In recent years *madrasas*, often financed by Saudi Arabia, have become the means by which radical Islamism has been spread, laying the “foundation for the populist and militant Islamic leadership” of today (Ahmed 2003: 145). Sadly, in such schools, the Koran, a book which through the centuries has been the object of careful and meticulous learned study,

has been degraded into a source for ideologically driven selective justifications.

Ahmed criticizes the limited curriculum of the *madrasas*: “The philosophy of the typical syllabus is reduced to... ‘political Islam’: Islam as a vehicle for all-encompassing change; Islam as a challenge not only to the corrupt local elite but also to the world order; Islam minus its sophisticated legacy of art, culture, mysticism, and philosophy” (Ahmed 2003: 144).

SHARIA

“Muslim normative behavior cannot be understood without the Quran... and the life of the Prophet; together the two form the *Shari’ah* or the Path” (Ahmed 2003: 2).

It is important to grasp the philosophy underlying law in Islam. “How Christians hold the spiritual teachings of Christ to be immutable can be a key for the understanding of how Muslims regard the Shari’ah” (Nasr 2002: 118).

Sharia, meaning “path,” refers to the embodiment of Divine Will in Islamic Divine Law. Such law does not reflect human reason. It is superior even to natural law despite natural law’s claim to transcend time and place. And it most certainly is not mere societal law which only reflects societal peculiarities or worse, cultural trendiness as the law in Western societies seems to do. Law is not to be invented to suit human desires. Rather, law is an expression of God’s Will and is “meant to determine society rather than be determined by it” (Nasr 2002: 116), an interpretation reminiscent of Jewish Old Testament Talmudic Law. The purpose is to make human order conform to God’s norms, not the reverse. Since God’s Will permeates all aspects of life, the distinction between the secular and the sacred in law is effectively removed. And the legal is never separated from the moral.

Accepting *sharia* in practice becomes a precondition for being a Muslim. And living according to the precepts of *sharia* is also a precondition for reaching higher levels of faith and eventually achieving complete surrender to the Will of God.

In practical terms, a system of law was necessitated by the spread of Islam in order to govern wide ranging territories and peoples while maintaining a basic sense of community coherence. While the Koran is the primary and most important source of *sharia*, the *Sunnah* is also a relevant source. Additionally, some legal schools (*madhhab*) use analogical reasoning (*qiyas*) to deal with new situations and accept the basing of legal decisions on existing judgements from the legal schools (*taqlid*), legal consensus (*ijma*), fairness, and even local customs that do not contradict the *sharia*.

Contemporary Sunni Muslims are classified according to four major surviving legal schools (*madhhab*) of Koranic Law: the Hanafi with the largest number of followers in Sunni Islam have a penchant of including local social and legal practices into the *sharia*, the Shafii, the Maliki school, generally conservative in its interpretation of the law, and finally, the literalist and fundamentalist Hanbali school of which Wahhabism is an offshoot. All these schools are part of Islamic orthodoxy and a Muslim may switch from one to another.

Sharia is elaborated through the “principles of jurisprudence” (*fiqh*). *Fiqh* is the “science of deriving juridical decisions from sources (Nasr 2002: 122). The intellectual undertaking of deriving new law from sources is known as *ijtihad*. The problem is that in the “Sunni world the ‘gate of *ijtihad*’ closed after the tenth and eleventh centuries” (Nasr 2002: 123) though this is not the case for Shiite Islam. This closing of the gate led to debates in the past now revived as to whether the gate of *ijtihad* needs reopening in light of the overall challenges posed by modernity and by more specific issues such as environmental ethics and bioethics.

One jurisprudential term receiving widespread negative attention in the Western world is the *fatwa*. *Fatwa* in traditional Islamic jurisprudence refers to a legal opinion or ruling on a point of law made by properly trained expert authority (*mufti*) on the *sharia*. It implies careful study and balancing of the complexity of Koranic injunctions. But it has been degraded to the sanctification of hits on some target defined as infidel such as the author Salmon Rushdie, or, as in the case of bin Laden’s *fatwas*, entire peoples such as Americans. Methods used to carry out these so-called *fatwas*, such as the murder of innocents and the premeditated suicide by the perpetrators are blasphemy in traditional Islamic doctrine.

THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITY (*UMMA*)

The Islamic community is a core concept in the Muslim world view. It constitutes another facet of the stress on unity (*tawhid*) in Islam and reflects the Prophet’s drive to replace the tribal bonds of the Arabian peninsula with a larger identity. It emphasizes communitarianism over individualism. Above all, the emphasis on community has religious significance: “The human community is judged in the Quran according to the degree to which it allows its members to live the good life, in the religious sense, based on moral principles” (Nasr 2002: 159). The rise and fall of communities is seen as intimately tied to their moral corruption, their deviation from religious precepts, and their refusal to heed the messengers of God. Thus the *umma* inevitably and always has “both a political and a religious character” (Johnson 1997: 91).

Fleeing persecution in Mecca, Mohammed and his followers called “Emigrants” (*muhajirin*), some 70 families, retreated to safety and migrated (*hijra*) to Medina (Yathrib) in 622 A.D., a date which became Year One of the Muslim lunar calendar. (Mohammed’s tomb is located in Medina making it Islam’s second holiest location.) In Medina, assisted by locals referred to as “Helpers” (*ansar*), Mohammed the religious leader soon also became the political leader, judge, and military commander of the first Muslim community of believers (*umma*). The Medinese community is still regarded today as the model Islamic community and its image, in addition to the Koran, is an important pan-Islamic unity factor despite the theological, political, racial, and ethnic differences among the world’s Muslims.

Thus, in contrast to Christianity which, for some three centuries operated apart from the state and suffered periods of persecution by the political authorities, Islam from its very start combined religion and politics. It makes no Augustinian distinction between the City of God and the City of Man. The Koran does not contain any foundational text injunction to “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things which are God’s” (Matthew XXII: 21). God alone is sovereign, the source of all authority and thus of all legitimacy. Religion is integral to the political, social, and economic order. Religion is the “defining

ideology of the state” (Johnson 1997: 146). There is no place for the idea of a secular state in the normative tradition of Islam (Johnson 1997: 16). “Islam can never be truly depoliticized; it is inherently political and religious at once, or it is not Islam” (Johnson 1997: 17). Nevertheless, the actual historical interface of Islam and politics has varied greatly. Still, separation is not supported by normative doctrine and the current wave is one of “repoliticization” of Islam, not depoliticization.

In politics, the Koran does not mandate a particular form of government except to emphasize consultation. Several traditions also emphasize the justness and righteousness of the ruler. But for Muslims a political system and socioeconomic order not justified by Islamic faith lacks the most fundamental basis of legitimacy. Consequently, American and Western arguments of separation of church/mosque and state make neither theological nor moral sense for many Muslims. Moreover, this separation, it must be understood, ultimately is not just between the mosque as an institution and the state but between religion as faith and as a complete way of life and politics. The separation also involves religion and law, a principle contrary to the *sharia*.

The ideal of complete absence of separation between the religious and political realms, however, did not stop the breakup of the early Islamic Empire into different political entities and later into modern nations and states (*watan*). Nor did it prevent the actual separation of mosque and state for several reasons. First, the class of religious scholars (*ulama*) was forced to retreat from politics however reluctantly, even prior to the inroads of Western influences, and reluctantly acquiesced in that retreat at times to be allowed to retain its influence in the religious, legal and social spheres. Second, under the influence of Western secularizing trends or later Soviet influenced Arab socialism, the separation was enforced by modernizing domestic elites.

Classical Islam has neither priesthood nor church hierarchy. Nor does it have a laity as such. It does have a class of religious scholars, the *ulama*, (literally “those who know”), the guardians and interpreters of religious and legal traditions. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini’s innovation was to cut out the political middleman in favor of direct rule by the *ulama*. “The Islamic Republic of Iran is the first case in Islamic history in which the religious ‘*ulama*,’ the closest one can come in Islam to a priestly class, has ruled directly over a major Islamic country” (Nasr 2002: 149). Up until then, applying the word theocracy to an Islamic country was something of a mislabel if by theocracy is meant direct governmental rule by the priesthood. As Bernard Lewis puts it: “The emergence of a priestly hierarchy and its assumption of ultimate authority in the state is a modern innovation and is a unique contribution of the late Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran to Islamic thought and practice” (Lewis 2003: 20).

On the one hand, with the precedent set, Iran was not for long the only place where such a development took place. On the other hand, the Khomeini innovation may already have overstayed its welcome in Iran. By 2004 a protest letter by some 100 moderate Iranian legislators, many of whom were denied the right to run for reelection by the clerical Guardian Council, to Iran’s supreme spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini accused him of overseeing a clerical regime which had perverted the spirit of the 1979 Islamic Revolution with the rights and freedoms of Iranians now “trampled in the name of Islam.” The most celebrated Islamic revolution was thus being accused by insiders of betraying its promise. Absolute power, even or

perhaps especially religiously guided one, still corrupts absolutely.

A basic goal of the Koran is the establishment of a just Islamic economic, social, and political order on earth. This global order serving the *umma*, the Islamic community of the faithful, transcends (but does not necessarily obliterate) any other identity differences such as national, racial, ethnic, or cultural ones. Today, the countries in which the *umma* dominates belong to the Organization of the Islamic Conference, a prominent international governmental organization whose defining membership criterion is religion. By contrast, the notion of an international “Organization of Christendom” would be regarded as bizarre today. Indeed, the mere mention of Christianity as source of contemporary Europe’s civilizational heritage is a contentious issue in the drafting of a new European Union constitution.

Muslims should strive to bring about the global Islamic *umma* through the propagation of the faith (*dawa*). The struggle (*jihad*) for the propagation of the faith can focus on returning non-observant Muslims to the faith, on converting non-Muslims or, more personally, on attracting people to Islam by leading exemplary individual lives.

At a minimum, the continued existence of various religious communities, i.e. religious pluralism, is problematic for Muslims as it is for any serious believer in a monotheistic religion claiming possession of the ultimate revealed truth. The existence of the “other” presents a continuous challenge to the “true faith” and the community of the faithful. According to the Koran, God could have willed only one community. (Sura 11:118; 16:93 and 42:8 for example) That God did not is a test for believers and an encouragement to compete in goodness.

Problematic too are the additional contemporary phenomena of secularism, atheism, and agnosticism. “A particularly difficult task, which is also a new one requiring intellectual effort (*ijtihad*) on the highest level by Muslims, is determining the rights of those who do not believe in God and therefore in any responsibilities that people of faith believe they have toward God” (Nasr 2002: 301).

“Today the Islamic *umma*... faces unprecedented challenges from the onslaught of modern secularism and consumerist globalization,” an onslaught driven above all by forces outside the Islamic community and “supported by exceptional military, economic, and political power” (Nasr 2002: 198). These challenges “threaten the very foundations of the Islamic order” (Nasr 2002: 199).

Even local crises involving Muslims concern the entire *umma* considering that Mohammed compared the *umma* to the human body which suffers pain as a whole if one part of the body experiences pain or is afflicted by illness.

To avoid the temptation of the non-believer, some Muslims (like some Jews and Christians) preach strict separation between believers and non-believers, a form of *hijra* reminiscent of Mohammed’s leaving the infidel city of Mecca to establish the first Islamic *umma* in Medina. But, in a subsequent step, the emigration or *hijra* from the infidel world is but a regrouping which must be followed by the struggle or *jihad* to advance the true faith.

Moderate Muslims remind us of Sura 2: Verse 256 of the Koran which states that “there is no compulsion in religion.” But radical Islamists tend to conflate God and the group or community allowing them to defend the community in the name of God. The result is a “frenetic, distorted and dangerous form” of group solidarity bent on honor through revenge (Ahmed 2003: 162-163).

DAR AL-ISLAM

The struggle to propagate the faith raises the prospect of using military means, i.e. *jihad*, to accomplish the goal of vanquishing the unbelievers and infidels.

Classic Islamic juristic thought assumes that the world is divided into two parts, a fundamentally important distinction. It is important to note that the following categories conceive of religion as territorial realm not as defining only individuals souls regardless of where the live and in what numbers. There follows a desire to control space.

First there is the *dar al-Islam*, the peaceful abode of the Islamic *umma* or realm of the true believer community where submission to the Will of God is practiced. Put differently it is the world of the Pax Islamica. In historical reality, of course, this realm was neither as united nor as peaceful as nostalgia would have it. The *dar al-Islam* can include non-Muslim minority communities of monotheistic believers who have submitted to Islamic rule, who must pay a religious poll tax on adult males (*jizya*), and accept certain restrictions, traditionally for example on dress, use of colors, bearing of arms, riding of horses, owning Muslim slaves, holding authority over a Muslim, and building new churches. Litigation between a Muslim and non-Muslim had to be pursued in a Muslim court.

Non-Muslim subject peoples in the *dar al-Islam* were called *dhimmi*. The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims was one of Muslim superiority and *dhimmi* inferiority. There is substantial disagreement on how harsh or benign *dhimmi* status was in actual historical fact. While enjoying varying degrees of protection over centuries, unlike Jewish communities in Christendom, *dhimmi* communities would be regarded by today’s standards as having the status of second class citizens well short of enjoying democratic minority rights. In historical practice *dhimmi* status was sometimes maintained because conversion to Islam was forbidden for the purpose of maintaining the poll tax base. One of the most objectionable historical practices suffered by non-Muslims occurred under the Ottoman Empire namely the abduction and forced recruitment of Christian boys to be converted to Islam and become janissaries, among the most feared elite soldiers of Islam.

A select geographical core of the *dar al-Islam*, the holy land of the *Hijaz* in western Arabia with the cities of Mecca and Medina, is off limits to all except Muslims. This prohibition against outsiders dates back to Caliph Umar who based himself on a deathbed utterance by the Prophet Mohammed that there “not be two religions in Arabia.” In general, the idea of the *dar al-Islam* is a very tangible, territorial conception of the abode of the true believer not a more spiritual state of grace. This places a premium on unquestioned control of territory to assure proper belief (for the significance of such an attitude see the section on “spatial aspects” and “territoriality” in the discussion on fundamentalism).

Islam seeks to maintain its adherents and lead the rest of humanity to the “Abode of Peace,” a reflection of the yearning for the ultimate peace in God (Nasr 2002: 217). For Muslims only religion is able to lead to that peace. Thus, extending the peaceful abode of the true believer is not imperialism but conversion, a religious duty seen as obligatory to expand mankind’s obedience to God.

Second, and in stark contrast to the *dar al-Islam*, there continues to exist the *dar al-harb*, the territory of war and the realm of infidels and unbelievers where Muslim law does not apply and Muslims cannot easily live a life of faith. It is a territory “continually at war with itself, and it is in a perpetual state of conflict with the dar al-Islam,” (Johnson 1997: 48) a conflict that will end only upon the global eradication of the realm of war (Ibid: 51). As far as classical Islam is concerned, the hostility between these two realms is not the result only of acts of war but it is “thematic and systematic” (Johnson 1997: 52). The absence of war between the two realms is a mere temporary interlude and a peace agreement a mere armistice. Such views have the potential of leading followers of Islam in a direction which raises the prospect of a “clash of civilizations” with non-Muslims.

On the other hand, later Islamic jurists, especially of the Shafii school, have added a third category, *dar al-sulh*, translated confusingly as the ‘Abode of Peace’ by Nasr (Nasr 2002: 163) and translated more logically as “House of Truce” by Bernard Lewis (Lewis 2002: 42). James Turner Johnson also refers to the similar *dar al-‘ahd* or territory of peaceful covenant (Johnson 1997: 144). Such a conceptualization opens the way to compromise. This realm is not part of the Islamic abode but it is a realm where Muslims can practice their faith in peace. Some Muslims are willing to apply this concept to the United States, reflecting recognition of its freedom of and respect for religion. But the aftermath of September 11, 2001, as Ahmed points out, has undermined the promise of America as a “new Andalusia” where different religions could coexist in peace (Ahmed 2003: 39). The reference to “new Andalusia” as model begs an important question: how representative was Moorish Spain (al Andalus) of Muslim historic practice in general with regard to tolerance of diverse religions inside the *dar al-Islam*?

Ultimately the focus on and fascination with the notion of the *umma* bespeaks of a degree of nostalgia for a fantasy for “even in the early years of Islam and throughout the classical age of Islamic jurisprudence, the ideal of statecraft by which the *dar al-Islam* was understood as a single religio-political entity under unitary rule, opposed only by the non-Muslim *dar al-Harb*, did not correspond to the actual political shape of the Islamic world” (Johnson 1997: 139).

JIHAD

“The subject of war for religion is one on which the cultures of Islam and the West are deeply divided. While for common opinion in the West such warfare is a phenomenon belonging to less advanced stages of civilization, for many in the contemporary Islamic world the idea of warfare for religion represents a dynamic force for causes ranging from spiritual renewal to violent struggle in the name of Islam” (Johnson 1997: 9).

“Jihad is a defining concept or belief in Islam, a key element in what it means to be a

believer and follower of God's Will" (Esposito 2002: 26). All life is a *jihad* given the human condition in an imperfect world. *Jihad* is not one of the pillars of Islam even though "the performance of all the acts of worship certainly involves *jihad*" (Nasr 2002: 259). But radical Islamists have de facto and in their minds turned it into the sixth pillar of Islam.

The term *jihad* cannot be reduced to or adequately rendered by such translations as "holy war." In Arabic *jihad* means to struggle, to strive, to exert effort, specifically in the path of God but more generally for a worthy cause. It is a prerequisite for carrying out any act pleasing to God. While the concept is nowadays popularly associated with war or worse, terrorism, *jihad*, at its most basic level, refers to an individual believer's spiritual struggle to live a virtuous, moral, god-fearing life of faith, to struggle against temptation (*jihad* of the heart), to witness and testify to one's faith to others, i.e. to propagate the faith and proclaim Allah's word (*jihad* of the mouth) and to do good deeds (*jihad* of the hand). Indeed the *jihad* of the heart is defined as the higher, greater (*akbar*) form of struggle while war against infidels and unbelievers outside the *umma* and apostates and heretics threatening unity within, i.e. the *jihad* of the sword, is considered the lesser *jihad*. According to a *hadith*, the best *jihad* is the conquest of the self in the service of God.

Understandably, the higher *jihad* aspects are highlighted today by those who wish to counter the emphasis on "holy war" as religious-military obligation. Indeed, when the Koran "provides a direct injunction to Muslims to fight, the word used is not *jihad* but *qital* ('fighting') or another word built from the same root" (Johnson 1997: 35). But outside the Koran, Islamic tradition and practice very early on associated *jihad* and *qital* (Johnson 1997: 61).

Koranic references to *jihad* of the Meccan period, with the followers of Mohammed as a struggling minority, stress the moral struggle dimensions while the later Koranic references of the Medina period and the successful rise of the *umma* take on more directly military meaning. War becomes an aspect of statecraft with booty as significant incentive. Early Muslim interpretations after the death of Mohammed emphasized precisely the so-called lower *jihad* as Islam, by conversion but also by war and conquest, spread rapidly and successfully. "When the classical jurists employed the term in the context of relations with the dar al-harb, it is clear that they meant actual warfare and not simply missionary work or personal efforts at self-purification to resist the temptations offered by the territory of unbelief" (Johnson 1997: 61). The preponderance of the "traditions" in the *Sunnah* relating to *jihad* focus on warfare not on spiritual striving. No doubt then, the military and militant aspect of *jihad* is an aspect of the Koran in particular (Sura 2:190-194; 9:5; and 47:4 for example) and Islam in general.

"While for the (contemporary - emphasis added) West war for religion is divisive and terrible, for Islam *jihad* as war for religion is not divisive but unifying, and what is terrible is the world of strife *jihad* seeks to bring to an end" (Johnson 1997: 18). Its "fundamental objective" is to "universalize the Islamic faith" (Johnson 1997: 115) and the enemy is defined in religious terms as being in a state of rebellion against God. And *jihad* "as the warfare of the Islamic state became the preeminent vehicle by which Islam dealt with the sphere of unbelief, identified as the *dar al-harb*" (Johnson 1997: 146).

During the existence of the Ottoman Empire warfare for the faith or *ghaza* became the

“foundation stone of the Ottoman state” (Johnson 1997: 152) and the successful pursuit of the *ghaza* “served as the basis for a claim of leadership of the dar al-Islam” (Ibid.).

Jihad contains elements of *bellum justum* (“just war”), not unlike those discussed by medieval Christian writers. Among the criteria for making *jihad* a just war was the emphasis on right authority, on its defensive nature and on the importance of respecting the rules of war (*ius in bello*) such as prohibitions against killing women, prepubescent children, and the elderly and against torture of prisoners. But those who refused the call to Islam or submission might be put to death unless deemed otherwise useful. No allowance is made in classical Islam for the murder of innocent bystanders and non-combatants though they can be turned into slaves as part of the booty of war. Indeed, early Islam had a “functional approach” to noncombatancy (Johnson 1997: 120). Noncombatants are spared not because they have inherent rights as human beings but because they may be of value. But as in Christianity such injunctions often went and continue to go unobserved in practice.

In normative Islamic tradition a key distinction is made between offensive and defensive *jihad*. In early Islam offensive *jihad* was to be conducted under right authority once a year unless the circumstances were unfavorable (Johnson 1997: 91). Offensive *jihad* in Sunni Islam required approval by the caliph, as religious and political authority, in consultation with the *ulama* while in Shiite Islam it necessitated the approval of the Imam. Shiite hesitancy about offensive war is also attributable to the fact that as minority they could be the target of Sunni religious war against apostasy. Since neither caliph nor Imam exists at this time to provide authorization, logically, offensive *jihad* cannot be initiated. The offensive aspect of a “right to war” (*ius ad bellum*) is thus foreclosed. However, in the past, temporal rulers, declaring themselves leaders of the faithful, have set the precedent for taking over the authorization function. And another avenue of the “right to war” remains wide open, namely defensive *jihad*.

In the contemporary world radical Islamists have blurred the line between offensive and defensive *jihad* and erased the line between combatants and bystanders. First, since the Muslim *umma* is deemed as already under US and Jewish (or Russian or fill in the blank) assault, any response to these attacks is by definition defensive. The Koran, moderates point out, enjoins believers to “fight for the sake of God those who fight against you, but do not attack them first. God does not love aggressors” (Chapter 2: Verse 190). But if hostilities are declared by radicals as having already been initiated by infidels, the limitation is moot and *jihad* becomes a global revolutionary struggle. Second, since no land once part of the *dar al-Islam* (such as al-Andalus, i.e. Moorish Spain and all of Palestine) can ever be definitively renounced as no longer belonging to Islam, a military recovery strategy is always latent. Third, the classification of all US, Israeli Jewish and now Russian citizens, civilian or not, as legitimate targets merely for supporting their government by their taxes and voting for their representatives, makes a mockery of classical Islamic rules of war which exclude innocent civilians from deliberate harm in war.

Offensive *jihad* is a community obligation under proper leadership with a list of exemptions for participation which includes such categories as women and youth lacking parental permission to participate. Under defensive *jihad* conditions, it has traditionally been the personal obligation of every individual Muslim, male or female, young or old, to join in the defense of Islam even in the absence of a call by a formal leader. In the modern context,

defensive *jihad* consequently has undergone another disturbing development, a self-authorization by individual faith alone (see Johnson 1997: 150-151). In the contemporary world the individual obligation provision of defensive *jihad* has led to a dramatic proliferation of self-authorization by groups and individuals to declare themselves under attack, select threats, and engage in war. This proliferation of self-authorization is a key enabling factor in the proliferation of terrorist groups and even individual terrorist acts. This is ironic since the discipline imposed by *jihad* was originally designed to curb tribalism and “all the centrifugal forces that threatened the unity of the Islamic community” (Nasr 2002: 256). In defensive *jihad* the moral act is the duty to resist and to serve and uphold the greater Islamic moral order. The moral consequences for the individual fighting or others caught up in the struggle are unimportant.

Just like Saladin opposing the Crusaders not as religious leader (caliph or imam) but as political leader of the faithful engaged in a defensive *jihad*, so now new Saladins (bin Laden for example) are waging the war against infidels and Crusaders. “Their authority as leaders” of *jihad* does not “flow downward from the juridically correct authority of caliph or *imam* but upward from the religious and moral authority implied by the individual obligations of every Muslim” (Johnson 1997: 156). And the very act itself of waging such a war confers authority on the warriors for the faith. The successful warrior “gains legitimacy by proving his *baraka*” (Johnson 1997: 165). *Baraka* refers to charisma derived from divine blessings reminiscent of those conferred by God on the Prophet himself. Consequently, if these warriors are seen to be failing their *baraka*, their legitimacy is undermined.

Jihad shares a further element with Christian religious warfare: its crusading zeal. But the first Christian Crusade was preceded by over a thousand years of Christian history devoid of such a concept. And there is no theological basis whatsoever in the New Testament to justify the Crusades. The justification for the Crusade is more easily found in classical just war theory which recognized as valid defense against wrongdoing, punishment of wrongdoing and recovery of property lost to wrongdoing. The conviction, so widespread as to be almost universal in the contemporary Muslim world, that the Muslim-Christian confrontation started with the Crusades is real. But the perception is also as convenient as it is inaccurate: the first Crusade was preceded by some 450 years of Muslim conquest and domination of largely Christian areas in the Middle East, Asia Minor and North Africa. Muslim armies invaded Spain as early as 711 and reached within less than 100 kilometers of Paris by 732 before being defeated at the battle of Tours by the Franks under Charles Martel, over three and one half centuries before the first crusade. The first attacks on Constantinople occurred within a few years following the death of Mohammed. In contrast to Christianity, *jihad* is present at and from the outset in Islam and the Koran does not forbid it even today. Neither is there a normative tradition of pacifism in mainstream Islam. In fact the Koran makes it abundantly clear that idolatry is worse than carnage (Sura 2: 190-193).

In the Western world, after *much* religiously driven warfare, religious war, especially in the wake of the carnage of the “Thirty Years War” in the first half of the 17th century, became one of the first reasons for war (*casus belli*) to be regarded as morally unacceptable and to be outlawed as a legitimate reason for claiming a right to go to war (*ius ad bellum*). War for religion would become rejected by normative Christian doctrine. This rejection was also a separate legacy of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment and its secular assault on religion.

Recal, for example, Voltaire's scathing and contemptuous portrayal in "Candide" of two armies each invoking God before the carnage. The spheres of religion and war became increasingly separated. Eventually the separation of church and state deprived the state of a religious justification to go to war. Instead the state and the nation were elevated to values worthy of *casus belli* status. Europeans would go on fighting wars of great scope and brutality among themselves and against non-Europeans but not for religious reasons. And war-shy contemporary Europeans (joined by like-minded Americans) look down upon a culture that practices war for religion, as evidenced in the unprecedented contempt shown for an American President whom they accuse of too much religiosity.

In Islam *jihad* retains its central role as rationale for war. "Inasmuch as Islam was a universalist system of belief... war was the ultimate device for incorporating recalcitrant peoples into the peaceful territory of Islam" (Dougherty 2001: 198). And today's radical Islamist groups using the term *jihad* in their organizational titles "do not use the word to denote moral striving" (Lewis 2003: 37). Thus, the differences between Islam and Christianity (and its secular Western offshoots) in their respective "normative conceptions" of war for religion are "profound": "while the West... sees in jihad a threat to civilization itself, traditional Islamic culture finds in the Western concept of the secular state, the very political institution which makes holy war unthinkable, an offense to God's will for the right ordering of human community" (Johnson 1997: 15).

Against this background, arguments made by moderate Muslims (mostly to Western audiences) that "verses about fighting Jews and Christians - or Muslims who are considered 'hypocrites' - must be understood relative to a specific situation and time frame" (Ahmed 2003: 10) and that belligerent verses of the Koran are "taken out of context" are welcome but ultimately unconvincing particularly in light of the additional consideration that the Koran, as the word of God, is valid for all times. The simple fact remains that these moderates within Islam must win the debate with other Muslims for their interpretation to prevail.

Unfortunately, according to Egyptian radical Sayyid Qutb, the ideological brain behind modern radical Islamism, *jihad* should be pursued not just for defense but to eradicate all worship of false gods and to establish the universal Muslim society. Just as Mohammed destroyed Arabian paganism (*jahiliyya* - from the word *jahl* meaning ignorance) so Qutb's and now his disciples' rage against the "new age of ignorance" mandates the destruction of the contemporary *jahiliyya* whose head is the United States. It is ironic that bin Laden's call for a holy war against "crusaders" is itself a radical Islamic version of a crusade against the West in general and the United States in particular. While some authors, prematurely and optimistically were pointing out not so long ago that the militant, expansionist interpretation of *jihad* had seemingly become outdated in modern times, it has clearly been revived by extremists. The radicals' call is but a new iteration of mankind's recurring utopian temptation to seek a perfect and final solution, this one steeped in the nostalgia for a seventh century religious "Golden Age" and subsequent political empire.

SUNNIS AND SHIITES

A crucial denominational difference in Islam, the Sunni-Shiite division has been called

“the most important in the formal structure of Islam” (Nasr 2002:63), occasionally deteriorating to the level of Muslim civil war. While Sunnis constitute roughly 85% of Muslims, Shiites make up a mere 13% but enjoy a fairly high level of geographic concentration and an influence disproportionate to their numbers. The name “Sunni” relates to the fact that they are defined as *ahl al-Sunna*, people of the *Sunnah*, followers of the practices of the Prophet. Shiites are not a mere denominational sect. The appropriate but rough analogy in Christianity is Eastern Orthodoxy, present in the Christian religion from the outset, not the later Protestantism.

The major points of disagreement between Sunnis and Shiites involve first, the succession to Mohammed and second, the qualifications of any successor.

Regarding succession, Shiites are followers or “partisans” of Ali (*Shiat Ali*), the fourth and last of the “rightly guided” (*rashidun*) caliphs and Mohammed’s son-in-law. Denied immediate successor status by the intervening three caliphs who succeeded Mohammed, Ali himself nonetheless refused to oppose their succession and eventually did become caliph. After the quiet interlude of Ali’s son Hasan, Ali’s line was further violated, in Shiite eyes, by the murder of his son Hussein who perished at Karbala in 680 A.D. trying to oppose the Damascus based Umayyad caliphate. The massacre at Karbala, located in today’s southern Iraq, lies at the root of Shiite emphasis on sacrifice and martyrdom and its annual commemoration in Shiite Islam (*ashura*) is outranked in importance only by the *hajj* itself.

Regarding the qualifications of a successor, Shiites insist that he must have the “deepest knowledge of Islamic Law” (Nasr 2002: 66) and of the Koran. He cannot merely be a ruler, albeit just, of the Islamic realm but must be an Imam, inerrant, protected from sin, mystical, a spiritual guide with perfect knowledge of both the inner and outer, spiritual and legal meanings of the Koran. He is not elected but chosen. While Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini did not explicitly claim to be the Twelfth Imam, the aura of an imam which surrounded him placed him beyond legitimate criticism. All Shiite imam’s are descendants of Hussein’s one surviving son. In Sunni practice the term imam is often used to denote a local religious leader.

Differences between Twelver Shiites and others relate to disagreements over the line of Imams. The Twelver Shiites believe that the last Imam, Mohammed al-Mahdi is not dead but in “occultation” and will reappear in the end times to reestablish justice and peace on earth, an eschatological expectation known as Mahdism (from the term *Mahdi* or the “awaited one”). Sunnis use the term imam much more loosely to denote great religious scholars.

As a minority, sometimes violently persecuted by Sunni Muslims, the Shiites evolved the principle of dissimulation (*taqiyyah*), giving them the ability to hide their denominational preference in the face of danger to life and property.

SUFISM

Sufism refers to a mystical strand in Islam organized into various “orders” (*taifa*) with Sufi masters as the spiritual guides of their respective orders. Both Sunnis and Shiites can be Sufis. Sufism thus is an “inner dimension of religion” which transcends the outer Shiite-Sunni divide (Nasr 2002: 63). Sufis strive to achieve higher levels of faith and progressive degrees of

perfection. Sufi orders trace their spiritual authority back through “initiatic chains” of masters. The orders have played a significant role in the spread of Islam, especially into South-East Asia.

The Sufi mystic notion of merging with God, *ana al-haqq* “I am God,” is regarded as sacrilegious by more orthodox Muslims (Ahmed 2003: 4). But the Sufi mysticism and the advocacy of *sulh-i-kul*, “peace with all” could become the basis of a modernized Islam reconciled to live in peace in the world alongside others. This argument is a key conclusion of Malise Ruthven’s Islam in the World (see Ruthven 2000: 398-401). First, Ruthven argues that the “battle to ‘save Islam’ from the destructive power of modernity has been lost.” Consequently, the exoteric manifestations of Islam such as the orthopraxy of the five pillars and the rigid application of *sharia* are no longer sufficient to save Islam. Unfortunately, given Islam’s crisis of theological authority, new interpretations “consonant with the needs of the modern world” keep running into rigid resistance (Ruthven 2000: 398). The challenge is to find a form of Islam that can restore and preserve Muslim dignity in the face of modernization and globalization. The solution is to be “found in those Islamic traditions that resisted the encroachments of populist orthopraxy in the past, notably the spiritual disciplines of Sufism and the forward- looking orientations of modern Shi’ism” (Ruthven 2000: 399). What is needed is a renewal of mysticism in combination with metaphorical, not literal understandings of the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet. But, to the extent that Islam is very much a worldly religion intent on structuring society according to its norms, the internalization of the faith by individuals such as Sufis is unlikely to be a satisfactory solution for many. It should also be recalled that Sufi orders have on occasion provided the organizational base for anti-Western protest and resistance movements.

WAHHABISM

Named after Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), the Wahhabi movement is an 18th century puritanical reformist movement which started out in the Nadj of Southern Arabia then ruled by a local sheik of the House of Saud. It opposes, then and now, the accretions and “innovations” in Islam in theology, philosophy, arts, culture, and social norms after the first two to three centuries of Islam. It aims at a return to what it believes to be authentic Islam. In that it is compulsively atavistic.

A first alliance between Wahhabis and the House of Saud posed a serious challenge to the Ottoman sultan and was defeated by the Ottoman Turks. “The second alliance of Wahhabi doctrine and Saudi force began in the last years of the Ottoman Empire...” (Lewis 2003: 123). The victorious House of Saud, in control of Saudi Arabia and with Wahhabism as state doctrine, would spread this interpretation of Islam with its oil revenues financing a *madrassa* infrastructure abroad.

For Wahhabism, *kalam* i.e theological discussion is forbidden. Wahhabism strongly opposes Shiite Islam as well as the more mystical manifestation of Islam in Sufism. It regards the worship of saints as apostasy, calling it a form of *shirk*, in its worship of created beings alongside uncreated Allah.

CALIPH (KHALIFA)

An Arab word meaning “deputy” and “successor,” the term in its broadest sense refers to humanity’s status of viceregency on earth on God’s behalf.

More specifically, it denotes the earliest successors to Mohammed as leaders of the Islamic state. The first four caliphs, called the “rightly guided” ones, were Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali, the latter being also the first Imam in the Shiite tradition. Three of them were murdered, two by disgruntled but devout followers of Islam. Subsequently the term was used in Sunni Islam by some Muslim rulers including Ottoman Turkish rulers. It is not to be confused with sultan, i.e. ruler or sovereign, though some rulers combined the two designations. A related term, *Amir al-Muimin*, meaning “Commander of the Faithful,” adds some confusion in that it designates caliphs but has also been applied to some sultans. The term emir generally means military commander but also ruler.

“For Sunni tradition the caliphate and its successors represented the union of political and religious rule initiated by Muhammad. In practice, however, the caliphs functioned as temporal rulers.... For the Shi’ites the same was true of the imamate, though in reverse: the imam was held to be the only legitimate heir to both religious and political power, but in practice the imams were restricted to religious leadership of the Shi’ite community while the caliphs and not the imams held actual power in the Islamic community as a whole” (Johnson 1997: 95-96).

Upon the death of Mohammed, the “spiritual and prophetic mission...was completed. What remained was the religious task of spreading God’s revelation” (Lewis 2003: 7). Thus the caliphs are less the spiritual head of Sunni Islam than the “religious and political head of the Muslim state and community” (Lewis 2003: xvii). They are certainly not prophets in their own right. “Each caliph was also imam (heir to the Prophet) for the community as a whole though the caliphs were admitted to lack the special divine guidance received by Mohammed” (Johnson 1997: 93).

The abolition of the caliphate, the symbol, at least for Sunni Muslims, of the unity of the Muslim *umma*, by the Turks in 1924 (after briefly separating the caliph from the sultan) was a form of decapitation of the community. Interestingly, one of bin Laden’s major demands is the restoration of the caliphate as symbol of Sunni dominated Muslim unity.

CONCLUDING COMMENTARY

Extremism - critics of and within Christianity point to the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch burning, religious wars and persecution, anti-Semitic pogroms, and now anti-abortion and anti-gay violence - it must be emphasized, is not the exclusive prerogative of any one religion. Contemporary Islam as religion and civilization is far more than the manifestations of Islamist extremism. But it serves no purpose, indeed it is a dangerous delusion, to argue that extremism, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or Hindu, has “nothing to do with” and is “not real” or “not true” Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Hinduism. The radicals, extremists, purists, or fundamentalists would be the first to insist that their interpretation of the faith is indeed the only “real” one. They deserve to be taken seriously. Bin Laden’s statements make it abundantly clear that his attacks on the United States were the acts of a Muslim doing God’s work. In his mind and in those of his followers their actions have everything to do with Islam. Their message has

appeal and their attacks are celebrated in the Muslim world. And the *ulama* are split on the legitimacy of those acts with expressed opinion ranging from condemnation (all too rare) to frequent nods of toleration, given offenses to Muslims, to religious legitimation and outright and enthusiastic endorsement.

On the one hand, the preservation of the ability to insist on what is or is not the “real” religion is vital for the continuation of theological debates. A debate on what constitutes the “real” and “true” faith is an argument that can be used to distinguish religious orthodoxy and sound theological adaptations rooted in profound learning from the abuse of superficial, politically motivated interpretations. On the other hand, to insist that extremism is not the “real” religion is a form of denial of the existence of a manifestation of the faith that can have and has had terrible consequences for its own believers as seekers of truth, for other-believers and for non-believers. Ahmed, using Sura 5:32, may argue that the “actions of the nineteen hijackers had little to do with Islamic theology since killing a single innocent is like killing all humanity” (Ahmed 2003: 9) and “had nothing to do with Islam” (Ahmed 2003: 31). But the hijackers of September 11 and their masters acted as self-conscious Muslims. And Ahmed does admit the “the causes and consequences of their actions will have everything to do with how and where Islam is going in the 21st century” (Ahmed 2003: 31).

If the radical Islamists are not to represent Islam, moderates within Islam must win the argument. To do so they must refute extremist interpretations of the Koran with the Koran itself, not an easy task. Advancing moderate interpretations, however, continues to have serious and sometimes deadly consequences for those who dare to speak up. With frustrating regularity Muslim proponents of moderation in Islam tend to end up advocating their cause from the relative safety of Western societies in which they live as exiles. In this context, Ahmed laments the absence of a geographical center of Islamic learning, thinking and rethinking and a situation where the *ulama* is caught between the threats of hell (*jahannum*) by radical Islamists and the threats of jail by repressive political rulers (Ahmed 2003: 91-93).

Rather than rejecting one’s own religion’s capacity to exhibit extremism and comforting oneself with the denial that extremism is alien to the “true” interpretation of one’s own or, in the name of intercultural and interdenominational “understanding,” is alien to the sympathetic understanding of other peoples’ religion, it must be acknowledged head on that such extremism is and can be a manifestation of a particular religion and of religion as such. Bin Laden makes no sense and has no appeal outside Islam (except perhaps among viscerally anti-American intellectual circles) just as the Crusades made no sense and would have had no appeal outside the world view of Christianity of the time. This is not to deny that in both cases power political and other motives contributed to events.

Bin Laden’s appeal derives from predecessors such as Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), one of contemporary radical Islamism’s preeminent ideologists, who identified the ultimate threat to Islam not as the military power of a scientifically and technologically advanced infidel state (which can be defeated with proper resolve and asymmetrical warfare adaptations) but as the subversive cultural temptation which corrodes the mind and soul of Muslim believers. A precision guided munition accurately targeted on a group of “holy warriors” can transform a believer into a martyr but a television program portraying a permissive, morally corrupt, and

degenerate lifestyle could turn the seduced believer into an infidel. Martyrdom is infinitely preferable.

“Satan as depicted in the Qu’ran is neither an imperialist nor an exploiter. He is a seducer, ‘an insidious tempter who whispers in the hearts of men’” (Lewis 2003: 81). Ayatollah Khomeini’s “designation of the United States as ‘the Great Satan’ was telling, and for the members of Al-Qa’ida it is the seduction of America and its profligate, dissolute way of life that represents the greatest threat to the kind of Islam they wish to impose on their fellow Muslims” (Lewis: 2003: 163). The materialism, consumerism, sensuality, and sexuality of American society simultaneously attracts, tempts but also repels. It deserves contempt. Thus one key element in answering the question “why do they hate us?” must include a realization that their hatred is “a rejection of Western civilization as such, not so much for what it does as for what it is, and for the principles and values that it practices and professes” (Lewis: 2003: 26). Implicit is a rejection of the principle of freedom which allows such excesses. This argument does in no way exclude other important reasons for the hatred of the West including colonialism, support for dictators, and conditions of poverty and despair, reasons more in tune (unlike sexual freedom, gay rights and same sex marriages condemned by Muslims but upheld by the West’s own progressive critics) with obligatory recognition of Western guilt and round-up-the-usual-suspects excuses for Islamist extremism.

We need to realize that both our official policies and our day-to-day social behavior, our actions or inactions but also our beliefs and values will be fodder used to condemn us. Islamist extremists “are hostile and dangerous, not because we need an enemy but because they do” (Lewis 2003: 28). It is sobering to remind us of the extremists’ demands. A November 2002 “letter to America” attributed to bin Laden makes plain a staggering agenda of what the US is “called to do” and what they “want” from us (Lewis 2003: 157). First, embrace Islam; second “stop oppression, lies, immorality and debauchery”; third admit that America is a “nation without principles or manners” (Lewis 2003:157-158). The first three demands are cultural behavior and value related demands. Consequently sites of degeneracy such as the Bali discotheque, where mostly Australian victims served as convenient stand-ins for hedonistic Americans, become legitimate targets. Only then does the letter raise more specifically foreign policy related demands: stop supporting Israel, India, the Philippines, and Russia as oppressors of Muslims; leave the Muslims lands; stop supporting “corrupt leaders,” interfere neither in domestic politics nor, significantly, in education.

Islam’s early rapid victories reinforced the belief in the correctness of the faith. Regarding the “what went wrong?” line of argumentation of Bernard Lewis (see Lewis 2002), the Koran states that “If God aideth you, no one shall overcome you,” (3:159) but the inferior Europeans turned the tide on Islam and colonized much of the Muslim world. For Islam, the “situation created a crisis of cosmic proportions with eschatological overtones” (Nasr 2002: 102). Explanations varied. The weakness of Islam in the face of Europeans could be explained as the result of straying from the straight and true path, in which case puritanical reforms such as Wahhabism, which return Islam to its early true path, are in order. Some have explained the situation as the foretold trials preceding the end times. Others insist the situation necessitates the reform and modernization of Islam itself. The latter opened the door for secular nationalism, continued cultural Westernization, or Marxist influences in the context of the Cold War. But

secular nationalist and Arab socialist options now look like a failure.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr retorts that the “what went wrong” question is blatant Western civilizational hubris. It should be “what went wrong” in the Western world, a civilization which abandoned the primacy of religious and spiritual principles, placed man at the center of its world view, elevated science over wisdom, and now finds itself facing social breakdown, empty materialism, and an aesthetic wasteland which celebrates the ugly and the outrageous (Nasr 2002: 310). For Nasr, religions guard the sacred and contemporary Islam “has a particularly important role in carrying out this duty. Therefore, whenever the sacred is attacked and challenged by the forces of desecralization and nihilism, Islam is destined to display a particularly combative spirit to respond to this challenge” (Nasr 2002: 272). Unlike the Islamist extremists, however, Nasr warns that Islam’s combative spirit must not degenerate into terrorist violence which destroys “the sacred message of Islam itself.”

Civilizational breakdown, what Emile Durkheim called social “anomie,” in the Islamic world, caused by Westernization and globalization, are the starting points for Akbar Ahmed’s thesis in Islam Under Siege. Using the great Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun’s (1332-1406) concept of “*asabiyya*,” a word derived from the Arabic root *assab* meaning to bind and referring to social cohesion, group solidarity and loyalty, Ahmed’s central thesis is that global changes have led to social breakdown and the loss of honor and dignity in traditional societies, undermining family, tribe, nation, and religion. Traditional Muslim “*asabiyya*” has collapsed, resulting in a reaction of “obsessive” group loyalty “usually expressed through hostility” and violence (Ahmed 2003: 14). Understanding the collapse of *asabiyya* is a precondition for understanding what ails Muslim societies. The collapse has resulted in a reactive “hyper-*asabiyya*,” a desperate attempt to recapture group solidarity manifested in a hyper-*umma* sensitivity and a perverted fascination with honor and revenge where honor becomes “an exaggerated expression of group loyalty defined through violence” (Ahmed 2003: 57). “By dishonoring others, such people think they are maintaining honor” (Ahmed 2003: 15). Furthermore, the collapse of traditional Islamic learning and scholarship has opened the way for the populist Koranic interpretation quackery of bin Laden’s ilk. “Hyper-*asabiyya* is cause and symptom of the post-honor world in which we live” (Ahmed 2003: 15).

What is needed in Ahmed’s mind is the growth in Islam of leadership with political and moral authority capable of balancing action and spirituality. It is leadership intent on providing justice (*adl*) and creating conditions for compassion, balance (*ihsan*), and knowledge (*ilm*) designed to overcome the chaos (*fitna*) and conflict (*shar*) afflicting the Muslim community which is reacting to global transformations that challenge its identity with a sense of seething anger and siege mentality. But a reconstituted *asabiyya* as “an organizing principle is not ‘value-free’,” Ahmed reminds us (Ahmed 2003: 77). Social order reflects moral order after all.

Sometimes, to overcome stereotypes which condemn, there is a tendency to bend over backwards in the name of reconciliation and understanding. But such sympathy can lead to embracing simplistic slogans such as “Islam Means Peace.” It may be a cry against the perceived and actual vilification of Islam but it does not advance understanding. First, such a slogan is no more and no less meaningful than a slogan such as “Christianity Means Brotherly Love.” Both may be assertions of ideals and deeply desired preferences by well-intentioned

people of good will but neither is an accurate and complete depiction of reality, past and present. Second, though linguistically related to the word “peace” (*salam*), the primary meaning of Islam is surrender to the Will of God, the only path by which genuine peace may be found. Third, the slogan is tautological, i.e. true by definition, if one assumes that Muslims inhabit the peaceful abode of the true believer while non-Muslims live in the realm of war. Fourth, people seem to love their own version of peace best and problems arise when such definitions do not coincide with the preferred definition of peace as seen through the eyes and reflecting the interests of others. Peace in the Middle East has several definitions. Unfortunately they have so far been incompatible. Fifth, those well-intentioned people both inside Islam and outside of it who embrace the slogan will have to struggle mightily, sometimes in the face of great danger, to establish in fact what the slogan asserts as desirable. This raises the question of who speaks for Islam and a sixth point: what about the Koranic injunctions and prophetic traditions that justify violence? What do they mean? They have not only been interpreted metaphorically and even learned Muslim scholars today show much equivocation over their interpretation and practical application.

Today, there is a great deal of tacit if not explicit agreement between practicing Jews, Christians and Muslims that large aspects of what passes for culture in the West in general and the United States in particular is an abomination at worst and out of control at best. Numerous “entertainment” programs come to mind. Culture wars within cultures and between cultures are real.

There are other hard realities. “Most Muslims are not fundamentalists [but many are traditionalists], and most fundamentalists [especially the traditionalists] are not terrorists, but most present-day terrorists are Muslims and proudly identify themselves as such” (Lewis 2003: 137). What makes them so? Is it the challenges and conditions imposed on them from outside by the West and/or from inside by their own oppressive often secular governments, headed by what have been called modern day “pharaohs”? This is what apologists would have us believe. They are not wrong, only partially correct. For there is another, deeply disturbing and unsettling question that cannot be skirted particularly by moderates who insist that genuine Islam has been hijacked by extremists: is it also a particular and extreme but recurring emanation of their faith?

This debate will not easily subside. It cannot be avoided either by Muslims or non-Muslims. There is no place to hide. It will be a lengthy debate stretching out well beyond any foreseeable future. For impatient Americans this time frame alone will be challenging.

American policy makers and the American public must be made to realize that Islam today is in a great debate with itself and, inevitably, with outsiders. The debate ranges (and rages) over Islam’s handling of internal theological diversity in light of the demands of *tawhid* (unity/oneness); over its stand regarding external diversity, given the existence of other religions and of global trends undermining all faith based world views and life styles; over the degree to which *kalam*, i.e. the debate over matters of theology and cosmology, and *bida*, innovation in law and custom not sanctioned by the *sharia*, should be allowed and the gate of *ijtihad*, of creative interpretation, opened or closed; over issues such as Islam’s relationship to modernity, especially cultural modernism and Western driven cultural trends; over its religious and power political role and destiny in the world; and finally over Islam’s relationship to democracy and the

issue of the role of religion in politics, society, and culture. It is a daunting agenda. The very “ideological frame within which Muslim normative behavior and thought is to be understood is itself being challenged” (Ahmed 2003: 2). But “the most promising trend” may not always be found in the most obvious places. Thomas Friedman found it in Iran, describing popular resistance against the clerical regime as a “combination of Martin Luther and Tiananmen Square - a drive for an Islamic reformation combined with a spontaneous student-led democracy movement” (www.nytimes.com/2002/12/04/opinion/04FRIE.html).

Our policies around the world and at home can positively or adversely impact Islam’s great internal debate but they cannot ultimately determine the outcome of that debate. That determination is up to Muslims themselves. But how the debate turns out will have profound consequences for us all. “No one is immune from the debates that now rage around Islam” (Ahmed 2003: 9).

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