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# Islam and the West

*The theology behind the history*

**Robert R. Reilly**

Introduction by John H Moore



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# **Islam and the West**

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**Editor's Note:** This Occasional Paper is the transcript of a talk given by Robert Reilly at the CRCE Colloquium held in Slovenia in September 2010. I should like to express sincere thanks to Stan Mickiewicz who transcribed it.

For those that question the link between communism and Islam, there is a fascinating insight in Laurent Murawiec's, *The Mind of Jihad*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2008 – p.200 *Bolsheviks and Pan-Islamists*.

More recently Dr Patrick Sookhdeo noted:

“The fall of Soviet Communism weakened the Western hard left and forced it to look for other allies in its fight against capitalism, and Christianity. It has now developed links to radical Islamists, many of whom take part in demonstrations against Western governments and policies, and help to stir up resentment against them among other Muslims. Although Islamism and the extreme left have very different ideas and goals, they are united in their hatred for America.”

Also:

“Left-wing intellectuals present a sanitised view of Islam, ignoring its terrorist forms, playing down the place of Islamism and emphasising the guilt of the West. They offer Islamists a privileged platform in the media channels and academic centres that they control, according any criticism of Islam 'Islamophobic' and thus silencing all dissent.”

\*Patrick Sookhdeo, *The Way Ahead – Returning Britain to its Christian Path*, Barnabas Fund, August 2010

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and Robert R. Reilly

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## **Introduction by John H Moore**

Emeritus Professor and former President, Grove City College, Pennsylvania

The topic which we are going to discuss consumes a great deal of time every day on newscasts and commentary programmes in the U.S. It is now a major issue in the upcoming midterm elections, with the controversy over a proposed mosque/Islamic cultural centre near Ground Zero taking centre stage, at least for the time being. I suppose that the European airwaves and cyberspace are just as loaded with the issue as are ours at home. Certainly the outpouring of books, journal and magazine articles, blogs, talk radio diatribes, and so forth shows no sign of letting up. I don't tweet and I'm not on Facebook or anything of that ilk, but I imagine that those too are full of talk about Islam and its impact for the West – and the rest of the world.

What can be done with such a topic in a short time? There are a great many issues that could be discussed, of course. Here are some that came to mind more or less randomly.

- Is, or is not, Islam fundamentally imperialist in the sense of dedication to global religious dominance? Or global political dominance?
- Can Islam triumph without the use of force or terror?
- Is there a “mainstream” Islam? If so, is it represented by the terrorism of al Qaeda and its allies? Or is al Qaeda just a violent offspring of a less violent Islam?
- What, other than the will to use terror, differentiates Islamists from other Muslims?
- Is there an internal struggle between Islamists and mainstream Islam, or are they inseparably joined?
- Is it true that religion and government are inseparably linked in Islamic belief? Does recent Turkish history suggest that ultimately they are?
- Do the differences between Shia and Sunni beliefs override a common drive for Islamic dominance? Can they co-exist in the long run? Are there any implications in these differences for the future in Afghanistan? (Taliban Sunni, Iranian geopolitical interests in Afghanistan, Pakistan's geopolitical position)

- Is there any difference between Islam as practised in Arab states and non-Arab states?
- Why has radical Islam (assuming that a distinction can be made between “radical” Islam and some other version) emerged so forcefully in the few decades? (Remember the Marine barracks, the Cole, the first WTC bombing, etc.)
- In the modern world, can Islamic societies compete against non-Islamic ones (largely in the West, but not exclusively – Japan, China, India) if they somehow abandon the use of terror? Can a society based on terror survive in the long run?
- Can a society whose law and constitution are based in Western classical liberalism allow the use of Sharia law for its Muslim population and survive?

These questions only touch the surface of the matter. Perhaps some of them will come up in the discussion today, but surely not all! To lead the discussion, we have our friend and long time CRCE colleague Bob Reilly. Bob has been studying and writing about Islam for many years. His paper *The Roots of Islamist Ideology*, published in 2006 by CRCE, is in the readings circulated for the conference. A greatly extended version of the paper (or so I think) was published this year by ISI Press in book form as *The Closing of the Muslim Mind*. If you haven’t read it, you should. The paper and the book do not directly address all of the issues I have mentioned, more or less randomly. They do, however, form an essential basis for understanding the nature of the Islamists and the reasons that Islam has failed to keep up with the rest of the world since the time of the Industrial Revolution.

In his famous 2002 book, *What Went Wrong*, Bernard Lewis considers (and mostly rejects) a number of possible reasons for this decline: the yoke of the Mongols (much too early, historically); the rule of the Turks (for the Arabs); the dead weight of the Arab past (for the Turks); Western imperialism; the Jews; the Western upsurge in science, exploration, technology, and so forth; the Islamic religion itself: the unification of church and state in Islam (as opposed to their separation in the West). Bob’s work is in contrast to Lewis, at least on the matter of the importance of rational thought (and hence of scientific development). In fact, Bob shows how a fundamental disagreement in theological belief that occurred a thousand years ago led to an interpretation of the universe and the

natural world that has crippled Islamic belief ever since. This understanding of Islamism provides deep insight into the answers of many the questions that I have posed.

Bob Reilly is an old friend and needs little if any introduction to this group. But we may not all know as much as we should. Bob has taught at the National Defense University and served in the Office of The Secretary of Defense, where he was Senior Advisor for Information Strategy (2002-2006). He participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 as Senior Advisor to the Iraqi Ministry of information. Before that, he was director of the Voice of America, where he had worked the prior decade. Bob has served in the White House as a Special Assistant to the President (1983-1985) and in the U.S. Information Agency both in DC and abroad. He has published widely on foreign policy, “war of ideas” issues, and classical music.





# Islam and the West

As John indicated, this is a sort of homecoming, and in respect to this particular topic, it is more than that, because five years ago Ljubo and Lisl invited me to give a talk at this conference, while it was still at Lake Bled, on the subject of the Roots of Islamist Ideology. Quite ironically, Ljubo, I actually found the sheet of paper, from which I spoke then. I spoke extemporaneously, and my notes say ‘Ljubo, Andrzej (Brzeski), Cold War, off the record, then — denial of causality, primacy of power, unlimited will, terrorism, logos. To what extent is Islam just Islam resurgent, or something else with a Western element?’ This little sheet of paper has morphed into this book, called the *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis*. The book was published at the end of May. I just want to read from the acknowledgements, if I may: “I first embarked on the subject of this book at a lecture in Slovenia and then a briefing paper for the Centre for Research into Post-Communist Economies, London. I am particularly indebted to its President, Ljubo Sirc, and its executive director, Lisl Biggs-Davison for their encouragement and support. I wanted to make sure I had to thank you publicly, Ljubo, and then the next line is thanks for the support to the Earhart Foundation, John, for which I hope I have expressed my thanks as well.

I developed a one-sentence statement of my general thesis: Islamism is a spiritual pathology, based upon a deformed theology, which has produced a dysfunctional culture. That is a lot to say in a sentence, but I take two hundred pages to lay it out in *The Closing of the Muslim Mind*. I would like to mention some very fundamental, but extremely important things about Islam, which I think I can do in the shortest possible time, by contrasting Christianity and Judaism. I do not do this in the book, because I try to keep the book focused on an intra-Islamic dispute that arose in the 9th Century. But it is much quicker, when addressing Westerners, to reveal these fundamental differences through this means of comparison – in particular, with the all-important subject of the status of reason in these respective cultures, based upon their cults, which in turn rest upon their respective revelations. The title for the book is *The Closing of the Muslim Mind*, but my publisher did not think that title was sufficiently incendiary. He is the one who suggested the subtitle: *How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis*. However, this subtitle actually comes from my introduction, in which I quote one of the great Muslim scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup>

Century, a Pakistani by the name of Fazlur Rahman. He served at the ministerial level in Pakistan for a time, before he was driven out of the country for his ideas on educational reform. He ended up as a Professor at the University of Chicago. Just to provide the context, I will give you the full sentence in which the phrase appears. Rahman said: “A people that deprives itself of philosophy, necessarily exposes itself to starvation in terms of fresh ideas; in fact it commits intellectual suicide.” So, this book is really an autopsy on a culture that has committed intellectual suicide in precisely the terms that Fazlur Rahman states.

I delve into the pivotal dispute in the 9<sup>th</sup> century over the role of reason, and the fight between the first two fully developed schools of theology in Islam — the Mu‘tazilites and Ash‘arites. I lay out the terms of that dispute and how the conflict was conducted, what its consequences were and how, over the succeeding centuries, philosophy was extirpated from the Sunni Muslim world. I should emphasize from the start that I am only talking about Sunni Islam, which of course is the vast majority of the Muslim world. It constitutes around 85% of all Muslims and, within Sunni Islam, I am talking about the Ash‘arite Kalam, the school of theology for the majority of Sunni Muslims.

In the Qur’an, there are several things that might strike anyone in the Judeo-Christian tradition familiar with the Bible. When I read the account of creation in the Qu’ran, the first thing that jumped out at me was the fact that man was not made in the image and likeness of God. In Genesis, it is very clear that man was created in the image and likeness of God. This is repeated in the Old and New Testament in a variety of different ways. For instance, in the Book of Wisdom, it says: “For God formed me to be imperishable. The image of His own nature, He made me.” And then of course, in the New Testament, St. John makes the extraordinary statement: “now we are children of God”. There is a familial relation between man and God; He is our father, we are his children. “What we shall be later is not yet clear, but when we see Him, we shall be like Him, for we will see Him as He is.” So the implication is very clear, that man’s destiny is to share divinity; to share in God’s divine life. Also, in the Catholic Mass each day, at the Offertory, the priest says: “through the mingling of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled Himself to share in our humanity.” I cannot possibly emphasise enough how scandalous each of these statements is to a Muslim.

In Islam, it is blasphemous to suggest in any way that man is like God or can be compared to God. The single most important teaching in Islam is a kind of

radical monotheism and a conception of transcendence that makes God infinitely beyond man. There is a famous saying in Arabic, *bila kafa wala tashbih* (without asking how and without comparing). Never compare anything to Allah; don't compare man to him; do not compare Him to anything in creation, because He is incomparable. The word to describe this doctrine in Arabic is *tanzih*. It means utter transcendence and how unapproachable He is in his person and how far beyond his creation He is. So to suggest, in any way, that a man can share in the life of God and somehow himself become divine is blasphemous in the extreme. And, of course, to say that Christ was both human and divine is an absurdity beyond consideration to Muslims. How could God have bodily functions?

By the way, when we consider this issue, we might ask ourselves what is the *Imago Dei* in man. What is it that is conceived to be a reflection of God in the image of man? What is God-like in him? The answer consists of the immortal soul, of course, but most important is that man has reason and free will. Man can apprehend things with his mind; he can know the truth. This is God-like, and that he can act freely, this, too, is God-like.

Obviously this notion, based upon Judaic and Christian revelation, heavily influenced the idea that the individual is inviolable. The source of that inviolability is divine. This was not given to man by his community or his political order, rather he was endowed with it by his Creator. So the absence of this notion in the Qu'ran is very surprising to a Christian or a Jew. The next thing that happens soon after the creation account is what, in most cases, Christians call original sin. How is this original sin understood? It is a cataclysmic dislocation in the relationship between God and man – so cataclysmic that it broke this relationship and sundered all of creation. Death entered the world through it and, as St. Paul says, “all creation groans” as a consequence of this huge breach, which man did not have within his power to repair. He disobeys. He sins, and this sunders creation from its Creator. Yet this created being, this finite being, has nothing within his means to offer to this infinite Being whom he has offended in order to repair this relationship.

So what then happens in Genesis? Man knows he is incapable of offering anything of sufficient worth in reparation; so God says: I will send you a Messiah; I will send you a Saviour who will do this for you. And then, in the Old Testament, the prophets foretell who this person will be and what he will do. The Jewish people still await his arrival to complete this mission. From the New

Testament, of course, Christians believe that the Messiah came in the figure of Jesus Christ, through whose offering this terrible breach was repaired.

In the Qu’ran, there is no original sin; there is only the first sin. And the first sin is no different from the second sin, or the third sin. There is nothing different about it or its consequences, really, than any other sin, though it does say that Adam and Eve were thrown out of Paradise. But there is no cataclysmic breach in the relationship between the creature and his Creator, because there was no relationship to begin with. Since there is no broken relationship that needs to be restored, there is no promise of a Messiah or a Saviour in the Qu’ran. This is incredibly important, because Genesis is the source of what we have come to call “salvation history.” It is salvation history that, then, was later secularised in the West into history itself – the very notion that history is a linear process, not a circular one as was understood by classical men and most pagans, but a linear progression with a beginning, a middle and an end in some kind of culmination. Obviously, it was from the secularised notion of salvation history that the very idea of temporal progress arose.

Islam is absent that. Islam does not have salvation history. And therefore, in a sense, it actually has no history either. Islam had no salvation history to secularise into what is considered history in the West. This does not mean that Muslims did not write accounts of what their famous men did, just as did the ancient Greeks and others, who tried to preserve the great deeds of great men. But they had no comprehension of history as a process moving forward. Islam is a profoundly ahistorical religion and, as consequence, has a conception of time that is fundamentally different from the West’s. As someone one put it, Islam’s end is its beginning. It always circles back upon itself.

There is another interesting detail that might catch one’s attention when reading the Qu’ran, as opposed to the creation account in Genesis. Who names the animals in Genesis? Man. God parades the animals in front of Adam, who names them, and these names are what they are. It was thought that the power to name gives a certain power over those named — the power of naming things is a significant power. In the Qu’ran, who names the animals? Allah, not man. Man does not have this power to name. This is an extremely significant issue that I think you will see spelled out later in Muslim epistemology. It is symptomatic of the difference between the two views of man in Genesis and Qu’ran. The power to name is, in a way, the power to know. The German thinker Joseph Pieper said, “Reality becomes intelligible through words. Man speaks so that

through naming things what is real may become intelligible.” If you cannot name a thing, can you know it? This seemingly little detail is an indication of what we shall later see as the inability within Islam, as it developed, to grasp reality; it does not have full access to reality because of the way in which it thinks of it in theological and metaphysical terms.

How, then, do Muslims consider their Revelation, and exactly what is it? As you know, the Qu’ran was thought to have been revealed to Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel over a period of some 20 years. Last summer I met a German theologian Dr Gerl-Falkowowitz<sup>1</sup> — much admired by Benedict XVI — who made a very interesting comparison with Gabriel’s encounter with Muhammad in the cave and Gabriel’s encounter with Mary in Saint Luke’s Gospel in chapter 2. She made the interesting point that the appearance of Gabriel, which, by the way, Muhammad first thought was demonic, was more of the Oriental kind of overwhelming, crushing power in which a demand was made. “Recite!” (The Qu’ran means recitation.) There were three such encounters with Gabriel by Muhammad, when he thought he would be crushed to death. It has about it the trancelike element that is found more in Oriental religions; an encounter takes place when you fall into a semiconscious state and that is how the encounter with the divine takes place. In other words, it does not have much to do with your reason. Reason is in abeyance as you are only semiconscious. This is opposed to Gabriel’s appearance to Mary when he makes this startling announcement that she is to conceive and her reaction is to question the Archangel: “how can this be?” Before she accepts, she has to understand it at a certain level; so she asks Gabriel several questions. She is not so overwhelmed that she feels as if she is going to be crushed. Nor is she in a trance-like state with her rational faculties suspended. This decision is not being suborned from her; it is voluntary, and once she has answers to her satisfaction, she says “Let it be done according to your word”. So the nature of these two semi-divine encounters also shows something of the difference between Islam and Christianity.

Let me return to that question of how Islam regards these other revelations — in the Torah and in the New Testament. The account in the Qu’ran is very clear on this. In Surah 5, Allah says: I gave my revelation to the Jews; I had a covenant with the Jews, and the Jews had the Holy Land as a result of this covenant. This is all acknowledged. However, what did the Jews do? And here comes the offence for which the Jews are forever cursed. The offence is, “they changed

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<sup>1</sup> Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkowitz, Professor of Philosophy of Religion and of Comparative History of Religions at the Technical University of Dresden.

my words". They changed God's words; they changed his revelation. This, of course, is a blasphemous act of enormous pride for which they were cursed, and for which, it is generally understood throughout the Muslim world, they lost their right to the Holy Land. This may give some insight into the problems with the peace process. If at the level of revelation the Jews are said to have lost their right to the Holy Land, how can they be back in the Holy Land today exercising sovereignty and, indeed, sovereignty over some Muslims? The magnitude of this offence to a Muslim on the basis of Surah 5 is incalculable and is simply unacceptable. Until someone comes up with a new interpretation of Surah 5 that is widely accepted in the Arab world, it is hard to have a great deal of hope concerning the peace process.

One can only appreciate the magnitude of the offence of changing God's words by grasping the orthodox Muslim understanding of the nature of the Qu'ran. This was part of the dispute in the ninth century that was so deadly. The Mu'tazalites said indeed the Qu'ran was the word of God but was created in history. It was revealed to a certain people at a certain time, within a certain culture, and in a certain language; so one must know thoroughly the circumstances of the time to understand what was meant – because the content is contingent on the historical situation in which it was revealed. This was the Mu'tazalite position. It was at odds with the Ash'arites who were defending the orthodox position that already existed within Islam that the Qu'ran was not created, but that it has co-existed eternally with God, in heaven, in Arabic, exactly as it exists today. Therefore, as a document co-existing eternally with God, it is not an historical document. Since it is not contingent upon history, one cannot use history to understand its contents. The latitude to interpret the Qu'ran may not be completely collapsed but it is significantly narrowed. So within the understanding that the Qu'ran is literally God's word and that it exists coeternally with him, the magnitude of the Jewish offence in changing those words becomes all the greater.

So Allah then says in the Qur'an that because the Jews changed my word, I gave it again – this time to the Christians. So He gives his rules to Christians, and what do the Christians do? They come up with this absurd idea that Christ is his son. You will see throughout the Qu'ran in the many appearances of Jesus, his constant repetition is "Allah, I never said that. I never said I was your son; I would never say that". Jesus is considered the greatest prophet within Islam next to Muhammad, and in some Muslim eschatological thinking Christ comes back at the end of time to break the cross so that everything will be in submission to Allah.

Also, in a way, one could say that Islam is not so much anti-Christianity as it is anti a deformed notion of Christianity, because when you read the Qu’ran you will see that it repeats many stories from both the Old and New Testaments. They were the major sources for Muhammad’s material, but he gets things wrong, such as genealogy and temporal sequences; and some of the Gnostic gospels are obvious sources for Muhammad. The interesting thing is the description of the Christian Trinity in the Qu’ran where it is described as Father, Son and Mary, which is why the Muslims find it repugnant, and so, of course, would Christians. Christians have never thought this was the Trinity, except for a tiny heretical sect in northern Arabia, the Collyridians, who actually did think this, and from whom, no doubt, Muhammad got this very strange notion. Since the Qu’ran is literally the word of God, Muslims are impelled to think that is what Christians think the Trinity is.

Therefore, Allah says in the Qu’ran: I’m going to do it one last time. The Jews changed it; the Christians came up with this ridiculous idea that I had a son (and by the way, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the first major architectural expression of Islam has emblazoned in Arabic: “I have no one beside me; I have no son”). So God says, this is the last time I am going to give my revelation, as it was originally stated, now given through Gabriel to Muhammad. Therefore, Muhammad is considered the “seal of the prophets” — the last one. Muhammad sees himself in the succession of prophets, from Adam, Abraham and Moses and Jesus. He gives the definitive and a repeat of the original revelation of God as to how one should behave. So these are the rules for life. God does not reveal himself. He says, in effect, you do not know me and you cannot know me, as I am infinitely above you, but here are my rules. And that is how Moslems consider their revelation. It supersedes all prior revelation. If a Christian says “Wait a minute, all the prophets were foretold; why is it that in the Old and New Testaments there was no indications or prophecies of the coming of Muhammad?” The Muslim’s answer is simple: “those were the parts you changed!” As a consequence, Muslims were never encouraged to read the Old or the New Testaments and, indeed, sometimes were explicitly forbidden to do so. Why read corrupted Scripture when you have the pristine copy in the Qu’ran?

Muslims thundered out of the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, in possession of this superior new revelation, which they believed gave them the right to rule. They experienced astonishing success in conquering the Persian Empire and large parts of the Byzantine Empire. In both these empires they



encountered Hellenic thought, Greek philosophy, both in its pure form, because there were still extant centres of Hellenic learning even in the Persian Empire, and then in the form of Christian apologetics, which Greek philosophy had heavily influenced. The first four Caliphs stayed in Mecca but then the centre of the empire was moved to Damascus and thence to Baghdad. So once it was out of its pristine home there was no avoiding the contamination of the surrounding cultures, which were not Islamic and, by any standards, were superior to the Arabian culture of the time. They conquered the superior cultures, but how were they to understand what they were being told by them and how were they to defend their own faith in the face of Christian apologetics, for example? Well, they became fascinated by some of the texts of Greek learning — which were not in Greek, by the way, but in Syriac — and they were mostly interested in the practical aspects of Greek learning, which included medicine and astrology, etc. However, men of learning in that day were not restricted to their professions; they knew philosophy as well.

So the encounter with philosophy began and Muslims began to wonder how compatible this kind of reasoning was with their revelation. Can we understand revelation with reason? Or is it completely submissive to it, or is it alien to it? They began thinking through these questions. The first fully developed school of Muslim theology was the Mu‘tazalite, and it was the most heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. First of all, you should know that in the Muslim world if you lost an argument not only was your life imperiled but your books would be burned. Since the Mu‘tazalites lost the argument halfway through the ninth century (through the use of force, not reason), they had to run for their lives, and their books were burnt. So how is it that we know what these people said? We know because, in the refutations of them, their positions were stated. It turns out that these accounts were done fairly. Furthermore, in the 1950s, some Egyptian archaeologists discovered a hidden trove of the Mu‘tazalite texts from Abd al-Jabbar, one of the last great Mu‘tazalites; so we know in detail how they explained their theology, and what they said. Al-Jabbar said some things that would strike a Muslim today as quite startling. He said that the first duty of man is to reason, because the existence of God is not self-evident. Therefore, the first duty is to reason because it is through his reason that man comes to the conclusion that, in fact, there is a God. And he uses proofs for the existence of God that are very familiar from Christian apologetics; the most powerful one being from the contingency of creation: that you cannot have an infinite regress of caused things. Of course, that is a variation of Aristotle’s argument for the prime mover, as well. Then al-Jabbar says that once you have concluded the



existence of God, the next question that may arise is: has He spoken? Is there indeed a revelation and by what standards would one come to accept or reject this revelation? These too would be subject to the standards of reason. Is the revelation reasonable? Does it demand the denial of reason? In examining the Qu'ran, al-Jabbar says there are things in it that are contradictory, if understood literally. In the Qu'ran, it states that God has hands and feet; that He sits on a throne and that He sees, has eyes, and this cannot be true, because we know that God is pure spirit. So how are we to understand the parts of the Qu'ran that are contradictory in this way? Al-Jabbar says, obviously, it is not meant to be taken literally, but metaphorically. If something in the Qu'ran seems to be in conflict with reason, that is the indication that you are not to understand it literally. Find another way of understanding it that comports with reason. Reconcile it with reason. Also al-Jabbar, like the other Mu'tazalites, asks if the word of God is created or uncreated. He answers that it was created in time and requires interpretation.

Al-Jabbar says something that will not startle you until you learn how the opposition to it developed. He says that man's reason is a gift from God, and man has this gift to come to know Him through the rational order of his creation. So the reasoned order of creation is a reflection of the Creator, and by coming to know it, one can come to know Him in some ways. Most importantly, al-Jabbar says that one can come to know what is good and evil through reason. This is not true just for Muslims, but for men everywhere. Everyone has the duty to reason and everyone can come to know what is just and unjust, what is good and evil, through reason. Why? Because God is just and He would not require you to do the good and avoid the evil, unless you could come to know the difference. Also, according to the Mu'tazalites, revelation in the Qu'ran only reveals what is good and evil. It does not constitute what is good and evil, which knowledge is already available to you through reason, and it simply confirms that knowledge, or tells you of it in specific ways that you would not have arrived at, unaided by reason. For instance, you can know you should worship God, but how could you know that you are supposed to pray five times a day? How could you know the direction of your prayer, or which foods are Halal and which are Haram? So, God still needed to give man right guidance to reach heaven, but it is guidance that is in itself reasonable or that accords with reason.

Also essential for God's justice is free will. God would not condemn man doing what is evil unless it was man himself who chose to do what is evil, and he had the knowledge to know it was evil. Then he can be held responsible for this evil

and be punished, or rewarded for knowing and choosing the good. This is true of all men not only Muslims. To quote from al-Jabbar: “it is obligatory for you to carry out what accords with reason”.

This is a side of Islam unknown to many. The caliph in the first half of the ninth century was Abu Jafar Abdullah al-Ma'mun, who was the greatest advocate and supporter of Greek thought in Islamic history. Aristotle appeared to al-Ma'mun in a dream, and the caliph asked Aristotle “what is the good?” Aristotle replied: “it is what is rationally good.” Al-Ma'mun embraced this reply and the Mu'tazalites, and he sponsored the first Arab philosopher, al-Kindi. This is the beginning of philosophy in the Arab world. Al Ma'mun created the Bait al-Hikmah, the House of Wisdom, in Baghdad, which became one of the great translation centres in the world. He then commissioned the translations of the Greek texts into Arabic. Actually, most of these works were translated from Syriac into the Arabic and, almost without exception, most of the translator scholars were Christian Nestorians. They did this great translation work – not that it takes any credit away from the Arabs. Al-Ma'mun was the one who sponsored this. Some time later, when they got the Greek texts, they compared the Syriac to the Greek and made sure they had accurate translations. They got much of this material, of course, from the Byzantine Emperor. There was a healthy trade with Constantinople, where they would send their emissaries to buy books from Byzantium. There are extant accounts of debates held before al Ma'mun between Christians and Muslims. The most famous of these, I think, would be that of Bishop Theodore Abu Qurrah, who was a disciple of St. John of Damascus, with Muslim scholars.

This dialogue has been published and it still extant today. In fact, there is also another account of a Christian-Muslim debate in al-Ma'mun's court between a Christian named al-Kindi (not the Arab philosopher) and a Muslim courtier, a relation of the caliph. The interesting thing is the preface to this debate written by the Muslim. It shows to what extent Hellenic thinking had suffused the Islamic world, at least at the upper levels of the court. It also contains clear references to Mu'tazilite teachings of the primacy of reason, free will, and responsibility. In the preface, the Muslim courtier says to al-Kindi: “Therefore bring forward all the arguments you wish and say whatever you please and speak your mind freely. Now that you are safe and free to say whatever you please, appoint some arbitrator who will impartially judge between us and lean only towards the truth and be free from the empery of passion: and that arbitrator shall be reason, whereby God makes us responsible for our own rewards

and punishments. Hereby I have dealt justly with you and have given you full security and am ready to accept whatever decision reason may give for me or against me.” The debate begins in the form of letters; and al-Ma’mun was fascinated by it. He had the whole series of letters read to him non-stop. There are places in the Muslim world today where this kind of exchange could not take place, as it did in the first half of the ninth century. In fact, the letters of al-Kindi were suppressed three caliphs later. Al-Kindi’s letters were forbidden. In fact, in Cairo some years later, if one were found in possession of a copy of al-Kindi’s letters, not only would your house be destroyed, but forty houses around would be levelled to the ground. Just as a little teaching lesson – no one was to have or to be anywhere near the letters of al-Kindi.

Al-Ma’mun’s was an extraordinary court —one of the greatest courts by any measure in history. It did represent an explosion of learning, interest and openness, intellectually speaking. It did not last. There were only three successors of al-Ma’mun, who continued to espouse and sponsor both philosophy and Mu‘tazalism, and then caliph al-Mutawakkil suppressed the Mu‘tazalites in the second year of his reign. The Mu‘tazalites themselves had suppressed their opponents. There was something called a mihnah, an inquisition, because the caliph said that anyone who believes that the Qu’ran has existed co-eternally with God cannot be a judge and cannot be a witness in a trial, or hold an official position. So, under al-Ma’mun, you had to swear that the Qu’ran was created; otherwise you could be imprisoned or even killed if you would not do this. Ibn Hanbal, the founder of the Hanbali school of Muslim jurisprudence, which obtains today in Saudi Arabia, was arrested and put in prison, because he would not admit the Qu’ran was created. In his many interrogations, he would only answer by quoting from the Qu’ran or the Hadith. Otherwise, he would remain silent. Caliph al-Mutawakkil let Ibn Hanbal out of prison and the Muslims in the street greeted him with great acclaim. This was a great triumph, and the Mu‘tazalites were suppressed or arrested or had to run for their lives. It was illegal for them to hold any official position, and they were expelled from the government.

They escaped towards the Shia areas, which existed at the time in the eastern part of the empire, where they were welcomed by the Shia, because it was around this time that the twelfth imam went into occultation. The Shia believed that there was a direct line of succession on the male side of Mohammed and these imams continued to have direct divine guidance. It is often said that Muslims have no pope. The Shia did have a pope – it was their imam. So, for the

Shia, revelation was not really over — their imams could infallibly tell them. But the twelfth imam disappeared — the term they used was ‘went into occultation’ – and, at the end of history, he will return. As a consequence, the Shia were wondering what to do. Without divine guidance, they had to think for themselves. The Mu‘tazalites arrived and said ‘we can show you how to do that’. Because of this, the Mu‘tazalites became closely associated with Shi‘ism. They had a profound impact on the development of Shi‘ism and this made their reputation even worse in the Sunni world, because not only did the orthodox Sunni consider them apostates for saying that the Qu‘ran was created and holding other views, but also for joining the Shia enemy.

Let me briefly state what the opponents of the Mu‘tazilites said; these are the Ash‘arites, named after al-Ash‘ari, who until the age of forty was a Mu‘tazalite. Then for reasons no one completely understands, he said “I now abjure the Mu‘tazalites, I abjure their teachings”, and he goes down through a litany of these teachings and says: “I denounce them”. So, what is it that he denounced? The idea of the Qu‘ran was key. The Qur‘an, al-Ash‘ari said, exists co-eternally with God. It exists here, as it does on the eternal tablet in heaven. The Mu‘tazalite teaching that, through his unaided reason, man can come to know good and evil – this he denied. Man is incapable of coming to know good and evil through his reason. Why is this so? They have two reasons: one — man’s reason is corrupted by his self-interest; so whatever advances his interest, he will say that is good, and whatever thwarts it will he will say that is bad. His reason cannot be relied upon because of this corruption. The far more profound reason comes from Ash‘arite metaphysics. Al-Ash‘ari claimed that there is nothing to be known in terms of moral philosophy because things are neither good nor bad in themselves. They have no nature, so there nothing in them to know that could lead one to conclude that this is good, or that this is bad. How then, are you to come by this knowledge? You are to come by it exclusively through revelation. It is only the Qu‘ran, the Hadith, and the Sharia that can tell you what to do and what not to do, what is Halal, what is Haram. Therefore, you are entirely dependent upon it for your salvation. This idea that things are neither good nor bad in themselves answers for the Ash‘arites the famous question that Socrates asked in the Euthypro: do the gods love piety because it is good, or is it good because the gods love it? In other words, the Ash‘arites would say: God does not forbid murder because it is bad; it is bad because He forbids it. The Ash‘arites say, specifically, that telling lies is not evil in itself. It is only evil because God says not to lie. However, He could change His mind tomorrow and make lying obligatory. Ibn Hazm, a famous theologian

from Spain, who was not an Ash‘arite, he was a Zahiri who believed the Qu’ran was self-explanatory – you did not need any reference outside the Qu’ran to understand it. He was quoted by the Pope Benedict XVI in the Regensburg address<sup>2</sup>, as saying that God is not bound, even by His own word. Ibn Hazm said, Allah may require of us acts of idolatry and if He requires these acts of idolatry, which would be so repugnant to a Muslim, then we must do them. God may also choose to reward those who disobey him and punish those who obey him, and there is now gainsaying Him for doing this.

The Mu‘tazalites emphasized most particularly God’s rationality and his justice. This was all of a piece with the duty to reason and man’s free will. The Ash‘arites said, rather, that God’s essential attributes are omnipotence and pure will. God is not bound by anything; God can do anything. He is unaccountable. God is above or without reason; therefore you cannot use reason to constrain what God may do by some idea of what is just. You cannot say that there is anything unreasonable in what He might do, such as oblige you to engage in ritual murder, if that is so. His will is what is just by definition, no matter what He wills. Therefore, unlike the Mu‘tazalites, the Ash‘arites said that revelation in the Qu’ran does not reveal what is good and evil; it constitutes what is good and evil. Furthermore, it is the sole source of coming to the knowledge of this.

God is omnipotent to the extent that no other thing is so much as potent. This extends to the fact of denying secondary causality. For the Ash‘arites, there are no secondary causes in creation – no cause and effect in the natural world. There is solely the first and only cause — the prime cause: Allah, who does everything directly. To suggest otherwise would mean that Allah is not omnipotent because the secondary causes would exist somehow semi-autonomously, apart from Him. How could this be if He is omnipotent? Now for instance, watch this: I drop my glasses, and what has happened?

If you said gravity; you have committed the sin of shirk. You are saying that the power of gravity, on its own, made my glasses fall on the table and the table prevented them from falling further. The sin you have committed, in Arabic, is shirk. It is blasphemy; you have just compared something to God — something we call the law of gravity. Within Ash‘arite theology, the law of gravity cannot exist. God himself decided that my hand would release these glasses, and

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI’s address at the University of Regensburg, Germany, September 2006:[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html)].

pushed them down onto the table and decided that the table would stop them. There is no natural law of gravity to cause that to happen, and for you to suggest there is an act of blasphemy.

What if God decided that there should be a law of gravity? No, God cannot constrain himself in that way and still be omnipotent. In that respect, they would say that God seems to have habits, and the reason that the glasses keep falling to the table when the hand releases them is that this is a habit of God. God may sustain these habits as long as He wishes, but the next time He may send the glasses flying upwards. Either way, it is He doing it directly without any intermediary, without any semi-autonomous operation of the laws of nature that inhere in things themselves and make them what they are. Things have nothing within themselves; they have no nature. They are only momentary juxtapositions of time-space atoms that God has agglomerated in a certain way for the instant, and there is no telling what they may become in the next instant.

Would Allah have to issue another revelation if He changed something fundamental such as that Muhammad is the seal of the prophets? Is He able to change things without telling people? Yes, the significance of Ibn Hazm's statement that He is not bound, not even by His own word. So God can do anything and the Ash'arites considered the existence of a law of gravity to be a constraint upon God that would compromise His omnipotence. If something is even so much as potent, for instance, man having the power to do certain things, that would mean God could not be omnipotent. Whereas, the Mu'tazalites would say: the order in creation, which seems to be rational, with laws that operate because they are expressions of the nature of these things – it is what makes them what they are – this is an expression of God's rationality. It is not a constraint upon who He is or what He does; this is an expression of who He is. So, it is not a constraint upon Him.

With the the Ash'arites, rationality goes out of the window, and this is exactly the point. What this is, if put into legal terms, is that God is a legal positivist. In Aristotelian terms, you would ask what is just, and you might formulate the answer thus: justice is giving to things what is due them, according to what they are, which means you have to know what they are. A simple example is that you do not treat a man as if he were a dog. That would be unjust. You have to treat him according to what he is, which is a man, and not a dog. I do not know about the animal lovers among you, some might say it is not unjust to treat an animal as if it were a man, but I will not go into that. It is exactly this knowledge

that the Ash‘arites say is unavailable to man. You cannot know what things are in themselves, because there is no “in themselves” there. And the metaphysics they developed for this is so radical that nothing like this was seen in the West until Sir David Hume. There were earlier discussions about this in Medieval Europe, Duns Scotus, for example, but they lost the argument. I should emphasize that there is nothing strange about these theological discussions.

Let us return to the metaphysics of the Ash‘arites to support God’s omnipotence in the fact that He is the only cause of what takes place. They adopted a form of Greek atomism. They said everything is composed of space and time atoms, which have no character or nature of themselves, and whatever something is, in an instant, is simply an agglomeration of these space-time atoms. The entire universe is constituted by these, as are you, as is this, my tea cup. And what you see here, though it seems to keep its identity, is a quick succession of these time-space atoms. They only exist instantaneously and momentarily. They are created and then annihilated; so creation is constantly, almost instantaneously renewed or replaced. For instance, if you see me moving my hand, that is not what is really taking place. What is taking place, and is doing so very quickly, is a succession of the constitution of a space-time atoms of my hand in one place, their annihilation, their reconstitution in another place, ad seriatim, until it looks as if I am moving my hand, but that is not what is really taking place. This is also true of stationary objects, and of any properties that seem to appear in them. If you take this plant on the table, would you say that the flower is going to remain a flower while we continue speaking here? You would probably say, yes. Why would it remain a flower? Then you might say, “because it has the nature of a flower”. This again would be shirk, blasphemy. There is no reason for this to remain a flower. It will remain a flower only if, in the next instant, Allah wishes to reconstitute it as it appears to be.

Now, what is the implication of this for human action? In what way can man be said to be free, if he is just a succession of created and annihilated space-time atoms, directly created and annihilated by God? Al-Ash‘ari gives the example of a man writing. He says, God creates in man the will to write, and then creates in him the power to lift his hand and, then, to place the pen on a sheet of paper. God then causes the figures to appear on the paper as the pen moves. Now you may say that the absorbent qualities of the paper draw the ink from the pen to create the figures according to how the hand moves. All of that would be shirk. God does all of these things directly, and because they happen in a sequence does not mean that there is a causal relationship. There is no cause and effect in



the natural world. There are only coincidences.

I remember the famous American-Lebanese scholar, whom I quote at the very beginning of the book, Fouad Ajami, who said in a meeting several years ago: “wherever I go in the Muslim world, it is the same problem: cause and effect, cause and effect.” So I went up to Fouad Ajami and talked to him for a while, and we started discussing these metaphysical issues and the reason why he experienced this problem everywhere. As we have seen, for theological reasons, in order to defend their notion of God’s omnipotence, the Ash‘arites denied explicitly, again and again, that cause and effect exists in the natural world. For instance, al-Ghazali uses the famous example of fire burning cotton. In fact, it is not fire burning cotton. It is just a sequence that God could change at any time. In *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, which is the book he used to destroy philosophy in the Muslim world, he says that,

*The connection between what is habitually believed to be a cause and to be an effect is not necessary, according to us. There is no cause or connection between the quenching of thirst and drinking, satiety and eating, burning and contact with fire, light and appearance of the sun, death and decapitation, healing and the drinking of medicine... the purging of the bowels and using the purgative and so on. Their connection is due to the prior decree of God, who creates them, side by side, not to it being necessary in itself, incapable of separation. On the contrary, it is within divine power to create satiety without eating, to create death without decapitation and continue life after decapitation and so on to all connected things. ... Our opponents claim that the agent of burning is the fire exclusively; this a natural, not a voluntary agent, and cannot abstain from what is in its nature when it is brought into contact with a receptive substratum... This we deny, saying. The agent of burning is God... in reality, there is no other cause... but God.*

There is one other interesting quote I should read to you, in respect to the neutrality of all acts and things in terms of morality, and why there is no moral philosophy in Ash‘arite Sunni Islam, why they deny such a thing as Aristotle’s *The Ethics* is possible. This is from a 15th century thinker, Mohammed Yusuf as-Sanusi. He is simply repeating the doctrines, which developed in the ninth century:

*It is impossible for the Most High to determine an act as obligatory or forbidden for the sake of any objective, since all acts are equal in that they are his creation and production. Therefore, the specification of certain acts as obligatory and others as forbidden or with any other determination takes place by his pure*



*choice, which has no cause. Intelligibility has no place at all in it; rather it can be known only by revealed law (shari'a).*

“Intelligibility has no place in it.” God does not act for reasons. God is not ordered teleologically; He can do anything. Since God acts for no reasons, what he does is not intelligible and cannot be understood. You cannot come to know God, all you come to know is his revelation, which is why al-Ghazali’s teacher, al-Juwayni, taught that, “There is nothing obligatory by reason.” And al-Ghazali said, “no obligations flow from reason, but from the Shari’a.” Nothing you can know through your reason can tell you anything about whether what you are going to do is morally good or evil, whether it is just or unjust. There is a famous line in the Qur’an that says, “It may be that you dislike a thing that is good for you, and you like a thing that is bad for you. Allah knows and you do not know.” (2:216) And ancillary to this is that, not only do you not know, you cannot know, apart from revelation. Now, one of the things God does for no reason is, of course, create the universe. And therefore, the universe itself becomes unintelligible, because it is the product of pure will, instead of reason.

This, again, is an enormous contrast to Christian philosophy and theology. Thomas Aquinas makes the point that our reason can apprehend creation, because creation was first thought by God. Or as Benedict XVI would say: at the basis of everything is God’s creative reason, not his will, but his reason. His creative thinking precedes creation. There is no temporal sequence in what God does, but that is how it is conceived to be in this theology. I would also add this one other thing; there were trends in the Middle Ages within Christian philosophy and theology that were also attracted by these doctrines of voluntarism, God as the first and only cause, and occasionalism, no cause and effect in the natural world. But they never finally triumphed. One reason they did not is because Christian revelation holds a decisive barrier against this development. And that barrier is contained at the beginning of the Gospel of St. John, which says “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things were made through Him.” The word, of course, was *logos*. This is a Greek gospel and one meaning of *logos* is ‘reason’. So, even though there were temptations to occasionalism and voluntarism; you could not deny this is an essential part of Christian revelation that God is reason and that reason is reflected in his creation, because all things are made through *logos*. So they are the product of reason. Reason is imprinted in creation, and that is how man can come to know whose creation it is. Albert Einstein made this wonderful remark: “the only incomprehensible thing about the universe is

that it is comprehensible.” How is it that our minds can apprehend this creation and find the principle of order in it that corresponds to our reason? The answer, as mentioned earlier, is the one Aquinas gave: “we can apprehend with our reason because God first thought this creation.” I would suggest to you that an Ash‘arite statement, in parallel to Einstein’s wonderful remark, would be this: “the only comprehensible thing about the universe is that it is incomprehensible,” because it is the product of a God who acts for no reasons.

Because there is no *telos*, because God does not act teleologically, you have this loss of causality; you have the loss of epistemology; you have the loss of objective morality, and, in their place, you have this divine positivism.

Let me explain something else. In Arabic, there was no word for conscience. So if you wonder why there was no freedom of conscience in Islam – in fact there is no freedom of conscience in Sunni Islam today – then ask: how can you have the freedom of something for which you do not even have a word? Now, this does not mean Islam is without a moral sense, absolutely not. It simply means that this moral sense exclusively comes from revelation, and your conscience, based upon your own reason, has no authority whatsoever. That is why the single most important study in Islam is of Islamic jurisprudence, of the four Sunni legal schools. Jurisprudence that is acceptable within Sunni Islam regulates every single aspect of life. It is that which you must know and abide by if you hope to reach paradise. In this Islamic jurisprudence, there is a principle that states: “reason is not a legislator”. So when you are applying or thinking through Sha’ria, the divine law, your reason is not going to come up with these laws; they are in revelation and that is how you come to understand them.

Because of this, you can come to understand why democratic constitutional rule did not develop indigenously within Islam because, if you believe “reason is not a legislator”, why, then, have legislatures? They have no valid basis upon which to exist because of the denigration of reason within Ash‘arite Islam. And the denigration of reason comes along with the primacy of power, the primacy of will, the primacy of force, which then is exercised in their political order through the constitution of the Caliphate and the power of the Caliph himself. The consequences, as well, for free will, as you might imagine, are highly problematic. From the early days of Islam there was always this disposition towards pre-destination. So, the Ash‘arites could explain man’s actions only in the way an apple tree bears fruit or a river runs in its bed. In other words, it is not a conscious act of free will directed by man’s reason.

Someone mentioned earlier that, if God changed his mind or his will, He would have some kind of obligation to let man know. If you say this, you are thinking like a Mu‘tazalite. God has no obligations to man; man has obligations to God. He can do anything He wants. Whereas the Mu‘tazalites said God is rationality and justice and He must keep his word to man and He must do the best for man, the Ash‘arites explicitly denied this. God does not have to do the best for man.

If you go to Saudi Arabian websites today, it just says ‘stop asking questions and submit to the text’. You have to understand, your reason is delegitimized, and the extent to which your reason is delegitimized is the extent to which the primacy of power replaces it. And the primacy of power then becomes self-legitimizing, which is why you would see a succession of Muslim rulers, whose very possession of power was their source of legitimacy. There is not any rational explanation for it.

There is an absolutely delicious episode in the Umayyad Caliphate, when the caliph al-Malik invites one of his competitors to the palace under false pretences. And the followers of his competitor are in the courtyard of the palace. The caliph invites him in and decapitates him. He then grabs his head, goes out to his competitor’s followers and says: “As was pre-ordained by God from eternity, I have decapitated your ruler,” and all of the erstwhile supporters of his competitor cry, “Allahu Akbar” and embrace the caliph. No further reasoning needed to take place, his power was self-legitimizing, and this is how it proceeded.

The Mu‘tazalites were overthrown; the Ash‘arites became the predominant school of theology in Sunni Islam. And as their theological doctrines worked their way through Islamic culture, it lost the intellectual vitality that it had had under the Mu‘tazalites. When people speak of the Golden Age, they are talking about Baghdad in the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. There is indeed no comparison with Europe at that time. The Caliphate was superior in every respect. Its culture, productivity, intellectual vitality, and all of that was gradually lost over time, as philosophy was extirpated from the Sunni Muslim world. The key figure who performed the coup de grace on philosophy was al-Ghazali, a titanic intellectual figure in Islam, who is considered, next to Mohammed, the most important Muslim. He wrote his famous book *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, in which he denigrated Aristotle and Plato, and showed that there was nothing that you could know by your reason, that reason can know nothing. Therefore, philosophy is not what it claims to be; it is simply another religion,

and it is antithetical to the religion of Islam. A century later, Averroes wrote a line-by-line refutation of al-Ghazali's work, called *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, but it was too late. In 1195, it was Averroes's books that were burnt in the square of Cordoba, it was Averroes who was sent into exile – he had to flee to North Africa; it was philosophy that was banned. You often hear that we received our Hellenic heritage from the Arabs. They are the ones who preserved it and, through Cordoba, we rediscovered it. There is a much exaggerated truth in this, but it is also true that, if the Arabs ever reconsider the thought of Averroes, it is from the Jews and Christians that they will get it, because most of his works were completely destroyed. They were preserved in Hebrew and Latin, and have been back translated into Arabic. Averroes had a huge impact on Medieval thought in Europe, but, alas, not much of one on Islamic thought.

I want to give you just one example of what this leads to in the thought of al-Ghazali. Once you have discredited reason as incapable of knowing anything, you begin to embrace things precisely because they are irrational. For instance, in *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, he wrote,

*“The pilgrimage is the most irrational thing in Islam. There we perform gestures and rites that are absolutely irrational. For this reason, the pilgrimage is the place where we can, better than in any other place, demonstrate our faith because reason does not understand anything at all of it and only faith makes us do those actions. Blind obedience to God is the best evidence of our Islam.”*

So stop asking questions and submit to the text. This is how the golden age of Islam disappeared, and its culture became calcified, and why the pursuit of science collapsed. As you might imagine, an endeavour to discover the laws of nature is not going too far when you deny the very fact that laws of nature exist.

Now, let us jump quickly to some of the results that we can observe today. I had a Kurdish friend, who told me the following story. He went on the Hajj with a more pious friend of his, and they were disputing these very points about God's power, miracles, and cause and effect. They were circling the Kabbah under the hot Saudi sun and the pious friend reached up to touch the famous black stone, and it was cool to the touch. So, he turned to my Kurdish acquaintance and said: see, this is God's miracle. Here He is directly affecting this under the hot Saudi sun. How else could this stone be cool? So, my more sceptical Kurdish friend began going around the Kabbah until he found a flight of stairs that led down to a refrigeration unit. Then he grabbed his friend, marched him

down the stairs, and said: ‘look, this is why the black stone is cool’. What was the response of his friend? Outrage! This was a direct assault on his theology. This is why some people in Saudi Arabia still refuse to believe that man has been to the moon – not because they are ignorant, but because, in order to get there, you would have to know a lot of things in regard to cause and effect in the natural order: the thrust of the rocket, the angle at which it is sent, the rotation of the earth, and this is forbidden knowledge. So, we cannot have got there. Or, for instance, under General Zia in Pakistan, for a period of time, they banned weather forecasts on Pakistani television, because this was forbidden knowledge. If you have an incalculable God, who does everything directly, how can you calculate the weather? It is an impious endeavour to forecast the weather. I have also had friends who trained Arab military forces. One was training the Royal Guards in Saudi Arabia, and it was very hard to get these people to maintain their weapons and also to teach them sharp shooting. Why was that? Because if Allah wanted the bullet to hit the target, it would hit the target. If he did not want it to, it would not. So, all of this maintenance and the aiming of the rifle was somewhat irrelevant to the outcome. There is a friend of mine living in Saudi Arabia now who tells me that driving is crazy. Getting Saudis to wear seatbelts is a big problem. Why? Because, if your time has come, a seatbelt is not going to save you. And if your time has not come, then you do not need the seatbelt. Likewise, the followers of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is an Islamist organisation endeavouring to restore the caliphate, forbids its followers from getting car insurance – another act of presumption in respect to the all-powerful Allah. And if you ever follow the Muslim press, you will see that their interpretation of natural events is, because of this theology, always as a direct act of God. For instance, the tsunami that hit India precisely during the holiday time, when people would be fornicating on the beach. The tsunami was sent by Allah to destroy these fornicators and infidels. I saw on an Islamist website a satellite photo of the tsunami. Superimposed over it was the Arabic script for Allah, to show that the wave was completely congruent with the Arab character for Allah, demonstrating that this was God’s direct action. And you can imagine that, with the hurricane Katrina in the United States in Louisiana, the Arab and Muslim press had a field day about God directly punishing these imperialist, materialist Americans for their sins. So, this interpretation of events is carried out often in this way, because of this theological influence. This excludes the understanding of things according to reason and cause and effect – the consequence of which is that the Muslim world, and particularly the Arab world, is rife with conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are the currency of the Arab and Muslim press. It does not matter how outlandish they are, because there are

no rational standards by which they could be proven to be outlandish. So they will believe almost anything in this respect. It is why more Arabs today believe that Muslims had nothing to do with 9/11 than there were eight years ago. The number grows in inverse proportion to the amount of evidence available.

Since 2001, the United Nations has published a series of UN Arab Human Development Reports. Quite prudently, the UN had only Arab scholars writing these studies. If you wonder in what condition the Arab world is today, I invite your attention to the series of UN Arab Human Development Reports, where you will discover that, except for sub-Saharan Africa, the Arabs are at the bottom of the heap in every measure of achievement: GDP, productivity, education, literacy, healthcare, number of patents, scientific endeavours. And in one instance, they are even at the bottom. Even sub-Saharan is above them. South Korea, by itself, produces more patents than the entire Arab world. Science is completely stillborn there. It does not mean they do not have doctors and engineers. They do, but I am talking about people who do original research. Spain translates more books in a year than the Arab world has translated in the past thousand. When you read this sorry litany of the depths to which the Arab world has fallen and you have some historical sense of what conditions were back in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, you begin to wonder. Bernard Lewis tells us what went wrong. What I try to do is explain why it went wrong. I trace this back to this 9<sup>th</sup> century dispute and then try to show that these thoughts were consistently held in the subsequent centuries, that al-Ghazali to this day remains thought by many to be the second greatest figure in Islam, next to Mohammed. And this can help us understand, and to a great degree account for, the problems that have befallen the Muslim world.

Now, how then do you get out of this situation? How are Muslims going to think their way out of this? Some of the Muslims I work with, and who are considered reformers, see this problem very much in this same way. I had one of the leading Muslim reformers in Europe, a man from a very distinguished family in the Middle East, read my book, and has endorsed it. I asked him: if I give you unlimited funds and absolute power for ten years to affect the change within the Muslim world that will lead it away from this Islamism and back to what it once was in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, tell me how you would do it? He thought for a moment, and then said, "I would rehellenize". This is directly parallel to Benedict XVI's Regensburg Lecture, which is mostly about the loss of reason in the West, in which he also recommends the rehellenization of Islam. If there is to be any genuine dialogue between Islam and the West, Islam needs to be re-

hellenize itself. My Arab friend also mentioned to me a very famous Moroccan philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, al-Jaffari, who made this interesting remark: “either the future of Islam will be Aristotelian or it will not be.”

This crisis is so severe that the only means by which they are going to be able to think their way out of it is to return to the questions that were foreclosed in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and reconsider them, even to the extent of re-examining who God is. An Iranian philosopher, Abdulkarim Soroush, said that, if you want democracy, you need a different God. This tyrannical God that Islam has cannot serve. It cannot even be the basis for an accountable government. So this is understood by those who wish to see this change made.

I had the privilege several years ago of meeting privately with the now late Abdurrahman Wahid, the former president of Indonesia but, more importantly, the spiritual leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, which is the largest Muslim organisation in the world – Indonesia being the largest Muslim country in the world. It is members of this organisation that surround Christian churches when the Islamists are trying to burn them down. He even said of the Pope’s Regensburg address, which, as you know, caused riots in the Muslim world and the murder of a nun, that he should have said it in a different way, but he was basically right. When I met him, I was a little imprudent. I had had a friend who told me that, in private, president Wahid had said he was a neo-Mu‘tazalite. So I said, “excuse me, but I was told that you once said this”. He did not know who I was, and he just shut down. It was imprudent of me, because calling someone a Mu‘tazalite is like calling them an apostate, and I was a stranger to him. So I should not have done that. Trying a different way, I said, “Mr President, in his last interview, King Hussein of Jordan said that Islam took a fatally wrong turn at the time of the suppression of the Mu‘tazalites. What do you think of that?” Again, he would not respond. Then he found his own way to answer my questions. He said, “I was in Morocco once and I went into a mosque in Fez, and there, under a glass case, was a copy of Aristotle’s *The Ethics*. And I looked at this book and I began weeping, and thought to myself – without it, I too would be a fundamentalist.” And I said, “Mr. President, when was it that you first became acquainted with *The Nicomachean Ethics*?” He said, “at my father’s madrasa”.

Just for a little touch of irony, a friend of mine was an interrogator at Guantanamo and engaged a fairly high profile prisoner and began discussing Aristotle. And his response was, “I am very interested in what you are saying. I have heard of Aristotle, but his works have not been available to us in my country.



Would you get me some Aristotle in Arabic, because I would like to start reading it?” And so he applied to the post library at Guantanamo, to see if the library could get *The Ethics* and *The Politics* of Aristotle in Arabic. They refused to do it. This is just a little indication of their complete obliviousness to the nature of the war of ideas that is taking place within Islam. When you miss the fact that this is the level at which the struggle is really taking place, you are not even in it. This is sadly indicative of US public diplomacy and its failure to help the very people in the Muslim world whose success we need for our own national security. We have not done that yet.

I will simply close by saying this: Osama bin Laden<sup>3</sup> is just one Islamist, who is the product of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Ikhwan, which was founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, grandfather of the famous Tariq Ramadan. The Muslim Brotherhood was created in direct response to the abolition of the caliphate by Ataturk in 1924. This sent much of the Muslim world into a state of shock in terms of its identity and its future – very much like the abolition of the Papacy might send Roman Catholics into a similar state. How can this be? The real explanation for the state of the Muslim world is the one I have just given, which is a very tough one, which would require Muslims to look within themselves, to go back to their texts, their theological and philosophical disputes, and to re-open fundamental questions. This is what Muslim reformers wish to do, which is why my book is dedicated to them. This is very tough medicine; it is a long, hard slog to do this. The alternative message, as articulated by al-Banna and bin Laden, is that ‘we once ruled the world and lived in glory because we followed the path of Allah. Allah does not simply promise paradise in the next world, but success in this one, if we follow his way. The manifestation of that success is our power and our riches. Now we have no power or riches. How can this be?’ The only account of it that they can give of themselves is that: we have left the path of God and are being punished for it. We can restore ourselves by returning to the path of Allah. How do we do that? According to Bin Laden and the rest, we will imitate the companions of the prophet as they went forth in the 7<sup>th</sup> century to follow Mohammed and then on to the jihad that created the caliphate – the largest empire the world had ever seen. The world today, including almost the entire Muslim world, is in a state of jahalia; our rulers are jahalia – referring to the pre-Islamic state of barbarism and ignorance. They must be removed, they have to be killed, and we need to restore Islamic rule and an Islamic state – by which is meant, of course, a Shari’a state. And how is this going to be done?

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<sup>3</sup> Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2011 by US Special Forces



The only disputes among them are really between whether to take out the near enemy, which means their own rulers first, and then take on the far enemy in a jihad against the West. Bin Laden's conclusion is: we cannot take out the near enemy, because it is too strong with the United States' support. So we need to take out the far enemy first, the United States itself, and then the near enemy will collapse, because it no longer will have this support. And that obviously is the programme on which he launched himself on 9/11. This is a very appealing explanation. It is comprehensive, simple, and it gives them some kind of meaning and understanding of their situation, which otherwise is very hard to obtain because it requires the kind of thinking and self-examination that I mentioned earlier. Unfortunately, it is this latter explanation that is prevailing.





