

HOW ISLAM LOST ITS WAY: YESTERDAY'S ACHIEVEMENTS WERE GOLDEN; TODAY, REASON HAS BEEN ECLIPSED. (Washington Post, 29 Dec 2001)

By
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If the world is to be spared what future historians may call the "century of terror," we will have to chart a perilous course between the Scylla of American imperial arrogance and the Charybdis of Islamic religious fanaticism. Through these waters, we must steer by a distant star toward a careful, reasoned, democratic, humanistic and secular future. Otherwise, shipwreck is certain.

For nearly four months now, leaders of the Muslim community in the United States, and even President Bush, have routinely asserted that Islam is a religion of peace that was hijacked by fanatics on Sept. 11.

These two assertions are simply untrue.

First, Islam – like Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or any other religion – is not about peace. Nor is it about war. Every religion is about absolute belief in its own superiority and the divine right to impose its version of truth upon others. In medieval times, both the Crusades and the Jihads were soaked in blood. Today, there are Christian fundamentalists who attack abortion clinics in the United States and kill doctors; Muslim fundamentalists who wage their sectarian wars against each other; Jewish settlers who, holding the Old Testament in one hand and Uzis in the other, burn olive orchards and drive Palestinians off their ancestral land; and Hindus in India who demolish ancient mosques and burn down churches.

The second assertion is even further off the mark. Even if Islam had, in some metaphorical sense, been hijacked, that event did not occur three months ago. It was well over seven centuries ago that Islam suffered a serious trauma, the effects of which refuse to go away.

Where do Muslims stand today? Note that I do not ask about Islam; Islam is an abstraction. Maulana Abdus Sattar Edhi, Pakistan's preeminent social worker, and the Taliban's Mohammad Omar are both followers of Islam, but the former is overdue for a Nobel Peace Prize while the latter is an ignorant, psychotic fiend. Palestinian writer Edward Said, among others, has insistently pointed out that Islam holds very different meaning for different people. Within my own family, hugely different kinds of Islam are practiced. The religion is as heterogeneous as those who believe and follow it. There is no "true Islam."

Today, Muslims number 1 billion. Of the 48 countries with a full or near Muslim majority, none has yet evolved a stable democratic political system. In fact, all Muslim countries are dominated by self-serving corrupt elites who cynically advance their

personal interests and steal resources from their people. None of these countries has a viable educational system or a university of international stature.

Reason, too, has been waylaid.

You will seldom see a Muslim name as you flip through scientific journals, and if you do, the chances are that this person lives in the West. There are a few exceptions: Pakistani Abdus Salam, together with Americans Steven Weinberg and Sheldon Glashow, won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1979. I got to know Salam reasonably well; we even wrote a book preface together. He was a remarkable man, terribly in love with his country and his religion. And yet he died deeply unhappy, scorned by Pakistan, declared a non-Muslim by an act of the Pakistani parliament in 1974. Today the Ahmadi sect, to which Salam belonged, is considered heretical and harshly persecuted. (My next-door neighbor, an Ahmadi physicist, was shot in the neck and heart and died in my car as I drove him to the hospital seven years ago. His only fault was to have been born into the wrong sect.)

Though genuine scientific achievement is rare in the contemporary Muslim world, pseudo-science is in generous supply. A former chairman of my department has calculated the speed of heaven: He maintains it is receding from Earth at one centimeter per second less than the speed of light. His ingenious method relies upon a verse in the Islamic holy book, which says that worship on the night on which the book was revealed is worth a thousand nights of ordinary worship. He states that this amounts to a time-dilation factor of 1,000, which he puts into a formula of Einstein's theory of special relativity.

A more public example: One of two Pakistani nuclear engineers recently arrested on suspicion of passing nuclear secrets to the Taliban had earlier proposed to solve Pakistan's energy problems by harnessing the power of genies. He relied on the Islamic belief that God created man from clay, and angels and genies from fire; so this highly placed engineer proposed to capture the genies and extract their energy.

Today's sorry situation contrasts starkly with the Islam of yesterday. Between the 9th and 13th centuries – the Golden Age of Islam – the only people doing decent work in science, philosophy or medicine were Muslims. Muslims not only preserved ancient learning, they also made substantial innovations. The loss of this tradition has proven tragic for Muslim peoples.

Science flourished in the Golden Age of Islam because of a strong rationalist and liberal tradition, carried on by a group of Muslim thinkers known as the Mutazilites. But in the 12th century, Muslim orthodoxy reawakened, spearheaded by the Arab cleric Imam Al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali championed revelation over reason, predestination over free will. He damned mathematics as being against Islam, an intoxicant of the mind that weakened faith.

Caught in the viselike grip of orthodoxy, Islam choked. No longer would Muslim, Christian and Jewish scholars gather and work together in the royal courts. It was the end

of tolerance, intellect and science in the Muslim world. The last great Muslim thinker, Abd-al Rahman Ibn Khaldun, belonged to the 14th century.

Meanwhile, the rest of the world moved on. The Renaissance brought an explosion of scientific inquiry in the West. This owed much to translations of Greek works carried out by Arabs and other Muslim contributions, but they were to matter little. Mercantile capitalism and technological progress drove Western countries – in ways that were often brutal and at times genocidal – to rapidly colonize the Muslim world from Indonesia to Morocco. It soon became clear, at least to some of the Muslim elites, that they were paying a heavy price for not possessing the analytical tools of modern science and the social and political values of modern culture – the real source of power of their colonizers.

Despite widespread resistance from the orthodox, the logic of modernity found 19th-century Muslim adherents. Some seized on the modern idea of the nation-state. It is crucial to note that not a single Muslim nationalist leader of the 20th century was a fundamentalist. However, Muslim and Arab nationalism, part of a larger anti-colonial nationalist current across the Third World, included the desire to control and use national resources for domestic benefit.

The conflict with Western greed was inevitable. The imperial interests of Britain, and later the United States, feared independent nationalism. Anyone willing to collaborate was preferred, even the ultraconservative Islamic regime of Saudi Arabia. In 1953, Mohammed Mosaddeq of Iran was overthrown in a CIA coup, replaced by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Britain targeted Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. Indonesia's Sukarno was replaced by Suharto after a bloody coup that left hundreds of thousands dead.

Pressed from outside, corrupt and incompetent from within, secular Muslim governments proved unable to defend national interests or deliver social justice. They began to frustrate democracy to preserve their positions of power and privilege. These failures left a vacuum that Islamic religious movements grew to fill – in Iran, Pakistan and Sudan, to name a few.

The lack of scruple and the pursuit of power by the United States combined fatally with this tide in the Muslim world in 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. With Pakistan's Mohammed Zia ul-Haq as America's foremost ally, the CIA openly recruited Islamic holy warriors from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Algeria. Radical Islam went into overdrive as its superpower ally and mentor funneled support to the mujaheddin; Ronald Reagan feted them on the White House lawn.

The rest is by now familiar: After the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States walked away from an Afghanistan in shambles. The Taliban emerged; Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda made Afghanistan their base.

What should thoughtful people infer from this whole narrative?

For Muslims, it is time to stop wallowing in self-pity: Muslims are not helpless victims of conspiracies hatched by an all-powerful, malicious West. The fact is that the decline of Islamic greatness took place long before the age of mercantile imperialism. The causes were essentially internal. Therefore Muslims must be introspective and ask what went wrong.

Muslims must recognize that their societies are far larger, more diverse and complex than the small homogeneous tribal society in Arabia 1,400 years ago. It is therefore time to renounce the idea that Islam can survive and prosper only in an Islamic state run according to “sharia”, or Islamic law. Muslims need a secular and democratic state that respects religious freedom and human dignity and is founded on the principle that power belongs to the people. This means confronting and rejecting the claim by orthodox Islamic scholars that, in an Islamic state, sovereignty belongs to the vice-regents of Allah, or Islamic jurists, not to the people.

Muslims must not look to the likes of bin Laden; such people have no real answer and can offer no real positive alternative. To glorify their terrorism is a hideous mistake: The unremitting slaughter of Shiites, Christians and Ahmadis in their places of worship in Pakistan, and of other minorities in other Muslim countries, is proof that all terrorism is not about the revolt of the dispossessed.

The United States, too, must confront bitter truths. The messages of George W. Bush and Tony Blair fall flat while those of bin Laden, whether he lives or dies, resonate strongly across the Muslim world. Bin Laden's religious extremism turns off many Muslims, but they find his political message easy to relate to: The United States must stop helping Israel in dispossessing the Palestinians, stop propping up corrupt and despotic regimes across the world just because they serve U.S. interests.

Americans will also have to accept that their triumphalism and disdain for international law are creating enemies everywhere, not just among Muslims. Therefore they must become less arrogant and more like other peoples of this world.

Our collective survival lies in recognizing that religion is not the solution; neither is nationalism. We have but one choice: the path of secular humanism, based upon the principles of logic and reason. This alone offers the hope of providing everybody on this globe with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

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