

## AMERICA AND THE CHALLENGE OF ISLAM<sup>1</sup>

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AT THE START OF A MILLENNIUM THAT PROMISES TO accelerate the irreversible processes of globalization, which are advancing dizzily before our eyes to envelope even the most remote people of the world, we seek global answers as to how we can best adjust to one another. How can different world cultures learn to live with each other? How can local cultures retain their sense of identity and dignity in the face of the onslaught of globalization, with its non-stop satellite television, instant high-tech communications, and so on? How much of a symbol of globalization is the United States of America to the rest of the world? Are the attacks on McDonald's after September 11th to be read as a rejection of globalization or of America?

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay appeared as "Towards the Global Millennium: The Challenge of Islam" in *The World Today* (August/September 1996): 212-16; these ideas are further developed in my book *Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

Given the high degree of uncertainty surrounding these questions, it is not surprising that we are often given superficial and shoddy answers. Even the experts can get it wrong. The relationship between Islam and the West—in particular the U.S.—is an example.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I will point out why some of the most influential current global theories about Islam's relations with the West are inadequate. I will then explore an alternative method of understanding what is happening in the Muslim world through a discussion of Muslim political structures and leadership. This will help explain Islam's present predicament and its sometimes thorny relations with the U.S. In conclusion, I will suggest ways to improve mutual understanding.

In the process a host of important questions will be raised, not all of which will find answers in this essay: Who speaks for Islam? Why is Islam such a potent symbol of resistance in our times? Why has Osama bin Laden emerged as such a powerful symbol of resistance to many Muslims after September 11th in spite of the universal condemnation of the event from Muslim governments?

An understanding of Islam is important in our world. The U.S. is currently involved in settling Afghanistan after a war and dealing with the aftermath of its war with another major Muslim nation, Iraq. In post-Saddam Iraq the U.S. is physically located in the heart of the Muslim world. There are 55 Muslim states, and over 1.3 billion Muslims with abundant vitality and passion. Muslims control much of the oil and gas reserves of the world. They live in the West in large numbers as permanent citizens. The challenge to Western-backed Israel from Islamic organizations like Hamas; the resurgence of Islam in countries that matter strategically to the West like Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, and Algeria; and the nuclear ambitions of several Muslim countries make Islam important.

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<sup>2</sup> For this discussion, I use "Islam" to mean Muslims, wherever they live, especially in those countries that have a Muslim majority; by "the West" I mean North America and Western Europe, with its leadership, often challenged but rarely shaken off, clearly residing in the United States. While using the terms "Islam" and "the West" as short-hand, I need to add the caveat that reducing the two highly complex and internally diverse civilizations to such simplistic terms may create more problems than it solves.

More Muslims have made an impact on the global media positively (Benazir Bhutto) or negatively (Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, the 19 hijackers of September 11th) than those of any other non-Western civilization. Can the Western man or woman in the street name any Russian leader apart from Gorbachev and Putin, or any black African except Mandela? And how many can name any Latin American, Japanese, Indian, or Chinese leader?

### *Global Theories*

In the last few years Muslims have simplified global issues and interpreted a series of developments, which on the surface are clearly unconnected, as a well-laid plan by the West and its allies to humiliate them: the controversy over *The Satanic Verses*, the collapse of the BCCI Bank, the Gulf War and the war in Iraq, the rape and death camps of Bosnia, and the slaughter of the civilian population of Lebanon. September 11th and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are also seen by many in the Muslim world as part of a sinister conspiracy against Islam. Muslims view those rulers who are seen as pro-American with disdain: in Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf is called “Busharraf.”

In this atmosphere of suspicion, even scholarly exercises providing global explanations of our times—Samuel Huntington’s essay, “The Clash of Civilizations?” (and later his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*),<sup>3</sup> Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*,<sup>4</sup> and Felipe Fernandez-Armesto’s *Millennium*<sup>5</sup>—which tend to see Islam as a dark force in

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72.3 (1993): 22–49; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Millennium: A History of the Last Thousand Years* (New York: Scribner, 1995).

history, are seen by Muslims as part of the conspiracy against Islam, part of a bludgeon-Islam-out-of-existence school of thought.<sup>6</sup>

### *A Clash of Civilizations?*

Huntington's thesis about the clash of civilizations was influential because it struck a responsive chord in the West. The Harvard professor argued that future conflicts would be cultural, not ideological or economic, in content. Islam was singled out as a potential enemy civilization in an argument that was as deterministic as it was simplistic. Huntington's thesis derived from established Orientalist thinking: "We are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations," wrote Bernard Lewis in 1990.<sup>7</sup> "Islam has bloody borders," concluded Huntington.<sup>8</sup> (But so do Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism—ask [respectively] the Bosnians and Chechens, the Palestinians, and the Kashmiris.) Where does this dangerously deterministic argument take us except to a clash of civilizations? Is this merely a self-fulfilling prophecy?

In his essay in this issue of *The Hedgehog Review*, Huntington identifies the 21st century as "The Age of Muslim Wars." He correctly points out the local nature of many Muslim struggles. But surely this emphasis on the local, often inwardly turned, Muslim struggle is contrary to the clash of civilizations thesis that he propounded a decade ago? Besides, his suggestion that "Muslim violence" is the root cause of the turmoil of our times is simply not borne out by the facts.

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<sup>6</sup> Not all books on Islam are sensationalist. In spite of its alarmist title, *A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West* by Graham Fuller and Ian Lesser (Boulder: Westview, 1995) is level-headed and objective. Benjamin Barber's *Jihad versus McWorld* (New York: Times, 1995) explains how all, not just Islamic, ethnic and religious communities feel threatened by globalization—hence the "Mc" in the title.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic Monthly* (September 1990): 60.

<sup>8</sup> Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," 35.

Isn't the real clash, the root cause of the turmoil, to be located within Islam, whether in Algeria, Egypt, Afghanistan, or Pakistan? Isn't the target the Muslim leadership? For Muslims, their leadership has failed. This failure is caricatured by stories of hidden, illegal wealth looted from the people and kept abroad, and corruption and cruelty at home. Hence the depth of Muslims' despair, the extent of their anger, and the desperation of their response.

The global strategic and security interests of the West are directly related to Muslim lands, and many Muslim nations are seen as important allies. Of the nine "pivotal states" identified by Western experts around which America forms its foreign policy, five are Muslim: Algeria, Turkey, Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia.<sup>9</sup> Strategic imperatives scramble Huntington's neat theory.

What about the 25 million Muslims permanently settled in the West conveniently ignored by Huntington? Where do they line up? Surely they are a bridge between the two civilizations? Huntington needs to recognize that an entire generation of young Muslims is coming of age in the West. There is a strong middle-class component among them in America, and they are integrated into the social and political structure. Black Muslims, too, are now emerging as a force in the United States. In this millennium we can expect influential figures in public life—members of Congress and Senators in the United States and members of Parliament in Britain—from this generation. Perhaps what is most significant is that they see themselves as both Muslim and American, or Muslim and British.

We also need to point out the serious efforts—at the global level, and perhaps for the first time on this scale and with this frequency—by influential individuals to increase mutual understanding. Although the reputation of individuals is vulnerable in an age of intense, even perverse, iconoclasm, several have spoken of the need to view Islam on its own terms, in terms of the global community, and not as the "other"

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Chase, et al, "Pivotal States and U.S. Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 74.1 (1996): 33–51.

or, more simplistically, as the new enemy after communism. The laudable attempts of the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Prince of Wales find an echo in the late King Hussein and his brother, the former Crown Prince Hassan, of Jordan; Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan; Muhammad Mahathir of Malaysia; and the Aga Khan.

### *The End of History?*

If Huntington sees Islam as a world threat, Fukuyama has a solution. He has simply written Islam—a threat to the triumphant liberal practice, consumerism, and democracy of the West, a force of disruption in the tranquillity at the end of history—out of history.<sup>10</sup> Fukuyama outrageously equates Islam to “European fascism.”<sup>11</sup> The main entry in the reference to Islam in his index is under “Islamic Fundamentalism” and then, in case anyone has missed the point, cross-referenced to “Fundamentalist Islam.” There is no other entry under “fundamentalism”—no Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, in spite of the clear global evidence of exuberant fundamentalism in these religions—except that of Islam. “Fundamentalism” is equated with fanaticism, extremism, and violence.

Fukuyama does not help himself: there is not a single Muslim author in his bibliography nor, surprisingly for an expert working in Washington, such acknowledged American experts as John Esposito, Clifford Geertz, Roy Mottahedeh, James Piscatori, and Edward Said. To compound matters, Huntington has five entries in the bibliography.

### *A Quranic Model*

We are still left searching for an explanation for what is happening in the Muslim world, for a general theory. Let us look in the Quran, the

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<sup>10</sup> Fukuyama 45–6.

<sup>11</sup> Fukuyama 236.

Muslim holy book, for a model that will explain Muslim behavior. No self-respecting political or social scientist, reared in the secular or liberal tradition of the West, would dream of looking in the Quran for explanations of behavior. Muslim social scientists themselves remain in awe of Western social theories and look around for easy answers in Ivy League or Oxbridge or London university departments—which is why so much of their work appears to be second-rate.

Mine is not an entirely original route. Max Weber persuasively showed the way in explaining the influence of the Protestant ethic on economic behavior, in contrast to Karl Marx, who emphasized economic and material factors as all-important. Inherent in Weber's models of authority is the assumption that societies move along a secular path and that leadership will be provided by a rational bureaucracy set in a working democracy. But even Weber could not foresee the collapse of the civilized veneer and easy reversion to primordial tribalism and savagery in Europe. Germany half a century ago, just decades after Weber was writing, and the Balkans in the 1990s illustrate for us how fragile the notion of a staid and safe European civilization, based on respect for human life and liberty, really is.

My thesis is that if the political leadership in its behavior, ideas, and politics is close to the Islamic ideal as laid out in the Quran and the life of the Prophet, friction in society is minimal; the further from the Islamic ideal, the greater the tension in society.<sup>12</sup>

The first and greatest model for Muslims is the holy Prophet. His life provides the balance between action and spirit, between this world and the next: he is the perfect person, *insan-i-kamil*. Imitating him were those disciples who were closest to him, such as Umar and Ali, great religious figures. But others too—not seen as religious figures—have attempted to live up to the ideal Islamic model. Saladin is one such name, which explains why Saddam Hussein—a man as far as can be

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<sup>12</sup> This idea was first explored in a general sense in my book *Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society* (London: Routledge, 1988).

imagined from the Saladin model— encouraged the comparison during the Gulf war and the war in Iraq.

We can refine our thesis by constructing socio-political categories, however crude, of Muslim leadership. To do so we cut through the confusing conflation, overlap, and collision of several traditions now functioning in the Muslim world: tribal, dynastic, European, and Islamic.

The first of the four categories is that of the clerical rulers. Iran provides an example. With the global media explosion through networks such as CNN and the BBC from the 1980s onwards, images of this category became the image of the Muslim cleric, indeed of Islam itself: a dark, scowling, evil-looking, bearded figure in black robes. The image neatly echoed Hollywood ideas and popular cartoons of the wicked wizard.

Iran, however much the West is transfixed by it, remains a one-off example, largely explained by its Shia culture and tradition. When given a choice at the polls, the people have rejected the religious parties in countries like Pakistan. The Jamat-i-Islami, perhaps the best organized and with the most coherent and sophisticated view of the modern world, has never had more than a few members in Parliament. The answer to this mystery is simple: Islam does not encourage a priesthood. “There is no monkery in Islam,” said the Prophet.

Another religious group that emerged to take power briefly was the Taliban. For a short while they controlled most of Afghanistan. Their guest Osama bin Laden by directly challenging the West dragged the Taliban into a devastating war, which destroyed their regime.

The second category is that of the military rulers and monarchies. Of the former, General Zia in Pakistan used Islam; Saddam did not use it until the Gulf war. Of the latter, the Saudis parade Islam; the Shah of Iran did not. In many countries in this category, the already existing tribal structures provided the bare bones of the state structure. Thus, the dominant tribal clan of the last century simply became the royal rulers, senior administrators, and entrepreneurs of this one. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are examples of this. Even the military

dictators rely on tribal politics. Both Assad and Saddam trust, as far as leaders of this kind can trust, their own sect or tribal clan.

The third category is the democratic one, which includes countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey, and Bangladesh. Governments in this category are democratic and elections are held, although there is a history of lapsing back to martial law in times of crisis. Stories of corruption, mismanagement, and evidence of the collapse of law and order create a general disillusionment with this category.

Such Muslim leaders skillfully exploit the fears of the West regarding Muslim fundamentalists. Their argument is simple: “we are all that stands between you and your worst nightmare, that is, Muslim fanatics, the dreaded fundamentalists of the media, in power with itchy Islamic fingers.” With the nuclear ambitions of many Muslim countries and the nuclear potential of others—e.g., Pakistan—this is a genuine concern of the West.

However, this category needs to be developed and strengthened for the future. It reflects the Islamic spirit of egalitarianism, the need for tolerance in pluralistic societies (again reflecting Islam), and larger global trends. In spite of the present faulty interpretation of democracy and the running of the nation-state, this is the most viable category for our times.

Long before September 11th forced American commentators to ask whether Islam was compatible with democracy—and before the war in Iraq forced them to look for democratic models that could apply to Iraq—Muslims had already stated their position when asked to vote for their leadership. In the 1930s they chose Mr. M. A. Jinnah to lead them in the Pakistan movement, which resulted in the creation of the largest Muslim nation on earth in 1947. Mr. Jinnah believed in human rights, women’s rights, minority rights, and the rule of law. Whatever his critics may say about him as a person, no one can doubt that he provided a genuine, authentic, and native model of democratic leadership to the Muslims.

The fourth and rather unsuccessful category is that of the socialist/communist leader, modeled on Stalin and the Soviet experience, whose appeal lies mainly in a rhetoric of care for the poor. Brutal dictators

with little hint of Islamic compassion and justice have ruled in this category through the secret police. After the Cold War, this category has little backing or appeal.

We must be cautious with our categories. Pakistan illustrates that one country can at different times adopt different categories: under Jinnah, it was democratic; under Ayub, a military dictatorship; and under Zia, Islamic. Each category presents problems for the future.

### *Looking to the Future*

In the short term, the prospects for a harmonious relationship between Islam and the West, particularly the U.S., look uncertain, even pessimistic. Most Muslim commentators predict further conflict after the war in Iraq. In the longer term, a great deal will depend on whether those who encourage dialogue and understanding will succeed or not.

What can be done to improve matters? The first steps are to stop demonizing each other. Muslims need to stop seeing a global conspiracy all around them—Christian, Jew, and Hindu germs every time they sneeze. They need to improve their understanding of the U.S. beyond the stereotype of the great Satan determined to exterminate Islam, who spends his spare time in an orgy of sex and violence. They need to put themselves in the place of the non-Muslims who see them as a threat: for example, Jews, surrounded by what they see as millions of Arabs united on one thing alone—their destruction; or Hindus in India, flanked by Pakistan and Bangladesh, and just beyond this circle, Iran and the Middle East—Muslim societies that to them appear in the grip of Islamic fervor.

I also need to point out what Muslims sometimes gloss over or refuse to acknowledge. There are far too many complaints about human rights violations, including that of non-Muslim minorities, in Muslim countries. This is because there is too little of the Islamic spirit of tolerance and compassion. Why are Muslims ignoring the Quranic instruction in Surah 2 verse 256: “Let there be no compulsion in religion”? Why are they not understanding the spirit of God’s greatest names, “the

Beneficent, the Merciful,” names which, paradoxically, they repeat the most during the day? The kidnapping, hijacking, torture, and blowing up of ordinary people in buses and bazaars—where are the young men getting their inspiration from? Why are the gentle teachers and mystics of Islam not heard? Why have Muslims abandoned one of the most powerful and endearing features of Islam? Why is the resistance invariably expressed in violence, as in Iran, Afghanistan, Algeria, Pakistan, and Egypt?

Muslims also face another, greater challenge—an internal one. They need to rebuild an idea of Islam that includes justice, integrity, tolerance, and the quest for knowledge—the classic Islamic civilization, not just the rituals, not just the five pillars of Islam, but the entire building. Reducing a sophisticated civilization to simple rituals encourages simple answers: reaching for guns and explosives, for instance. Today, piety and virtue are judged by political action and often equated with violence rather than sustained spirituality.

Muslim leaders also need to worry about the social, demographic, and educational trends in their countries. Muslim population growth is among the highest in the world, the literacy rates among the lowest, the figures for health facilities poor, and the life expectancy below average. The uneven spread of per capita income between countries like the Arab Gulf states and Bangladesh reflects the uneven picture within most Muslim countries. Affluent corrupt elites are living the extravagant and wasteful high life in the capital cities alongside the miserable squalor of the shanty towns. The gap between rich and poor is growing ominously wide. All this when a large percentage of the population is young, jobless, and restless for radical change. For many, Islam is the only natural way out.

Because of the global power of the U.S., the initiatives in understanding must come from the U.S. It must back off; it must treat Islam in its reporting and in its handling with the dignity due to a world religion. The problems of the unhappy people of Palestine, Chechnya, and Kashmir have not been solved. There is little hope of permanent peace unless this happens. Violence is possible at any time as young men give way to desperation and anger, whatever the surface movement towards normality.

The U.S. must put pressure on Muslim governments—and it interacts with most of them, whether overtly or covertly—to get their acts together, ensure justice, and provide clean administration. It must send serious signals to the ordinary Muslim people, through its media, seminars, conferences, and meetings, that it does not consider Islam as the enemy, however much it may disagree with certain aspects of Muslim behavior. The U.S. needs to understand the Islamic expressions of revolt as movements against corruption and lack of justice, not as anti-American.

The U.S. needs to discourage the knee-jerk “nuke ‘em” response to Muslims and the labeling of any Muslim act as “fundamentalist.” The generalized and intense contempt of the American media towards Islam, the abuse of the Prophet and Islam by prominent Americans, and the feeling in the Muslim community that they are the focus of new laws in the United States push many Muslims into an anti-American stance. It also makes the position of those who talk of dialogue and moderation more vulnerable.

Because the American media equate the word “fundamentalist” with an extremist, fanatical terrorist who is—invariably—Muslim, we need to ask how many media people raise the question: Can we legitimately use a term devised to describe something in one culture—a certain brand of Christian behavior and thought—to another distinct culture? As Muslims by definition believe in the Quran, however actively or not they may follow its instructions, they are technically all fundamentalists. Is every Muslim on earth today then an extremist, a fanatic, and a terrorist?

How many know—and this question is also put to Muslims—that the notion of the greater “jihad,” commonly misunderstood as an aggressive act of religious war in the U.S., which derives from the word to strive, was explained by the Prophet as the attempt to control our own base instincts and work towards a better, more harmonious world? The lesser “jihad” is to battle physically for Islam; that, too, is only directed against tyranny and injustice.

The common problems in this shrinking world need to be identified: drug and alcohol abuse, divorce, teenage violence, crime, ethnic and racial prejudice, the problems of the aged and the poor, the challenge of the growing sense of anarchy and rampant materialism, the sexual debasement of women and children, the depletion of our natural resources, and ecological concerns. On all these issues Islam takes a strong, enlightened position. This is the real Islamic “jihad.” If it is properly harnessed and understood, it can provide fresh, sorely needed strength to these most crucial of global issues.

We have seen how some of the most eminent American global thinkers have gotten it wrong where Islam is concerned. While pointing out their inadequacies, I have suggested an alternative method of understanding Islam and its relations with the U.S. Serious and urgent rethinking is required by the policy-planners and policy-makers in the corridors of power, not only in Washington, but also in Cairo, Kabul, and Tehran.

I conclude with a formula for the millennium. If justice flourishes—and is seen to flourish—in the Muslim world, if its rulers are people of integrity, and if Muslims are allowed to practice their faith with honor, Islam will provide its followers with the most viable, stable, and legitimate force for political action. It will be a good neighbor to non-Muslims living outside its borders and provide a benevolent and compassionate environment to those living inside them, but it will continue to resist attempts to subvert its identity or dignity. That resistance can take the form of a Jinnah who fought for Muslim rights within the law or an Osama bin Laden who fought outside the law. This is a formula the United States as the sole superpower needs to begin quickly to understand. Otherwise we will be entering a historical period in which America will be pitted against the Muslim world in protracted, messy, complex, and dangerous encounters.