IKRAM HAWRAMANI

An Intelligent Person's Guide to Understanding

ISLĀM AND MUSLIMS

What the West Misunderstands about Culture, Politics, Sexuality, Women and Rationality in Islamic Societies

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Preface

Many Western intellectuals cause Muslims to want to cringe as soon as they open their mouths to speak about Islam. Even if they have read multiple books on Islam, they are often capable of the most gargantuan mischaracterizations of the religion. There is a serious gap in knowledge between Islam as it is described in books and Islam as it is understood and practiced in the real world—and this book aims to fill that gap.

Among non-Muslims, those who know Islam the best are generally PhD scholars—such as the French priest and scholar Louis Massignon and the Christian Lebanese-American scholar George Makdisi—who spend decades studying Islam until they discover the important differences between theoretical Islam (what Muslims say Islam is and what is written down in books about Islam) and real-world Islam—Islam as it is *embodied* by living and breathing humans. This slowly makes it impossible for them to hold onto Western fantasies about Islam's supposedly alien and inscrutable nature.

The same process works in reverse too; a Muslim who studies the Christian philosophers Aquinas and Kant cannot help but slowly fall in love with such sensitive and well-meaning fellow humans. The more they study Christianity's intellectual tradition the more they respect it. Today's Catholic philosophers are some of the most admirable humans I know of. It is only those who have not taken the time to understand and empathize who can maintain a blanket dislike against Islam or Christianity.

This book aims to provide readers with a doorway into that "real" Islam that often takes non-Muslim students of the religion decades to fully uncover. It explains why it is right to call a wine-cup a work of Islamic art when it is decorated in the Islamic style even though Islam prohibits wine-drinking. It explains why there is no such thing as Islamic cuisine; why Hafez writes Islamic poetry but Persians make *Persian* music; why Muslim women wear the hijab; why Islam is opposed to sexual freedom (there is a deep philosophy to this); why political Islam is inherently un-Islamic; why Tolkien's character Gandalf is one of the best representatives of an ideal "Muslim" as described in the Quran. It also deals with the fate of Western civilization and the question of whether Islam can ever be at home in secular, pluralistic societies.

I present a new sociological framework for thinking about Islam that helps readers gain an intuitive sense on how such questions can be answered. This framework is informed by the evolutionary study of culture, the growing field of Western Islam studies, the Islamic scholarly tradition, and my own experiences living in multiple, very different, Islamic societies. My own modern but mainstream interpretation of Islam will also provide an important second layer of analysis, especially in the latter chapters of the book.

This book, therefore, is both academic and personal; both a study and a manifesto for a new conceptualization of Islam. It is meant to provide a new type of Islamic education to my Western friends so that they think and speak intelligently about this religion.

The first two chapters are essential reading and make up the heart of the book. They present a new sociological framework for understanding Islam that surpasses existing theories in its explanatory power thanks to not limiting itself to the sociological sciences and thanks to the important work of the late Harvard scholar Shahab Ahmed.

Some of the chapters may be categorized as apologetics; I speak for Islam against false sociological and psychological claims made against it.

While my academic interests are many and I am relatively familiar with the fields I cite, I do not claim to have written a scholarly work. My aim is to enable readers to understand what real-world Islam is like. I have used all available methods to attempt to pass my points across. I have attempted to write truthfully, without partisanship to any ideology or political interest group. My allegiance is to no particular worldview except a love for the truth. As a Muslim, I consider Truth to be one of the Attributes of God, therefore to serve the truth and nothing but the truth is in fact to serve God and nothing but God.

When dates are given, they are Christian dates unless specified otherwise. Arabic words are transliterated according to the *Encyclopedia of Islam* transliteration system except for words and names that already have a common spelling in English-language literature, such as Muhammad.

I wish to express my thanks to A. S. Amin for his reading of an earlier manuscript and for his many corrections and suggestions. I thank my wife Sakina for her essential support and her suggestions, corrections and encouragement. I am indebted to Robert R. Reilly's *The Closing of the Muslim Mind* for introducing me to Roger Scruton and for motivating me to complete this book through his gross mischaracterization of Islam.

I am greatly indebted to the many great Western scholars of Islam for their enlightening and admirably fair-minded studies of Islam. My greatest debt goes to Shahab Ahmed, whose scholarship provided the original inspiration for this book.

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1. Religion and Culture

The relationship between religion and culture is a common source of gross misunderstanding about Islam (and other religions). For this reason this first chapter is meant to explain how Islam interacts with culture.

The human genome holds about 20,000 genes. Humans, being genetic-cultural creatures, also have a certain set of *cultural information* that similar to genes, affects their behavior.

A gene is a unit of information written in our DNA that may potentially affect our behavior.[1] Cultural information is information written in *our brains* that may potentially affect our behavior; the end results can be the same, only the *storage mechanism* differs.

We probably have genes that enable us to recoil from snakes, so that a hatred and fear of snakes may be a built-in biological feature of humans (and chimpanzees).[2] As we grow up, if we get a good education, we will

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[1] More accurately, it affects our phenotype, with "behavior" referring to our social and psychological phenotype, which is our concern in this book.

[2] Michael Cook and Susan Mineka, "Selective associations in the observational conditioning of fear in rhesus monkeys." *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 16, no. 4

also acquire cultural information that makes us fear naked electrical wiring. This information is integrated into our psyche and affects our behavior. We acquire a response that makes us recoil from naked electrical wiring. This response is not genetic but cultural; the information making us recoil is stored in the brain structure rather than in the genome.

A boy who is told by his parents that playing in the snow without gloves will cause them to get a cold can acquire this piece of cultural information. This is an acquired idea about how reality functions, about cause and effect. Acquiring this information does not require that the person actually experience the cause and effect. The boy does not need to get a cold to believe what the parents say. If he is a good learner and not obstinate, he will from then on make sure to wear gloves when he is playing in the snow. His behavior has been modified by an acquired piece of cultural information.

What is special about cultural information (as opposed to any old information stored in the brain, such as the picture of an elephant) is that cultural information can be passed down to one's children the way that genes are passed down. The boy's parents may have heard it from their parents that playing in the snow without gloves results in getting a cold, only to go on to teach the same to their son.

Not all cultural information is necessary beneficial. There are pieces of cultural information popularly called "old wives' tales" that purport to tell us important information about the way the world works. If we were to adopt this information, they would modify our behavior. One such tale is that cracking one's knuckles leads to arthritis. This is a piece of cultural

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(1990): 372-389. For a discussion of these finding and others, see Nathan H. Lents, "Are Humans Predisposed to Fear Snakes?", *The Human Evolution Blog*, October 8, 2014, https://thehumanevolutionblog.com/2014/10/08/are-humans-predisposed-to-fear-snakes/ (retrieved January 23, 2018).

information that can be passed on for generations due to its supposed utility in helping prevent arthritis. Yet it is completely false according to scientists.

All information necessary for human survival cannot be encoded in genes due to the fact that DNA can only get so large before it becomes too prone to damage and corruption to be useful. It took perhaps millions of years to encode a fear-snakes-gene into our genome, but in just a minute we can encode a fear-naked-electrical-wire piece of cultural information in our brains that has equal power to affect our behavior. According to one estimate, human DNA contains about 750 megabytes of information.[3] The human brain, meanwhile, is theoretically capable of encoding 2.5 *petabytes* of information.[4] That is 3.5 million times more information than is encoded in DNA. Cultural information, that is, the brain's capacity for storing gene-like behavior modifiers within the brain structure, are one of the evolutionary innovations that have enabled human life in all its complexity and sophistication.

A population can carry cultural information that comes from its ancient past and that somewhat conflicts with its professed religion. We will discuss certain aspects of Christian culture before moving on to Muslim cultures. There were and are Christians who considered the Greek pantheon a harmful influence on Western culture that should ideally have been extirpated for the benefit of Christendom. Why refer to Greek deities when one has the Trinity and the rest of Christian metaphysics?

The Western European population, however, found Greek mythology sufficiently meaningful and useful to hold onto it. In this way, despite the

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[3] See Victor M. McElheny, *Drawing the Map of Life: Inside the Human Genome Project*, New York: Basic Books, ch. 3.

[4] See Scientific American Editors, *Ask the Brains, Part 1: Experts Reveal 55 Mysteries of the Mind*, New York: Scientific American, 2017, section 4.

fact that Christianity was largely in charge, the population was capable of maintaining a conflicting set of cultural information and building upon it, so that, for example, a Christian soldier may have found inspiration in something that a Greek hero did to decide to do something heroic themselves.

Western Christians did not necessarily become less Christian by adopting Greek mythology. They were capable of differentiating religion from myth, so that Christian concepts were preferred over Greek concepts in cases of conceptual conflict. Christianity's views on salvation, resurrection and Paradise remained the canonical and normative views on these matters for faithful Christians, but perhaps in certain areas adorned with Greek imagery.

Each person has their own set of cultural information that they store in their brains. A Christian child is given one view of Christianity by their mother, and another by their father, and these views can have very different elements and emphases. These father and mother pieces of information recombine in the head of the child, creating a blended view of Christianity (that may have some contradictory elements). The child, additionally, receives various Christian pieces of information from friends, relatives, preachers, teachers, books and articles.

The transfer of these pieces of information to the child will be affected by the child's propensities. There are children who learn little about religion despite the best efforts of their parents, while others constantly demand to learn more by asking questions and reading books.

Families develop their own traditions of values and ethics; our daily experience shows that different families can have very different interpretations of religion compared to their neighbors who ostensibly share the same religion. In technical terms, we can say that each family has

its own *hermeneutical tradition*; its own set of cultural and religious information that may differ in certain aspects from what is held by others.

A Muslim little girl may hear that one of Prophet Muhammad's companions was nicknamed Abū Hurayra, which stands for "father of cats", due to his keeping of a large number of cats. If she herself likes cats, this Abū Hurayra concept will be a cause for a feeling that among the Prophet's Companions were kindred spirits, and her love for the Prophet and his circle may increase, and in the future, when faced with a cat, she may intentionally show it more kindness—feeling that in this way she carries out a pious act that would be smiled upon by the Prophet and his cat-loving Companion.

The Abū Hurayra-the-cat-lover concept was acquired by this girl and her behavior was affected by it, helping her see the ancient Muslims as more humane and friendly. This concept, in turn, can affect the way she perceives and integrates other information about Islam. If she hears that the ancient Muslims were inhuman and cruel, this concept, among hundreds of others, will provide grounds for refuting such assertions.

The power to encode concepts in the brain differs between person to person, so does the ability to pay attention, and so does a person's interests and likings. Girls will necessarily pay far more attention to Islamic concepts having to do with ancient Muslim females boys will do, and in this way this girl-Islam will have differences from the boy-Islam that boys receive.

If out of the 1 million concepts in my head[5] only 50,000 have to do with Islam, that can be all that is needed to make me an authentically Islamic/Muslim person, leaving space for 950,000 other concepts.

Religions are derived from scriptures and oral traditions. Due to the great differences in intellectual ability, in hormone and neurotransmitter levels, in the lithium level in drinking water[6], altitude[7] and other factors, different individuals and populations can have greatly differing interpretations of their religious texts and traditions.

Religion is a set of concepts, but concepts can only exist in a person's head *after being biologically encoded*. This means that given the exact same religious texts and traditions, two people can derive very different concepts from them, so that even though the two belong to the same religion, they may come to contradictory conclusions on certain matters, both using the same texts and traditions to justify their conclusions. The great amount of dissent regarding various Islamic issues existing in Medina merely one lifetime after the Prophet Muhammad is testament to

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[5] This is a randomly chosen number. It is fair to assume that the number of concepts we are capable of acquiring is orders of magnitude larger than the number of genes, due to the already mentioned advantage of the brain in storing information.

[6] Higher levels of lithium in a population's drinking water reduces suicide risk. See Ohgami et al. "Lithium levels in drinking water and risk of suicide." *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 194, no. 5 (2009): 464-465.

[7] Higher altitudes increase dopamine and reduce serotonin, probably increasing the capacity for religious experience, but also increasing suicide risk. See Huber et al., "Altitude is a Risk Factor for Completed Suicide in Bipolar Disorder", *Medical Hypotheses* 82, no. 3 (2014): 377–381; Huber et al., "Association Between Altitude and Regional Variation of ADHD in Youth." *Journal of Attention Disorders* 22, no. 14 (2018): 1299–1306.

the way that different humans can see the very same information very differently.[8]

A British Muslim woman who loves Victorian literature will acquire a set of Victorian concepts; values, explanations, ideals, that will coexist in her head with her Islamic concepts, creating a new synthesis of what Islam is that may be quite foreign to a Chinese or Arab Muslim.

Becoming Muslim is a process of concept-acquisition that is invariably colored and modified by the person's existing concepts. When Islam is given to an irreligious population, its members integrate Islam into their already-existing cultural set of concepts, replacing some of their concepts while maintaining much that was already there from before. This process is highly dynamic, affected by the pre-existing culture and by the psychological propensities of the population.

These different propensities lead to different versions of Islam. The lessons a European Muslim "learns" from the Prophet's life may be very different from the lessons a nomadic Turkic Muslim learns. The original material may be the same, but the set of concepts each person *derives* (i.e. encodes in their head and uses in future thinking and decision-making) can be very different. European converts to Islam like to think of Prophet Muhammad as a wise philosopher-king and like to focus on his ethical teachings. A nomadic Turk may be far more interested in Prophet Muhammad the warrior. A Persian living in the heights of the Zagros Mountains may espouse a Sufi interpretation of his person and seek in her Prophet a pathway to the Divine Light.

Certain religious scholars[9] like to speak of a one true version of Islam. Almost every Muslim will give a definition of Islam that invariably

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[8] See Umar F. Abd-Allah Wymann-Landgraf, *Mālik and Medina: Islamic Legal Reasoning in the Formative Period*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013.

excludes some Muslims, but the reality of Islam is that of immense diversity, caused by differences in the concept-derivation process between populations, and by the pre-existing concepts the populations possess.

Middle class people often have libraries in their homes filled with a diverse array of books from around the world. These intellectual people, if they are Muslim, will have mastered the basics of Islam early on then gone on to receive vast amounts of non-Islam-related concepts from their readings. These people are often described as cosmopolitan, and even when pious and devout, are often lenient and tolerant toward Muslims who differ from them significantly. For these people, Islam is contextualized within a far larger framework of concepts, so that they are aware of the vast room for interpretation and difference that exists, and are able to distinguish between matters of priority and insignificant technicalities.

At the other end of the spectrum are radical fundamentalists. The corpus of religious texts and commentaries is more than sufficient to fully capture their attention and satisfy their curiosity, so that instead of being interested in seeking the new and the interesting, they are concerned with orthodoxy and religious purity.

Research has shown that religious fundamentalism and low-IQ are associated, while also showing that high IQ and a high ability to learn are

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[9] I will often refer to scholars, jurists and clerics in this book. Despite negative stereotypes about such people, they are often better-educated and more open-minded than the societies they come from (despite the existence of some dramatically bad examples). If some of the discourse in this book seems to reflect negatively on them, they are not meant as attacks on them but as attempts to describe reality, and I am sure there will be many among them who will appreciate the points I try to make. As someone who has a number of clerics and scholars in his own extended family and who is studying the Islamic scholarly tradition, an undiscriminating attack attack on them would be partly an attack on myself and people I love and respect.

correlated.[10] The more capacity for learning that a person has, the more "context" they create in their minds. A professor of Islamic law who has vast knowledge of other legal systems is going to have a far more sophisticated view of certain legal issues compared to a radical fundamentalist who only has a few isolated narrations of the Prophet Muhammad to rely on.

It is difficult to be a lover of books and also be a narrow-minded fundamentalist. A badly educated or extremist Muslim may have no trouble calling Christians *kāfir*s ("infidels"), but a Muslim who has enjoyed Dostoevsky, Dickens and Austen is not going to find such a label in any way justified for use toward an honored fellow human being. This and a thousand other cases of conflict between what we can call Islamic cosmopolitanism and Islamic fundamentalism continually pushes educated middle and upper class Muslims away from extremists who act as if religion exempts one from showing common human decency toward others.

Between religion and culture

Islam is often conceived of as the property of the religious scholars, while the culture of Muslim societies is conceived of as something belonging to the people. Since Islam is often considered a totally definitive ideology (a set of instructions and ideas that totally define and control every aspect of a Muslim's life), Islamic culture is conceived of as somehow in conflict with it; the more that a certain society's culture differs from Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, the less "Islamic" it is supposed to be.

T. S. Eliot brought attention to the ill-defined nature of the word "culture" in a lecture dedicated to defining it:

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[10] Stuart Ritchie, *Intelligence: All That Matters*, London, John Murray Learning, 2015.

> In general, the word is used in two ways: by a kind of synecdoche, when the speaker has in mind one of the elements or evidences of culture—such as 'art'; or, as in the passage just quoted, as a kind of emotional stimulant—or anaesthetic.[11]

According to Eliot, culture and religion are interdependent and cannot survive without one another. Eliot predicts that Europe will descend into barbarism if the abandonment of Christianity is taken to its logical extreme.[12] Eliot in the following passage touches upon many of the important concerns of this book:

> Anyone with even the slightest religious consciousness must be afflicted from time to time by the contrast between his religious faith and his behaviour; anyone with the taste that *individual* or *group* culture confers must be aware of values which he cannot call religious. And both 'religion' and 'culture,' besides meaning different things from each other, should mean for the individual and for the group something towards which they strive, not merely something which they possess. Yet there is an aspect in which we can see a religion as *the whole way of life* of a people, from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also its culture... we have to face the strange idea that what is part of our culture is also a part of our *lived* religion.[13]

Eliot, a Christian, says that we can think of religion as a total way of life. This is exactly the same idea that certain Western writers about Islam,

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[11] T. S. Eliot, *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*, London: Faber and Faber, 1948, 14. The "passage just quoted" refers to articles from UNESCO's draft constitution in which the promotion of appreciation for "life and culture" is mentioned as one of the purposes of the organization.

[12] Ibid., 122.

13 Ibid., 31.

certain Islamic scholars and certain extremists mention regarding what Islam is or should be. Eliot is aware of the contradiction between this view and the existence of culture, since culture carries its own values that are distinct from religion and cannot be identified in any book of scripture or theology. He cannot discover a way of reconciling this contradiction, but he hopes that his book could help intellectuals take a first step toward such making such a reconciliation. In his definition, a culture is a set of values, ideals and manners that is organic (one that is not planned but grows naturally across generations), that is transferable (it should be possible to raise one's children in it, who go on to raise *their* children in it), and that is co-extensive with a religion (merged with a religion to form a single mosaic).

In order to get beyond the confusion introduced by the word "culture", I will hereby propose a naturalistic definition. My definition is largely similar to Eliot's, and is also similar to that provided by the evolutionary biologists Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd in their important book *Not By Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*[14]:

> A culture is the sum of a society's heritable concepts. It is the sum of a society's knowledge, beliefs, protocols, manners and ideals that can be learned from the previous generation and passed down to the next one.

People belonging to a culture have specific ideas about how they should dress, spend their time, treat men, treat women, treat children, treat the elderly, engage in courtship and carry out business transactions. Each one of these sections of culture is made up of a set of concepts that are taught to participants of that culture, either verbally (through personal advice and admonishment, education, sermons and books) or non-verbally

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[14] Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd, *Not By Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

(where a person consciously or subconsciously copies the manners and standards he or she observes in others).

A person's genome is the set of his or her genes, which determine to a great extent their appearance and to a lesser extend their faculties and behavior. A person's culture is merely an extension of his genome; it is made up of behavior-modifying gene-like things that are stored in the brain rather than in DNA. My genome to a great deal affects how shy of a person I am. My culture teaches me to stand up when a respected elder enters the room. Both my genome and my culture "program" me as a human, modifying my incarnation in this world.

We do not need to believe in a deterministic universe to appreciate the power of genes and culture. Genes and cultural concepts "program" us, but, if we believe in free will (as Muslims do), we retain the freedom to bypass this programming. Many stories, real and fictional, celebrate this freedom, this ability to break from of our circumstances, genetic or cultural, and to transcend them by doing something new and unexpected. Another type of story regrets this freedom; a person is supposedly given and taught the right things yet manages to make all the wrong choices due to the way his or her free will enables them to bypass everything they have been given.

We say that a person lacks culture when they have not been properly "programmed". They are like a robot that acts in unexpected ways. Even if the robot's physical attributes are perfect, its programming is deficient. It does not know how to act in certain situations, or acts in a shocking and harmful ways. Of course, we may also say a person lacks culture merely as an insult.

A high culture is the set of concepts embodied by a certain, supposedly superior, section of society. Those belonging to a high culture *dress and behave differently* compared to the rest of that society. In other words,

they are *programmed differently*. They embody a set of beliefs, ideals and manners that are supposedly "high" compared to beliefs, ideals and manners of the rest of their society.

A culture is like an encyclopedia that answers the question "How should I act?" in every situation. A woman who wonders what she should cook for dinner today browses her culture's cuisine in her head and chooses one of dozens of culturally transmitted recipes. If she had been brought up in a different culture, the available answers to the question "What should I cook for dinner?" could have been entirely different, because she would have been browsing recipes off of a different encyclopedia in her head. There is, of course, room for individualism within culture, more so in some than others. A woman may modify a cultural recipe to make it taste the way she wants. Some cultures may laud her creativity; others may criticize her seeming lack of respect for tradition.

Similarly, when a man wonders "What should I do with my life?" he browses answers off of the encyclopedia of culture in his head. In his brain are encoded thousands of concepts about the most fruitful and beneficial careers; these concepts are given to him by his culture. In the United States, firefighters and astronauts are celebrated. For this reason far more children want to choose these careers than dozens of other careers vital to society. A person brought up in an untechnological, rainforest society may not even have the ability to ask "What should I do with my life?" since his genes and place within the tribe totally determine his trajectory in life.

This same person, if they were to be planted into a different culture, will then have to answer this question. Since their native culture is totally unequipped to answer this question, they will have to spend years trying out different paths, failing and learning until they (hopefully) succeed. This is a process that millions of people are going through right at this moment in the developing world as they move from villages to cities. The village culture may have little to offer them on how to prosper in a city.

This puts them at a great disadvantage compared to those who have been city-dwellers for generations.

Some people are more cultured than others, meaning they have *more programming*, meaning they carry and embody more cultural concepts. A cultured family will have a wide set of rules for the proper way to conduct oneself when having dinner. An uncultured person dining with them may display various behaviors that irritate or shock the family. These differences in culture end up leading to different sections or classes. A lower class person may have no interest in or respect for the seemingly stifling and unnatural manners of the upper class, and the upper class may look down on him or her as something unworthy and subhuman for his or her lack of "proper" ideals and behaviors.

A religion is a set of concepts, and culture is also a set of concepts. They are made of the same "stuff", concepts, and stored in the same way in the brain, and acted out in the same way in daily life. This is the confusing similarity between religion and culture that Eliot mentioned earlier. Religion can in fact be accurately described as a *subset of culture*. In the experience of real-world Muslims, religion and culture are inseparable except when it comes to obvious matters of religious doctrine. An Arab man has certain concepts about honor and right conduct that may or may not be derived from Islam; he does not usually care. The same way that a child looks up at the stars and sees a wide world adorned with glittering blue things, an Arab looks at his internal universe of concepts, these are some of the determinants of his behavior, and he does not necessarily distinguish the religious from the non-religious in this framework unless he is an intellectual. All the concepts are part of the same *mosaic*. Some, of course, are clearly religious, such as those having to do with the life and times of Prophet Muhammad.

As a man, Islam tells me very little about women. Yet it is crucial for me to know some things about women so that I may conduct myself in a way

that enables me to attract and keep a woman's love. This is an essential part of succeeding in life. This information that Islam does not provide is provided by culture.

The Quran could have provided men with a 200-page course on relationship psychology, and I am sure many of us would have appreciated it. But it does not, because Islam seeks to provide the minimum amount of information necessary for right conduct. Everything else is *delegated* to culture.

Islam is not there to abolish culture—simply because it could not possibly do that. Even the most untechnological humans have a need for a vast set of non-religious concepts in order to make it in the world. The biologists Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd mention the immense difficulty of mastering the cultural knowledge possessed by even a seemingly "primitive" human living in an untechnological society.[15]

Islam only provides a few points of definition here and there within the mosaic of culture, leaving the rest of the cultural mosaic *undefined*, free to be defined and molded by humans as their specific circumstances require, and as each generation acquires and builds upon the previous generation's experiences.

Islam could have told me that I should own a house before I marry a woman. But it does not, leaving it to my own judgment and my culture's practices. It could have also determined for me the details of courtship; what I can and cannot do when it comes to dating and wedding. But beyond a very small set of restrictions (one should not have intimate relations with the opposite sex outside of marriage, for example), it leaves everything else to culture. It is for this reason that we see extremely differing courtship practices among the Muslims of Saudi Arabia

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[15] Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd, *Not By Genes Alone*.

compared to the Muslims of Iran. Each culture provides the framework within which religion is interpreted and practiced.

Islam creates only a few points of definition in courtship, leaving everything else alone, letting human social dynamics retain their *fluidity*. What works well enough in Arabia may fail miserably in cosmopolitan Tehran, and may fail in the Arabia of 2500. The Quran is intelligent enough, we presume, to recognize this, rarely clearly and unequivocally telling Muslims to do things a certain way.

At this point a visualization is useful:
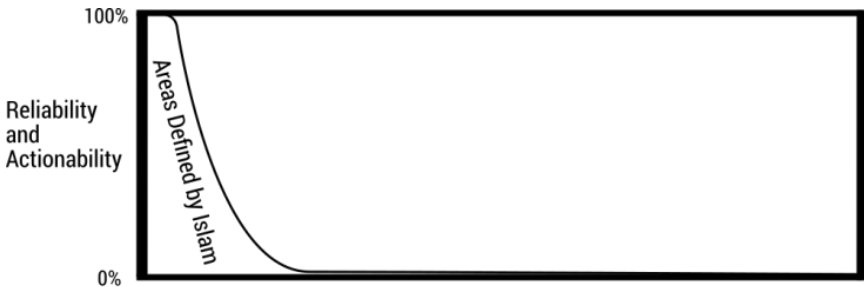
Above, the rectangle represents all of the areas of life that Islamic literature (the Quran, hadith, books of Prophetic biography, etc.) defines. Each point on the horizontal axis represents each concept of Islam (such as a Prophetic saying). The vertical axis represents how seriously Muslims take that concept, how reliable and actionable it is (how fit it is to be used in one's reasoning and practice). The crucial issues of authenticity, ambiguity and contradiction cause most of these Islamic concepts to be non-actionable. This means that a large part of the space of Islamic concepts is fluid; there are almost always multiple choices available; sometimes diametrically opposed ones. Using the Quran, the tens of thousands of hadith narrations, and the hundreds of medieval Islamic texts, one can make a case for almost anything, *and* also a case against it; it is culture that ultimately decides which case "wins" (for example by admiring a certain set of scholars and their opinions as opposed to others).

It is only a small core of concepts that are unambiguously defined for Muslims, for example by the Quran and the most authentic hadith narrations. As soon as we go beyond this small core, the "actionability" of the concepts plummets. There is too much ambiguity to embody them without qualifying them first, and that qualification is done through the lens of culture and what is called common sense.

Thanks to the nature of the Quran, which more often than not leaves wide room for interpretation, and the probabilistic authenticity of most hadith narrations, *real-world* Islam, as seen throughout the Muslim world, is an extremely adaptable religion that can easily fit in within most cultures.[16]

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[16] A very small subset of hadith narrations reaches the authenticity of the Quran. The overwhelming majority belong to a spectrum of authenticity. Some may enjoy a 99.99% likelihood authenticity, some 95%, and so on. Even highly authentic narrations can be rejected if the case can be made that they describe an earlier policy of the Prophet that may have been superseded by his later practice or by a Quranic revelation. For Malik's rejection of authentic narrations despite admitting their authenticity see Wymann-Landgraf, *Mālik and Medina*. For the issues surrounding hadith authenticity, see Jonathan Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunnī Ḥadīth Canon*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007; idem, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*, London: Oneworld Publications, 2014. 20th century Western scholars like Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht, despite their admirably thorough scholarship, had an unwarrantedly hyper-skeptical attitude toward hadith narrations, considering most of the literature potentially false and fabricated until proven otherwise, and their writings seem to have affected some Muslim thinkers. More recently, the Dutch (non-Muslim) scholar of Islam Harald Motzki has carried out a great deal of historical research that supports the Islamic view of hadith; that the hadith genre, despite its many faults, represents a true historical record. See Harald Motzki, *Analysing Muslim Traditions: Studies in Legal, Exegetical and Maghāzī Ḥadīth*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012.
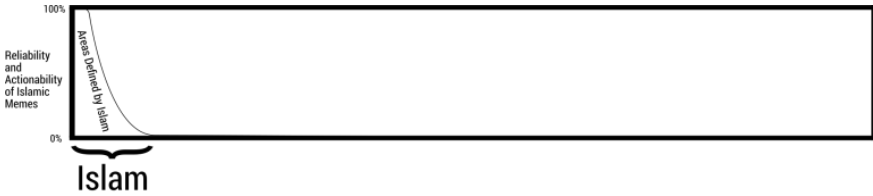
Above, I have overlaid the diagram of Islamic concepts from earlier over a larger diagram that represents cultural concepts. Islam is part of the rectangle of culture. The small area on the left is what is defined by Islam (ideas about the nature of God and the afterlife, and the rest of the concepts of the Quran and the best known hadith narrations and *sīra* narratives). Everything else is left undefined. This undefined area is what is defined by culture. Each human society comes up with its own way of filling up this area, and it is for this reason that Muslim cultures are so different from one another. Islam defines a small part and the larger part is defined by culture.

Extremists unwisely think that the best religion is the one that is the most *totalizing*, that provides the *most definition*, that leaves the least room for cultural fluidity. The best religion to them is the one that leaves no room for culture. The diagram above should be wholly defined by Islam in their view. And for this very reason their Islam is *stifling*, similar to wearing a suit that is too tight and made of rigid materials that can barely bend. Extremists may think that the best Islam is the one that recreates the Arabia of 632 CE. And Western scholars and pundits may also be under the same impression. But Muslim societies around the world have all wholeheartedly rejected this conception of religion. Like Eliot's Christians, they have both religious ideas and a vast culture that qualifies it and that carries its own ideas about values and manners.

In an essay meant to illustrate the diversity and plurality that exists within Islamic cultures, University of Alberta professor Earle Waugh puts his entire focus on *Islamic* concepts within these cultures, which unfortunately gives an impression quite opposite to what he seeks to

show.[17] He mentions various expressions of popular piety that do not exactly conform to orthodoxy (such as the veneration for saints and the use of the Quran in certain ceremonies) as a way of saying that Muslim societies are more open-minded than one would expect from religious scholars or religious literature. What Waugh focuses on is actually a very small part of the Muslim experience, and it serves more to give an image of a stifling hyper-religious culture than what the reality of Muslim culture looks like.
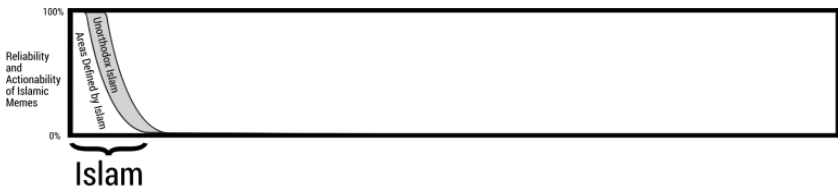
Waugh tells us that Muslims are not entirely controlled by Islamic concepts; no, there is actually this other shaded area (shown above) where Muslims show themselves to be slightly freer in mind than extremists and some Westerners think they are or should be. While he has good intentions, he entirely ignores the vast space for *human* culture that exists within Muslim societies. He continues to think that Islam is a total religion that expands like a cloud to stifle every aspect of human life.

The continuity of religion and culture

Syncretism is evidence for the continuity between religion and culture, the fact that they are inseparable and intermingled. Once a religion is cut off from its hermeneutic tradition (once people stop reading the Islamic literature), the religion *mutates* with the mutation of culture and according to the same trajectory. Syncretic South Asian Muslims impressed with the Christian idea of God having a Son call Ali a Son of

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[17] Earle Waugh, "Everyday Tradition." in *A Companion to Muslim Cultures*, ed. Amyn B. Sajoo, London: I. B. Tauris, 2012.

God. As their cultural ideas develop, as they update and discard concepts belonging to past generations, their religion suffers the same process, with concepts being discarded and updated and developed in wholly new directions having nothing to do with mainstream Islam.

Another form of syncretism is when a people convert to Islam but their knowledge remains largely second-hand due to the presence of a language barrier and a lack of qualified men and women to make Islamic concepts available to them. This was the case in the eastern shores of the Indian Ocean (the Malay Archipelago, for example) in the early days of their conversion to Islam. The 15th century Arab navigator Aḥmad b. Majīd (1421 – c. 1500) expresses a conservative Muslim's horror at seeing these fellow Muslims:

> The harbour of Malacca is between Pulau Ubi and Sabta. So enter the port successfully moving through five fathoms to four and then anchor. The people then come out to you—and what people. They have no culture at all. The infidel marries Muslim women while the Muslim takes pagans to wife. You do not know whether they are Muslim or not. They are thieves for theft is rife among them and they do not mind. The Muslim eats dogs for meat and there are no food laws. . . . Be always careful of them for you cannot mix jewels with ordinary stones.[18]

These poor 15th century Muslims practiced a "second-hand" Islam due to the lack of widespread knowledge of the religion. As commerce, travel and book-printing spread, the Muslims of Southeast Asia became less and less syncretic. More of them started to engage hermeneutically with the Islamic texts, so that by the 19th and 20th centuries they were fully integrated into the fold of mainstream Islam. The Muslims of Vietnam

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[18] Eric Tagliacozzo, *The Longest Journey: Southeast Asians and the Pilgrimage to Mecca,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 239.

appear to not have enjoyed a similar fate, so that their syncretism continues to this day.

Religion, while being a subset of culture, is unique in that it is continuously updated and re-derived from a relatively stable set of texts (such as the Quran). This prevents the religion from changing too much over time. While religion's concepts belong to the mosaic of culture, these concepts are constantly re-derived from the same sources used by earlier generations. This ensures religion's continuity through time, unlike the rest of culture, which can change greatly in just a few generations.

Evidence for Islam's non-total nature (the fact that it only provides small points of definition, leaving humans to maintain their humanity and freedom of thought and action) is the tremendous amount of change that we have witnessed in the Islamic world over the past 200 years. It would have been utterly unacceptable for a devout Muslim family of 1800 to let their daughter go to university. Today, equally devout Muslims let their daughters study at gender-mixed universities by the hundreds of millions. The religion's driving literature is the same and has not changed; we haven't started taking the Quran any less seriously than the people of 200 years ago. What *has* changed is the rest of the cultural mosaic. The Muslims of 1800 may have justified preventing women from getting an education in Islamic terms, as Christians used to do. And today, similarly devout Muslims justify educating their daughters in Islamic terms. From the cultural lens of 1800 it was *obvious* that women's education was against Islam, while form the cultural lens of 2018 it is *obvious* that women's education is supported and encouraged by Islam.

Another strong piece of evidence for Islam's non-total nature is the existence of tremendous cultural differences between different Muslim societies. A Turkish Muslim woman from Istanbul will probably feel completely at sea if she were to stay in an Indian Muslim village. Her experience will be very similar to the experience of so many Westerners

who have spent time among non-Western ethnic groups. Despite sharing many similar Islamic concepts, there is a vast universe of concepts—culture—the she does not share with them and that she must learn in order to be able to effectively live alongside them.

When conceptualizing Islam, we should think of it as a small part of the large man-made mosaic that is culture. Islam does not change much as time passes (although new ideas and findings can help us interpret certain things within Islam better and more accurately), but the rest of the mosaic is in constant flow. The story of Islam is the story of a *human* mosaic enhanced by an Islamic framework. Islam provides the skeleton, humans flesh it out with and through culture.

George Orwell and George Eliot

George Orwell, in his *Road to Wigan Pier*, has relevant things to say about this discussion:

> for the food-crank is by definition a person willing to cut himself off from human society in hopes of adding five years onto the life of his carcase; that is, a person out of touch with common humanity.[19]

In Orwell's time, the food-crank was what the extremist vegan is today, someone picky about food and willing to inconvenience, insult and look down on those around them for the sake of their ideas about eating. His critique for the preference of ideology over common humanity among certain types of people extends to Catholics, in a passage that could equally apply to some Muslims today:

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[19] George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958, 136.

One of the analogies between Communism and Roman Catholicism is that only the 'educated' are completely orthodox. The most immediately striking thing about the English Roman Catholics – I don't mean the real Catholics, I mean the converts: Ronald Knox, Arnold Lunn *et hoc genus*— is their intense self-consciousness. Apparently they never think, certainly they never write, about anything but the fact that they *are* Roman Catholics; this single fact and the self-praise resulting from it form the entire stock-in-trade of the Catholic literary man. But the really interesting thing about these people is the way in which they have worked out the supposed implications of orthodoxy until the tiniest details of life are involved. Even the liquids you drink, apparently, can be orthodox or heretical; hence the campaigns of Chesterton, 'Beachcomber', etc., against tea and in favour of beer. According to Chesterton, tea-drinking is 'pagan', while beer-drinking is 'Christian', and coffee is 'the puritan's opium'. It is unfortunate for this theory that Catholics abound in the 'Temperance' movement and the greatest tea-boozers in the world are the Catholic Irish; but what I am interested in here is the attitude of mind that can make even food and drink an occasion for religious intolerance. A working-class Catholic would never be so absurdly consistent as that. He does not spend his time in brooding on the fact that he is a Roman Catholic, and he is not particularly conscious of being different from his non-Catholic neighbours. Tell an Irish dock-labourer in the slums of Liverpool that his cup of tea is 'pagan', and he will call you a fool. And even in more serious matters he does not always grasp the implications of his faith. In the Roman Catholic homes of Lancashire you see the crucifix on the wall and the *Daily Worker*[20] on the table. It is only the 'educated' man, especially the literary man, who knows

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[20] A popular communist publication at the time.

how to be a bigot. And, *mutatis mutandis*, it is the same with Communism. The creed is never found in its pure form in a genuine proletarian.[21]

Many expect Muslims to act exactly like this minority of Catholics Orwell describes, seemingly eating religion for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Orwell contrasts this religion-obsessed mindset among certain Catholic intellectuals with the mindset of *ordinary* Catholics, who better represent real, *embodied* Catholicism.

For the average Catholic living in a Catholic society, religion is not something to bring into every discussion. It is, in fact, something that is very rarely talked about. Real Catholics embody Catholicism as humans, rather than ignoring common humanity, things like politeness and decency toward others, in the name of religion. A religion-obsessed Catholic, similar to a recent convert to an extremist form of Islam, tries to make their religion replace their humanity, making it explain everything and be everything to them. This causes them to join a class of bigots that are out of touch with the rest of society.

A Catholic like that, instead of enjoying the loving atmosphere of Christmas morning at a relative's house, uses the occasion to lecture the family about how Christmas is really pagan. A Muslim extremist, too, if one makes the mistake of inviting her to a birthday party, will likely end up giving her friend a lecture on how a true Muslim should not celebrate such heathen practices. In this way, those who make religion replace their humanity insult many other people around them due to their belief that their being religious exempts them from common decency and make themselves a nuisance in society. This is not merely a problem of the religious; the same scenario is repeated whenever a person embraces any ideology strongly enough. A "true believer" in Marxism is going to be

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[21] Ibid., 209-210.

perfectly happy to offend everyone around them in the name of fighting capitalism.

Orwell contrasts the self-conscious, recently converted Catholic intellectuals with the millions of Catholics who have been practicing this religion for centuries. The first is a tiny minority that has a total view of religion as a replacement for common decency and culture. The second group forms the actual representative group of Catholicism, which very much respects common decency and culture. The first group is radical and wants to abolish everything in the name of religion. The second group is conservative and is happy enough to enjoy life as it is. The first group thinks mankind is raw material that can be remade. The second group understands that humans by and large remain the way they are no matter what one tries to make out of them.

The majority of Muslim men and women are like that Catholic majority. Tell any educated Muslim that their love for science fiction films makes them less "Muslim" and they will either be insulted or laugh at the foolishness of the statement.

Many Western writers about Islam are unfortunately often incapable of conceiving of a faithful Muslim who is as intelligent and independent-minded as themselves, believing that a proper Muslim is one who is a nuisance in polite society just like an extremist vegan. It is *inconceivable* that a man or woman of their own caliber could enter into a covenant with God to abide by His commandments and ethics, acting as His steward while maintaining a fierce individuality and independence of mind. To them, being a devout Muslim is always associated with some sort of sickness of the mind; the most devout is the most stupid because he or she is going to be the one who is best at acting like a scripture-controlled robot. They think that the only reason a Muslim can be intelligent and independent-minded is if they abandon parts of Islam.

Thus in books like *Lost Enlightenment* by S. Frederick Starr[22], the writer does his best to stretch the evidence so that all Muslims who accomplished some great work are dismissed as actually freethinkers who did not take their faith seriously, while also having a rather snarky attitude toward great Muslim thinkers like al-Ghāzalī who were clearly orthodox. A Muslim must supposedly first give up the stupidity-promoting total religion that is Islam in order to become partly human and achieve something of human worth. Al-Ghāzalī, despite his great achievements, is worthless because he made the unforgivable sin of defending orthodoxy, which to Starr is proof that he was subhuman and twisted, since no proper human could ever be fully religious in his view.

George Eliot is another important Western writer who has called attention to the interesting relationship between religion and culture. Eliot, whose true name was Mary Anne Evans, grew up in a religious family. As an intellectual living among common people, she was especially well-placed to analyze their practice of religion. She came to conclusions that were somewhat politically incorrect for her the time. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), she writes some incisive comments on the interaction of religion and culture:

> Observing these people narrowly, even when the iron hand of misfortune has shaken them from their unquestioning hold on the world, one sees little trace of religion, still less of a distinctively Christian creed. Their belief in the Unseen, so far as it manifests itself at all, seems to be rather a pagan kind; their moral notions, though held with strong tenacity, seem to have no standard beyond hereditary custom. You could not live among such people; you are stifled for want of an outlet toward something beautiful,

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[22] See S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane,* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press*,* 2013. See Frank Griffel's devastating review in *Die Welt des Islams* 56, no. 2 (2016): 272-278.

great, or noble; you are irritated with these dull men and women, as a kind of population out of keeping with the earth on which they live,–with this rich plain where the great river flows forever onward, and links the small pulse of the old English town with the beatings of the world's mighty heart.

She goes on to write the following, which is worth quoting in full:

Certainly the religious and moral ideas of the Dodsons and Tullivers were of too specific a kind to be arrived at deductively, from the statement that they were part of the Protestant population of Great Britain. Their theory of life had its core of soundness, as all theories must have on which decent and prosperous families have been reared and have flourished; but it had the very slightest tincture of theology. If, in the maiden days of the Dodson sisters, their Bibles opened more easily at some parts than others, it was because of dried tulip-petals, which had been distributed quite impartially, without preference for the historical, devotional, or doctrinal. Their religion was of a simple, semi-pagan kind, but there was no heresy in it,–if heresy properly means choice,–for they didn't know there was any other religion, except that of chapel-goers, which appeared to run in families, like asthma. How *should* they know? The vicar of their pleasant rural parish was not a controversialist, but a good hand at whist, and one who had a joke always ready for a blooming female parishioner. The religion of the Dodsons consisted in revering whatever was customary and respectable; it was necessary to be baptized, else one could not be buried in the church-yard, and to take the sacrament before death, as a security against more dimly understood perils; but it was of equal necessity to have the proper pall-bearers and well-cured hams at one's funeral, and to leave an unimpeachable will. A Dodson would not be taxed with the omission of anything that was becoming, or that belonged to that

eternal fitness of things which was plainly indicated in the practice of the most substantial parishioners, and in the family traditions,–– such as obedience to parents, faithfulness to kindred, industry, rigid honesty, thrift, the thorough scouring of wooden and copper utensils, the hoarding of coins likely to disappear from the currency, the production of first-rate commodities for the market, and the general preference of whatever was home-made. The Dodsons were a very proud race, and their pride lay in the utter frustration of all desire to tax them with a breach of traditional duty or propriety. A wholesome pride in many respects, since it identified honor with perfect integrity, thoroughness of work, and faithfulness to admitted rules; and society owes some worthy qualities in many of her members to mothers of the Dodson class, who made their butter and their fromenty well, and would have felt disgraced to make it otherwise. To be honest and poor was never a Dodson motto, still less to seem rich though being poor; rather, the family badge was to be honest and rich, and not only rich, but richer than was supposed. To live respected, and have the proper bearers at your funeral, was an achievement of the ends of existence that would be entirely nullified if, on the reading of your will, you sank in the opinion of your fellow-men, either by turning out to be poorer than they expected, or by leaving your money in a capricious manner, without strict regard to degrees of kin. The right thing must always be done toward kindred. The right thing was to correct them severely, if they were other than a credit to the family, but still not to alienate from them the smallest rightful share in the family shoebuckles and other property. A conspicuous quality in the Dodson character was its genuineness; its vices and virtues alike were phases of a proud honest egoism, which had a hearty dislike to whatever made against its own credit and interest, and would be frankly hard of speech to inconvenient

> "kin," but would never forsake or ignore them,–would not let
> them want bread, but only require them to eat it with bitter herbs.

Eliot seems to think that these common Christians were not fully "Christian" due to the way culture so strongly affected their thinking and behavior. She says their way of life was somewhat "pagan" due to it not being largely derived from Christian concepts.

A person studying a Muslim society today might come to the same conclusions; that whenever Muslims act like humans rather than scripture-controlled robots, this means they have abandoned some of their religion for the sake of culture and humanity.

But the truth is that the state of Eliot's Christians is the natural state of the masses belonging to *any* world religion. They are not intellectuals and do not read many religious books. To them the Sunday or Friday sermons are an ordinary part of life and the contents of these sermons are qualitatively of no difference compared to the contents of their cultural codes, hence Eliot's observation that:

> The religion of the Dodsons consisted in revering whatever was customary and respectable; it was necessary to be baptized, else one could not be buried in the church-yard, and to take the sacrament before death, as a security against more dimly understood perils; but it was of equal necessity to have the proper pall-bearers and well-cured hams at one's funeral, and to leave an unimpeachable will.

That is what *religion is* for non-intellectuals. It is a part of life, a part of culture, a business carried out by a certain class of society (clerics) who pass slivers of it down to them at the Sunday or Friday sermons.

There is nothing wrong with this picture. That is as religious as the masses of non-intellectuals have been able to get, at least in the past when literacy was rarer than it is today.

If we look at the earliest Muslims, there seems to have been a core of Muslim intelligentsia (the Prophet's closest Companions) surrounded by vast numbers of uneducated Arabs who saw Islam as merely a set of practices (prayer, fasting, zakat, etc.) and restrictions. *All of Islam* could have been easily summarized for them in a 15-minute lecture. They attended Friday sermons in which the preachers tried to give them tidbits of Islam that they only perhaps half understood until repeated many times to them over months and years. A few were motivated to seek more, but most of them were content to be humans living in a Muslim society, rather than being religion-obsessed intellectuals.

Eliot's society did have some issues that can be strongly criticized from a Christian perspective, such as the commonplaceness of usury. Therefore I agree with a Christian who says that had those people been more spiritual, it would have been better for them. When thinking of improving society, we can come up with various suggestions. But when thinking of society as sociologists rather than reformers, when trying to understand what a religion truly is, we have to look at the whole population and see how they think and operate. It is the height of naiveté and reductionism to say that 99% of the believers *are doing it all wrong*, that only intellectuals and religion-obsessed individuals truly represent the religion. Anyone who believes that the Bible/Quran is from God and attends Sunday/Friday sermons is a representative of Christianity/Islam, and as it happens, the majority of these representatives are humans operating within sophisticated human cultures that are inspired and improved and beautified by religion here and there, rather than being mere automatons with lives that are totally or even mostly programmed by religion.

It is only a minority of people, the intellectuals, who are self-consciously religious and who try to bring religious ideas and principles into the issues of daily life.

While we can praise people for trying to be more religious, it is an injustice to dismiss the majority of the Muslim people of the world and consider them irrelevant to the discussion about Islam just because they are not intellectuals and are not self-consciously religious.

Going back to George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier*, he writes:

> It is quite easy to be on terms of intimacy with a foreign 'intellectual', but it is not at all easy to be on terms of intimacy with an ordinary respectable foreigner of the middle class. How many Englishmen have seen the inside of an ordinary French bourgeois family, for instance? Probably it would be quite impossible to do so, short of marrying into it. And it is rather similar with the English working class.[23]

Orwell sums up the difficulty in understanding the inner life of a foreign society, and it is this very same problem that has made it so difficult for many Westerners, even those who have studied, to understand Islam. To understand Muslims, it is not sufficient merely to read some books or spend time in a Middle Eastern country. It is quite possible for a Westerner to spend a decade or more in an Eastern country only to go back home with nothing but a large bag of prejudices, as so many British colonial servants did.

Westerners who have the best understanding of Islam, as Orwell predicts above, are those who have married into Muslim families. Even Western converts to Islam can have highly inaccurate pictures of the functioning of Muslim societies. They can occasionally be observed on the Internet complaining about how none of the Muslims they meet act as the Muslims of their imagination. It can take them quite a long time to come to terms with the fact that self-consciously religious people are always a minority whether in Muslim or Christian societies, and that most believers

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[23] Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier,* 186.

by and large judge things based on custom and do not often think to differentiate between what is religious and what is merely cultural.

For Muslims, Islam is not a replacement for their humanity. One does not have to stop being human to start being Muslim. Islam provides a skeleton that each culture and each person fleshes out according to their own needs and initiatives. Islam is not "total"; quite the opposite, Islam is "small". It strictly defines a very small area within the range of choices available to humans and their cultures, leaving everything else as *free space*, space that is filled out by culture.

In this way, Islam and culture form a single mosaic, with culture making up the largest part.

2. Conceptualizing Islam

What is "Islamic" about Islamic philosophy? Is a wine-cup decorated in the Islamic artistic tradition "Islamic" when Islam prohibits wine-drinking? What is "Islamic" about Islamic geometric patterns found at mosques and shrines? The Quran does not instruct Muslims to make such decorations, so where does the Islamic-ness of such a decoration style come from, and is it valid to call it "Islamic" when it actually has nothing to do with Islam-the-religion and its doctrines?

What is Islamic about Sufi poetry that celebrates the higher truth-value of Sufi doctrine above Islamic law?

This chapter creatively engages with the later Harvard scholar Shahab Ahmed's important book *What is Islam?*[1] in order to answer the above questions. My background is in the genetic-cultural study of human behavior, while Ahmed's is in the cultural (or social) study of humans alone. For this reason our thinking sometimes diverge greatly. Yet there are also remarkable cases of agreement. I take Ahmed's thesis forward and

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[1] Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016.

rebuild it within a new and, what I consider to be, a more general framework. This chapter is not limited to Ahmed's thought; I often develop new lines of analysis and carry them forward. However, I continue to return to his book once each section of analysis is finished in order to move on to new issues raised by Ahmed.

Merely speaking of what Islam *is* leaves out a great deal of context and background that would be present in discussions of what Islam *is not*. For this reason Ahmed's refutations of common misconceptions, and my sometimes refutations of his refutations, is going to be highly illuminating toward understanding the workings of Islam.

Legal supremacism

The most common error in conceptualizing Islam is to define Islam in terms of Islamic law, which Shahab Ahmed termed "legal supremacism". It is very common to find both Western and Eastern textbooks of Islamic law speak of their field as *the* defining field within Islam that rules every aspect of a Muslim's life. This claim generally goes unexamined and misleads casual students of Islam into thinking that Islam requires Muslims to be obsessed about legal technicalities day and night.

The claim that Islamic law is the most important part of Islam is similar to the claims of cocky physicists or biologists saying that their field is the most important field and that every other field is there to serve them.

That claim also ignores the most influential book in Islamic history after the books of scripture, al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (*Revival of the Religious Sciences*), a work of ethics that starts out as a total attack against the scholars of Islamic law and their thinking that knowledge of the law and hadith is the most important achievement of an Islamic scholar. Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE) tells them that they are nothing more than menial workers helping to transmit knowledge. Islam, for al-Ghazālī, is a program meant to reform life with the aim of achieving felicity in the afterlife. He

merges Aristotelian ethics, Sufi mysticism and Islamic law into a new type of Islamic practice that he calls the Science of the Hereafter. For al-Ghazālī and the millions of Muslims who admire him, it is this Science of the Hereafter that is the core of Islam. The law is merely a facilitator.

The majority of Muslims rarely consciously interact with Islamic law. Beyond learning how to pray, which foods to avoid and some other relatively simple regulations—which make up the most important parts of Islamic law—Islamic law has little relevance to their lives. They spend most of their days being humans doing human things, and it is reductionist nonsense, as Shahab Ahmed says, to imagine that humans can somehow make the law central in their lives. The law is nothing but a facilitator, part of the infrastructure of civilization, similar to electricity. It has little power or even *charisma* to make meaning except for legal scholars. For Muslims themselves, meaning is created through biographies of past Muslims, stories and parables of the Quran, poetry, novels, songs, films, nature, cultural epics; a vast and diverse set of units of meaning that inform the Islamic life.

As a Muslim, my Quran-derived ethical and spiritual framework makes me love and value non-Muslims who uphold the same principles that I uphold, even if some jurists (Islamic scholars who deal with Islamic law and issue religious rulings) say that non-Muslims should be treated with condescension and dislike by Muslims. Am I less "Islamic" for thinking the way I do? No, rather, like millions of Muslims have argued, my thinking is *more* Islamic, because it derives from the *deeper* general truths of the Quran, and because it fits reason and conscience. To me, Shahab Ahmed and millions of other Muslims, this Islamic ethical voice is far more *Islamically authoritative* than the voices of the jurists. A jurist is just a human, and when they recommend something unreasonable, unconscionable, and un-Quranic, this illustrates the limits of their understanding rather than the reality of Islam or God's opinions.

There is a fatwa (religious ruling) by a Saudi Arabian scholar that asserts that the Harry Potter books are forbidden to Muslims due to containing many un-Islamic things, such as magic. There are also Christians who say the Harry Potter books should not be read due to containing many un-Christian things. Yet the majority of Muslims and Christians consider the books perfectly fine. Even though they are religious, they do not need the opinion of Islamic and Christian scholars to tell them that these books are benign. They have the presumption to think for themselves, to judge matters by the sophisticated conceptual frameworks they have in their minds, derived from the vast literary wealth of Islamic/Christian civilization and their own familial hermeneutic traditions.

Islamic law is a man-made framework that resides within a larger framework that includes ethics, spirituality, conscience, human reason and the vast conceptual framework of culture. Even if a jurist has seemingly bullet-proof legal reasoning for wanting to ban the Harry Potter books, most Muslims would judge the matter by looking at what the Harry Potter books contain (we can call this the Harry Potter conceptual framework), then comparing it to their personal conceptual frameworks and checking for conflict. If the Harry Potter conceptual framework is 99% in agreement with these Muslims' personal conceptual frameworks (as it is for me personally), then they judge that there is nearly nothing wrong with what the books contain, not only that, but they may actually find the books to have positive value, for teaching and upholding various concepts that the Muslim finds beneficial (such as a focus on love, compassion, courage and the avoidance of evil.)

While jurists judge things through legal frameworks, Muslims judge things based on a *larger* framework. Devout Muslims will not break any clearly stated and proven laws of Islam, but there are actually few of those. When it comes to judging something as complex as whether the Harry Potter books should be read or not, they know instinctively that their own personal frameworks are far more fitted to the task than the frameworks

of the jurists. The farther one gets from the very basics of Islamic doctrine (such as the formal prayer), the more ambiguous things become and the more freedom for independent thought and action one enjoys.[2]

The atmosphere that the jurists and Western scholars live in may make them fall victim to the illusion that an Islamic jurist has the right to control every large and small detail of a Muslim's life.[3] But living and breathing Muslims themselves have very strong ideas about the *limits of the jurists' jurisdiction*, even if the jurists admit no such limits. This extremely complex sociological situation seems to have mystified most of those who have tried to study it. In matters having to do with religious doctrine, Muslims respect the jurists and listen to their opinions, but the farther we get from the small sphere of religious ritual and clearly defined limits such as the prohibition on eating pork, *the weaker the voice of the jurists becomes*, and the stronger a Muslim's *own cultural and personal voice* becomes, so that *actual* Muslim societies are not stifling jurist-ruled dystopias of so many a person's imagination. Muslim societies are *human* societies with an Islamic flavor, *not* Islamic societies with the humanity taken out.

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[2] Even on such an everyday matter as that of performing the *taslīm* (a ritual act that signifies the end of the formal prayer) there is intense debate and disagreement. See Yasin Dutton, "An Innovation From The Time Of The Banī Hāshim: Some Reflections On The 'Taslīm' At The End Of The Prayer." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 16, no. 2 (2005): 147–176.

[3] For centuries, it has been a habit of Western intellectuals to blame Islamic doctrine for the problems of the Muslim world. Among those who have done this are Edward Gibbon (writer of the famous *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*), the famous 19th century French intellectual Ernest Renan (who dedicated lectures to the subject), Bernard Lewis, and Robert R. Reilly. Chapter 3 is dedicated to refuting these misconceptions through a refutation of Reilly's book *The Closing of the Muslim Mind*.

Multiple "Islams"

One effort to come to terms with the variety of observed Islamic phenomena has been to propose that there are multiple "Islams", each somehow detached from one another. While this may seem like a useful effort to come to terms with the varieties of thought and practice seen across the Islamic world, it actually only serves to sweep the question under the rug; you are forced to ask what it is that justifies calling all of these Islams "Islam"s.

The multiple Islams hypothesis wants to posit the existence of multiple Islams, assuming a process similar to the way one language becomes many across time due to geographical distance and other factors. The problem is that unlike differentiated languages, the varieties of Islam continue to take their "grammar" from a relatively stable set of texts, therefore saying there are multiple Islams is like saying British and American English are two different languages that must be studied as somehow independent of each other. The British and the Americans are supposedly somehow wrong in thinking that there is such a thing as an "English" language, there is not; there are only Englishes. But saying that there are "Englishes", while in a weak sense true, does not enlighten us very much. It is not a useful conceptualization of the phenomenon that is the English language; therefore it is not used in scholarly efforts to make sense of it. The same should apply to the "Islams" hypothesis.

Islamicate

Shahab Ahmed engages with the great American scholar of Islam Marshall G. S. Hodgson's term "Islamicate", which for Hodgson is a way of referring to cultural phenomena coming from Muslim populations that do not have to do with the religion of Islam.

To Hodgson, something is Islamic if it has to do with the *religion* of Islam, while it is Islamicate if it is the product of an Islam-practicing culture. According to Hodgson, personal piety is Islamic, while political institutions or art created by a Muslim civilization are Islamicate, unless they have something to do directly with the religion.

The problem with "Islamicate", as Ahmed points out, is that it creates an unwarranted distinction between Islam-the-religion and Islam-the-civilization. It assumes that it is somehow possible to separate the religion from its *consequences*. It fuels the tendency of some Western writers to assign all negatives seen in an Islamic civilization to Islam-the-religion and all positives to the people and their culture in spite of and in isolation of Islam-the-religion.

I have encountered this thinking most egregiously in the historian S. Frederick Starr's *Lost Enlightenment*, in whose treatment of Islam-the-religion Islam is always the "bad guy": all cultural accomplishment is achieved in spite of it. He often dedicates multiple paragraphs to discussions that imply that a certain great Islamic thinker was not truly entirely Muslim, almost as if the more he can prove their lack of allegiance to Islam, the more human his favored subjects become.

Hodgson's framework is an effort to solve a complex problem, and while it helps us get over the conscientious difficulty we have with describing certain things as "Islamic" (such as a wine-cup), it can be said to merely mean "this thing has to do with Muslims but we cannot explain what it has to do with Islam." It leaves the question unanswered and puts it out of sight, which helps people get on with their work without facing the daunting task of coming to terms with the nature of the Islamic experience.

"Islamicate" somewhat discounts the possibility that Islam-the-religion's concepts and teachings may have had a formative effect on Islam-the-

civilization; as if the two exist in disconnected realms or that that they can be studied as isolated phenomena. This can be academically satisfactory, but it is very much an injustice to Islam-the-religion, since, in all likelihood, the things we call Islamicate may have not existed if it had not been for the influence of Islam-the-religion. Detaching Islamicate from Islam might be little more than detaching effect from cause. The Islamic culture of Asian Muslims (who make up the majority of the world's Muslims) is supposed to not really be Islamic but Islamicate. The consequence of this form of thinking is that we end up with the impression that the only true version of Islam, the only truly "Islamic" culture, is that of the Wahhabis of Najd, Arabia who believe that Islam should be largely about doing one's best to reenact 632 CE, and that the farther one gets from this ideal, the less Islamic one gets, and the more Islamicate.

My point is that divorcing Islam and Islamicate will only encourage the highly noxious thought pattern, common among casual students of Islam, to think that the only way a Muslim can be a full human is if they distance themselves from Islam-the-religion. The possibility that a Muslim can love Islam-the-religion and participate in the creation of culture and civilization becomes difficult to conceptualize. The Islam of the scholars becomes the enemy of the Islamicate of the population, and the possibility that beautiful cultural products can be the *result* of Islam-the-religion becomes easy to ignore and forget. It is better to continue using terms such as "Islamic culture" and "Islamic civilization", because this acknowledges the important reality that religion and culture fuse together in the minds of the population, becoming part of the same mosaic.

The validity of "religion" as a descriptor

Shahab Ahmed says, along with many other modern scholars, that the term "religion" is too arbitrary and ill-defined to be a useful descriptor, that it serves more to confuse than to enlighten. He says that the fact that

we do not recognize capitalism and Marxism as religions is evidence for the arbitrariness of the term "religion". Ahmed quotes Sharon Siddique saying:

> Islam … contains also the formulation for a social, political and economic order…in the context of conceptualizing contemporary Islam, it is more fruitful to deal with Islam as ideology, rather than Islam as religion.[4]

Ahmed also writes:

> Craig Martin—with whom I agree when he says, 'What properties or resemblances make Christianity and Hinduism 'religions,' but not American nationalism? I can think of none' … [5]

As an example of the invalidity of the concept of religion, Ahmed cites Western imperialism's forcing Japanese religious practices into the straight jacket of religion—forcing something that was not-a-religion into the framework of a religion, in this way having more power over it.

We can, however, just as easily posit that Western thinkers were able to analyze Japanese culture (i.e. the Japanese cultural concept-set as they could perceive it), determine the parts of the set that was driving their ethical and cosmological thought, and called that a religion—because that is what a religion is.

The concept of religion is a heuristic, it is not strictly defined. Our common conception of religion is derived from the world's major religions; the Abrahamic ones, Buddhism and Hinduism, the same way that our conception of a house is derived from the houses we observe around the world, and it is only natural that our conception of "house"

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[4] Ahmed, *What is Islam?,* 183.

[5] Ahmed, *What is Islam?,* 184, no. 20.

would stress the types of house known best to our local cultures. A New Englander will have a very different conception of what an ordinary house looks like compared to a Sri Lankan villager.

According to Shahab Ahmed's criteria one may argue that veganism is a religion. But due to the fact that one can belong to any number of religions and ways of life while being vegan, we know that veganism is too far from commonly recognized religions to be a religion. It provides too little *meaning* and too few limits on behavior, you can be anything and be a vegan, while you cannot be anything and be a Muslim. Veganism does not provide sufficient *form and definition*. It is the concepts that give a religion its form; more concepts, more form, more definition, less room for maneuvering, *more similarity between adherents.*

American nationalism provides more definition than veganism (it has more concepts), but it is still a far cry from the commonly recognized religions. People have no trouble recognizing American nationalism as a non-religion while recognizing Hinduism as one. It is the difference between something with 1000 concepts and something with 50,000 concepts.

If we were to say that anything is a religion, nothing is, and this is the source of Ahmed's error. Religions certainly fall on a spectrum when it comes to how *definitive* they are (how many concepts they require adherents to embody and believe in). Samaritanism seems to be far more definitive than Hinduism. But we can, in most cases, tell when something is a religion and when it is not by examining whether it is definitive enough to be similar to already-known religions or whether it is too undefinitive and loose conceptually.

An ideology is a human-invented set of concepts that has *some* of the features of a religion; it purports to explain the world and our place in it and provides suggestions for right conduct. It is not a religion because it is

too small. The more convoluted it is, the more religion-like it becomes. One of the fatal weaknesses of ideologies is that they generally fail the transferability test: it is easy enough for Muslims to pass Islam on to the next generation. The same cannot be said of the followers of most ideologies. The Islamic utopian ideologies of people like Ali Shariati that launched the Iranian Revolution of 1979 will be laughed at in Iran today; the ideology barely survived a single generation and was quickly replaced by the ideas of thinkers like Abdul Karim Soroush (while Islam remains as it was before). Similarly, people who grow up under communism often wish strongly that they could live in capitalist, consumerist New York instead of their shabby and decaying civilization, unless they are party apparatchiks who enjoy a capitalist lifestyle subsidized by the communism of the peasant class. For this reason communism, besides being orders of magnitude smaller than typical religions, also fails the transferability test. Unlike the typical religion, all that it takes is a few generations for communism to be completely abandoned after it was embraced.

Sharon Siddique's saying Islam is an ideology, not a religion, is a misunderstanding of these concepts. Islam *is* an ideology and a religion. An ideology is a set of concepts that in some way explains the world and provides suggestions for right behavior, and Islam does that. But Islam goes beyond that, since it is a religion, being transferable, and providing far, far more meaning, context and definition. Containing the seeds of political, economic, legal and social organization is what makes a religion a religion, and these features can be seen in all major religions where they are taken seriously.

A Hindu is a Hindu because they embody a Hindu set of concepts, which provides a cosmology and a complex set of doctrines for right conduct. Therefore calling Hinduism a religion is a right and proper use of the heuristic that is "religion". It is true that old definitions of religion were not perfect or complete. But as the West discovered new ways of life among foreign populations, it did its best to fit observed religion-like

phenomena into existing explanatory structures. This did not always work, but this is exactly how scientific research works; one tries to explain observations based on existing hypotheses until new observations force one to update the hypotheses or discard them.

Is Islam a totalizing ideology?

Shahab Ahmed criticizes *A History of Islamic Societies* by University of California, Berkeley professor Ira M. Lapidus for the way it represents religion as standing in contradistinction to the "secular" or "profane".[6] Lapidus conceives of Islam as a totally definitive set of concepts; it appears that in his view to be truly "Islamic", a culture must take *all* of its concepts from Islamic religious literature and be satisfied with them. The Seljuqs' use of various tools and methods of governance available to them stops them from being complete Muslims; they only *make use* of Islam while somehow not being authentically Muslim.

In his view, the most Islamic that a Muslim can be is to be a radical fundamentalist, doing one's best to act like a robot controlled by religious literature. It is to be a "Muslim" in opposition to being human. The fact that, as a human, a Muslim can embrace Islamic concepts while integrating a much larger set of concepts, the way that any religious human must, makes them less "Islamic". A Muslim's using Newton's laws somehow makes him less of a Muslim, it is a non-Islamic element admitted into their lives. They go from being 100% Muslim to being 99.9999% Muslim.

This view fuels the tendency among many Western pundits to look at Middle Eastern societies and blame Islam for nearly all of the negatives they see—while explaining away nearly all positives as happening *despite* Islam. The fact that *Christian* Latin America suffers from the same

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[6] Ahmed, *What is Islam?,* ch. 3.

problems and worse ones (orders of magnitude more crime) compared to the Middle East is never even thought about. Latin America's Christians are humans and have sophisticated human problems; the Middle East's Muslims are Muslims rather than humans. Islam is supposed to be more than sufficient to explain everything that is wrong with them.

Lapidus's dehumanizing view of Muslims (unintended, of course) is extremely dangerous; it makes him and others to rewrite the history of Islam, past and present, in a framework where Islam is nearly always the bad guy: that Islam can act as an *infrastructure that enables human achievement is never considered*; human achievement is always *despite* Islam.

It also enables him and others to view all Muslims as potential radical fundamentalists. The only reason we are not running in the streets forcing people to convert to Islam at sword point is because our Islam has been watered down thanks to other teachings. While a militant Wahhabi is 100% Muslim, we cosmopolitan Muslims are only 90% Muslim, and we, and the world, are so much better for it!

That I can integrate the Islamic set of concepts into a much larger framework of concepts, arriving at a sophisticated interpretation of Islam supported by the Quran and other literature, while continuing to give preference to Islam's teachings where there is conflict with other concepts, is not proper Muslim behavior in Lapidus' eyes—nor in the eyes of militant Wahhabis. In his view, a true Muslim's concepts are entirely derived from religious literature. If they have a human liking for Greek philosophy, this is *always* at the expense of their Islam; Islam must be given up to *make room* for non-Islamic elements.

The root of his mistake is in not realizing that Islam is a relatively small set of concepts compared to the human brain's capacity for encoding concepts; even if 10% of my concepts come from religious literature, that

leaves 90% of my mind free to encode a vast literature of extra-Islamic ethics and values, so that when faced with a decision, I am informed both by Islamic concepts and man-made concepts, creating a human synthesis that enables me to practice Islam with sophistication and context, similar to the moderate Christian thinkers of the 19th century.

This does not make me less Muslim. I too have read the literature that a militant Wahhabi has read. I too do my best to follow the Quran's every letter in my life and respect Prophetic traditions. But that still leaves me with vast room for creativity, for existence as a human who lives and enjoys a human experience. Enjoying classical Persian music or Vivaldi does not make my Islamic concepts drop away. My Islam continues to guide me, to give meaning to my life, but it *delegates* most decisions to my own judgment, my own creativity, my own learning, as a human respected by God, as a steward (agent) of God on earth.

God does not tell me to shut down my life and my brain to all things except religious literature. Veganism gives definition to a person's life, but by enjoying Vivaldi, a vegan does not become less of a vegan. In the same way, Islam, despite being a much larger conceptual framework than veganism, despite giving much more definition to life, leaves humans their freedom to enjoy life as humans, enjoying all that the human experience offers, while a few points of definition (such as the prohibition on wine, and the constant reminders to be kind and just) affect but do not *totally define* said experience.

Lapidus and many others envision Islam as a system of total definition; a total programming for life that makes a Muslim stop being a human. Perhaps the root of the error is in taking Islamic religious scholars seriously when they make similar claims about Islam's all-encompassing nature. Islam's scholars want to emphasize the depth and breadth of Islam's teachings; Islam's exhortations to kindness and fairness can be said to apply in almost any interaction between humans, but it is nothing but

fantasy to imagine that Islam defines and controls all or even most human interactions. Islam provides a little *form* to our daily lives through its various teachings, the way a building's interior gives some form to the way people live and interact inside it. In the experience of *real* Muslims, Islam has no total-ness. Muslims are free men and women under God, guided and inspired by a beautiful literature, but *free* to live and act out their humanity in the wide world, as long as they do not run afoul of the commandments, and as long as they do their best to embody Islam's ethics (of non-selfishness and kindness, etc.).

For a Muslim, Islam provides *infrastructure* for life. Lapidus and Wahhabis think that the infrastructure is the totality of existence for Muslims, while ordinary Muslims consider the infrastructure a helper toward living a full and meaningful human life.

Ahmed criticizes Western Michigan University professor Reinhold Loeffler for drawing the following, highly inadequate, picture of Muslim thought:

> For Muslims, theologian, scholar, or layman alike, God can speak but with one tongue. Consequently, there can only be only one true Islam, and that is usually the believer's own. What we perceive as diversity, for the believer is a matter of right and wrong. Thus, while we acknowledge the various Islamic forms— African, Arabian, Indonesian; traditionalist, modernist, fundamentalist—as equally authentic expressions of Islam, we also have to acknowledge that in this sea of diversity each believer upholds his form as the only really true one.[7]

Ahmed rightly parodies this as:

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[7] Reinhold Loeffler, *Islam in Practice: Religious Beliefs in a Persian Village*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, 246–247 quoted in Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 275-276.

> Muslims, in other words, are hopeless *orthodoxizers* whose individual *subjectivity* is constituted in the inability to recognize the validity of the individual subjectivity of other Muslims: 'there can only be one true Islam, and that is usually the believer's own.'[8]

Loeffler would be right if he limited his comments to the Persian villagers he studied. But it is grossly inaccurate to extend his conclusions to all Muslims, especially cosmopolitan ones. For Loeffler, there can never be such a thing as Muslims respecting Muslims from other Islamic traditions, despite the millions upon millions of Muslims expressing just such a sentiment. For each Muslim, their internal Islamic conceptual framework is supposed to be the one true framework.

What Loeffler is saying is that Muslims are incapable of thinking at his level and appreciating things as realists; they cannot consider Islam a project of meaning-making that deeply involves the heart and soul of each person—so that great diversity of conclusions can come out of—*despite* the fact that almost any cosmopolitan Muslim has a theory similar to this in their understanding and respect for differing Muslims. In my conversations with educated Muslims in Iraq, the United Arab Emirates and the United States, I have never met someone who treats the unique flavors of Islam of other peoples with contempt. They, instead, seek out the *human* in those foreign peoples, seeing them as humans who are experiencing Islam, and for that they love them. There is nothing more heartwarming to them than a video that shows the diverse peoples of the world all celebrating Islam in their own unique way. That those peoples could have significant theological differences compared with themselves is the last thing on their minds.

It is true that less well-educated village dwellers could have a highly non-pluralistic understanding of Islam, but that is a reflection of the specific

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[8] Ibid., 276.

limits of their environment and has little bearing on educated Muslims living in cities. I do not claim that every city-dwelling Muslim is a pluralist. But even if 10% are, that is sufficient to totally disprove Loeffler's thesis that Muslims are hopelessly incapable of respecting Muslims who disagree with them on religious matters.

What is Islamic?

Ahmed quotes Hamid Dabashi saying that since we do not call Marxism, psychoanalysis and quantum physics "Jewish" sciences due to the prominence of Jewish individuals in these fields, we should not call art, poetry, science and philosophy of Islamic civilization "Islamic".[9]

Dabashi is mistaken because what we call *Islamic* philosophy is very much saturated with Islamic concepts. *Islamic philosophy* would not exist in its present form if it had not been for Islam, therefore it is Islamic. But we can easily envision a non-Jewish Einstein coming up with the Theory of Relativity, the concepts of Judaism/Jewish culture were not formative to the scientific work of these Jewish scientists, therefore their science is not Jewish.

When we call something "Islamic", it is because Islamic concepts were *formative* in making the thing what it is.

Ahmed writes, in his proposal for an answer to the question of what makes something "Islamic":

> *something is Islamic to the extent that it is made meaningful in terms of hermeneutical engagement with Revelation to Muhammad as one or more of Pre-Text, Text, and*

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[9] Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 230.

> *Con-Text*...Conceptualizing Islam as hermeneutical engagement with Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text.[10]

For Ahmed, Islamic art is "Islamic" because it is a result of some degree of hermeneutical engagement, not necessarily by the artist but perhaps by the civilization at large, with the scriptures or things derived from them.

The "Islamic" wine-cup is easy to explain within the genetic-cultural framework that I have so far developed. The prohibition on wine-drinking merely makes up a small set of concepts within an ocean of Islamic concepts. Humans are capable of reinterpreting these few wine-related concepts and getting beyond them, and since genetically there is a very strong desire for the internal experience that wine brings, they are all the more motivated to do just that. Just because one reinterpreted a few wine-related concepts so that they may now drink wine does not mean that they are not operating within a background of thousands of other Islamic concepts (problematic as their wine-drinking is from the view of conservative, mainstream Islam).

When it comes to the Muslims who drink wine and give it a positive value in poetic, Sufi terms, they have Prophet Muhammad concepts (ideas about value, behavior, and manners taken from what they knew about the Prophet), Sufi concepts, and other concepts derived from Islamic literature, and it is the most natural thing in the world that they should make use of this conceptual wealth to give value to ("valorize") the idea and the practice of wine-drinking in Islamic terms.

University of Münster professor Thomas Bauer says that speaking of an "Islamic wine goblet" is like speaking of "Christian adultery".[11] Ahmed

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[10] Ahmed, *What is Islam,* 405-407.

[11] Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*, Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011, 193–194 as translated and quoted in Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 409.

disagrees with him, saying that these objects are Islamic because they are the product of an Islamic matrix of meaning-making. I agree with Ahmed.

The reason that people are not bothered when "secular" objects are described as Islamic art is because they, at least subconsciously, know that "Islamic" means that *Islamic concepts had a formative influence on making that thing what it is.* To put it another way, *that thing would not exist in its present form if it had not been for Islamic concepts.*

A wine cup defies a few Islamic concepts, but if Islam was formative to its artistic style (for example if it has Arabic calligraphy on it), then it is right to consider it "Islamic" art.

Shahab Ahmed mentions the interesting fact that while people have no trouble including non-religious artifacts within what they call "Islamic art", there is no analogous recognition of the music of Islamic civilizations as "Islamic music". Islamic art is generally considered to be what comes out of Islamic civilizations, but this is not extended to music. "Islamic music" is restricted to music having to do directly with the Islamic religion.

Ahmed points this out as a mistake, since, to him, since the music comes out of an Islamic context, it is just as Islamic as paintings and vases coming out of Islamic contexts.

But this feels unnatural, even if it seems to make sense. We know instinctively that music coming out of Islamic Samarkand is not necessarily Islamic, yet we also know that miniature paintings coming out of Islamic Samarkand are almost invariably Islamic. What gives?

Let us talk about food. We do not call Pakistani cuisine a subset of Islamic cuisine because there is no such thing as Islamic cuisine. People of certain cultures prefer certain types of food that can be procured or made within the limits of their environment. Islamic concepts do not have a *formative*

influence in the making of Pakistani cuisine. Therefore Pakistani cuisine is not Islamic.

The same applies to music. It is right and appropriate that people should not consider the music of Pakistan automatically "Islamic" music, because Islamic concepts have not necessarily had a formative influence on making it what it is. Since music, like cuisine, can be developed according to personal and cultural taste regardless of religion, not all music should be considered to have an association with the culture's religion. Central Asian music is Central Asian, not Islamic, unless it can be shown that Islam *forced a certain art style on the music*. When it comes to a love song that makes no reference to religious concepts and that is accompanied by a local culture's musical style, there is no good reason to call it Islamic even if the culture is Muslim. But if there is a certain type of music that clearly would not have existed without Islam, such as the *nashīd*, then we can comfortably call that Islamic music.

Domed mosques are representative of Islamic art despite the fact that the earliest Muslims did not have domed mosques. The reason is that it was Islamic concepts that drove the development of the mosque art style. Islamic concepts were *definitive* in the development of the style; calligraphy and geometric art were used, statues and paintings of humans were not. Minarets were used. Mosques were created to serve Islamic functions. Islamic concepts provided a set of criteria that *forced the art style to develop in a certain direction*, very much the same way that surrealist concepts provide criteria for the creation and development of a certain type of art known as "surrealist". For this reason it makes perfect sense to call the mosque art style "Islamic".

As for Islamic music, we again have to ask, "Were Islamic concepts definitive in the development of the music? Could that music exist the way it is had the population been non-Muslim?"

A miniature by the 16th century Persian artist Sultan Muhammad depicting a scene of wine-drinking from Hafez's poetry. This miniature is treated in detail by Shahab Ahmed. It is interesting to note that even the angels, separated and unseen by the rest, are drinking wine. (Quran 47:15 mentions the drinking of wine in Paradise, so associating wine-drinking with angels is not so out of the ordinary.) The miniature depicts multiple planes of experiencing wine; at the bottom is ordinary drunkenness, below the roof, on the left, two friends calmly converse. On the right, an old man reads a book (considered to be Hafez himself). And on the roof, the highest plane, the Unseen is depicted, which is what the Sufis aim at. The lower planes are for ordinary mortals, while the Sufis, in their drinking of the Wine of Truth, i.e. in their seeking of God through the various mystical Sufi practices, aim at that highest plane.

Since we cannot say with certainty that the non-religious music of Muslim societies came about due to religious influence, we cannot classify them as "Islamic" until evidence shows that Islam forced a certain art style on it.

Persian *poetry* is full of Islamic concepts. Hafez's work is a work of Islamic literature. Such a work would not have existed without Islam. A person of Hafez's poetic skill could have existed had Persia remained a Zoroastrian land, but that person would have had no access to Islamic concepts and therefore would have produced *entirely different* poetry. *Islam forced a certain art style on Hafez, therefore his art is Islamic.*

It is not always easy to determine whether something is Islamic or not, and how Islamic it is. Muslims are humans, and no matter how narrow their intellectual horizons are, they will always have far more non-Islamic concepts in their minds than Islamic ones since culture is much larger than religion. We are dealing with a complex system of concepts that interact.

Shahab Ahmed says that the medieval Jewish thinker Maimonides should be considered an "Islamic Jewish thinker", since his thinking is greatly reliant on the Islamic fields of philosophical theology (*kalām*) and jurisprudence *(fiqh)*.

But there is a good reason why we do not call Maimonides an "Islamic" Jewish thinker. Concepts drive people and make them who they are, similar to genes. Maimonides' driving concepts were not Islamic, but Jewish. This was the center of gravity of his conceptual universe. That he made ample use of Islamic concepts in his thinking does not take away from his Jewishness. He was a *Jewish* thinker making use of Islamic concepts, we can tell this by the fact that Islamic concepts do not overwhelm his value system; Jewish concepts remain supreme in his thinking.

Ahmed says that the Muslim use of Plato's thought makes such thought *Islamic*, why then should we not say that Maimonides' use of Islamic thought made such thought Jewish?

Whether Maimonides was "Jewish" or "Islamic" is an argument over words. He was a product of Islamic civilization, and of Jewish culture. People have implicitly agreed to use the word "Jewish thinker" for people who gave preference to Jewish concepts over other concepts and "Islamic thinker" to thinkers who gave preference to Islamic concepts over other concepts.

There is no conflict between the Islamic set of concepts followed by a Muslim carpenter who uses carpentry concepts (information and ideas about carpentry) taken from non-Muslims. Islamic concepts and carpentry concepts can coexist without conflict. But when it comes to a Muslim thinker who takes up competing concepts from Christianity (values, theology, aims), we look at the center of gravity of his concepts to find out whether he is an Islamic thinker or a Christian thinker. In cases of conflict, *when a person reliably gives preference to one side of the conflict, we can reliably identify them with that side.*

Calling Maimonides an "Islamic Jewish thinker" serves more to confuse than to enlighten, because we instinctively recognize the conflict that exists between Islamic concepts and Jewish concepts, and we know that a person *has to* choose one side over the other.

Labels are chosen to elegantly describe phenomena. Regardless of what labels we use, the Maimonides historical phenomenon remains the same. Calling him an Islamic Jewish thinker is in a sense accurate, but it is inelegant, because it implies contradictory things about the phenomenon being labeled, i.e. it is a bad label. Calling him "a Jewish thinker who made ample use of Islamic concepts" is far more elegant, because it nicely

compresses a complex phenomenon into a few words without causing confusion.

As for calling the works of Plato and Aristotle that were translated and received by Islamic civilization as Ahmed suggests, this would only be valid for sections of their philosophy that was *formed* into a certain shape by Islamic concepts. Ahmed fails to include the criterion of formative influence, believing that the very fact that the thought of these two philosophers were received by Islamic civilization is sufficient to consider all of that received thought "Islamic" since they were made sense of through an "Islamic" lens. This makes sense according to his framework. According to mine, it does not; it is quite possible for Muslims to acquire certain concepts into their culture without this interacting much with their religion, because the space of culture is much vaster than religion.

We can certainly speak of Islamic Platonism and Aristotelianism as the Islamic philosophies that were developed from the thought of these two philosophers. But referring to a book of Aristotle as "Islamic" merely because it was received by Islamic civilization serves only to confuse the matter. If the *integrity* of Aristotle's original thought was maintained, then that means Islam did not *shape and form it*, therefore Islam was not *formative* to it, meaning that it was not Islamic.

Autonomous consensus

When speaking of ordinary Muslims as the ultimate gatekeepers of truth as opposed to the scholars, one may argue that if such a thing was taking place, it would have led to a breakdown of orthodoxy, causing a free-for-all atmosphere where no one cares about following the tenets of Islam accurately. In real, lived experience, it is not the scholars who force orthodoxy on people (they have zero power to do so), it is people themselves who enforce orthodoxy upon themselves, and if the people change, the orthodoxy changes regardless of the scholars. Read most

books by historical scholars and you will see them complain about how "un-Islamic" nearly everyone around them is. If they had the power to force these people to be more "Islamic", why did they not use such power?

The reason the earliest Muslims accepted Islam was not because the Prophet had the power to force them to convert, but because Islam was a set of concepts superior to what the people already had. It was a beneficial addition, so they embraced it and gained tremendously from it. This process repeats for every generation; they learn about Islam and see that it is good, so that they go on to teach it to their children.

Islam was meaningful to them. *Meaning* is the fact of a conceptual framework *being fitting and enhancing* within a genetic-cultural creature's experience of the world. Islam provides meaning because it is a set of concepts that, once integrated with what one already knows about the world (one's pre-existing set of concepts), it *fits and enhances* their experience. The world starts to make more sense, and one is *better equipped* (has better concepts) to deal with the world.

The Companions of the Prophet are quoted as saying that the Arabs were lost and Islam guided them, the Arabs were humiliated and Islam gave them honor, the Arabs were weak and Islam gave them strength, the Arabs were divided and Islam united them. The pre-Islamic concepts the Arabs had, while sufficient for survival and for the maintenance of a basic civilization centered on a few towns and oases, caused Arab life to function at a *lower plane* than the Islamic concepts that were given them later. Islam was fitting and enhancing and took them to a higher plane of existence.

When studying a population of bacteria, we may be able to see great genetic diversity between individual bacteria and between different strains. But if an individual bacterium suffers a genetic mutation (say due to being hit by a cosmic ray) that is fatal to it, we do not consider its

wreaked genetic code representative of the whole species, because *it is not capable of surviving*. We do not call the dead bacterium a new species, despite it being an "interpretation" of the species it belonged to.

An interpretation of the Islamic scriptures that leads a person to concluding that they should commit suicide is not a valid interpretation, because it is not capable of surviving. It may make an interesting case study of a diseased mind, but we do not single out this person's interpretation of Islam as something *equal* to other interpretations that actually *work*. Islam, the object of study, is any set of concepts that a population has acquired, lived, derived meaning from through time, generation after generation. We can argue about the exact definition of a religion, but surviving through time is an important part of it. "Religions" that are acquired by a small population that goes extinct and does not pass the religion down are called cults. Only cults that are successful through time are religions: cults that survive the rigors of being practiced in the real world for generations.

This fact, of the necessity that an interpretation must work, greatly reduces the number of valid interpretations that the Islamic literature can have. Any interpretation of Islam that cannot be embraced by a population, or that cannot be passed down from one generation to the next relatively intact, or that causes a population not to reproduce, is not a valid interpretation, because it fails the workability test. It is a failed set of concepts, exactly the same as a failed gene set, a failed genome that cannot survive. When sociologists study Islam, they are not interested in the failed outliers; those are studies for historians and psychologists. Islam-the-sociological-phenomenon is the story of sets of concepts that *worked*, it is a study of the strains of Islam that were successful through time, the same way that biology is the study of genomes that function and survive.

The most normative interpretations of Islam are those that are best capable of spreading and surviving through time, the same way that the

most normative forms of a certain species of bacteria (the most normative gene-sets, genomes) are those best capable of surviving and spreading.

Islam is what we get when a population interprets the Islamic literature (the Quran, books of hadith, law, biography, Sufism, etc.) and puts them into practice. Shahab Ahmed calls this "hermeneutic engagement". Different regions have different sets of Islamic "classics" as part of the Islamic literature that they study, engage with and derive their religious concepts from. Egyptians read Mohammed al-Ghazali (1917 – 1996) and Yusuf al-Qaradawi's (b. 1926) and consider them expressive of Islam as Islam should be. Indian and Pakistani Muslims read Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (1703 – 1762) and Abul Hasan Nadwi (1914 – 1999). Turkish and Kurdish Muslims read Said Nursi (1877 – 1960). These different expositions lead to different flavors of Islam. Each culture has its own "normative" Islam often exposited by a few charismatic local religious leaders.

What unites these flavors of Islam is that they are all significantly derived from a shared literature, most importantly the Quran. If a Muslim community stops the process of hermeneutic engagement, the community slowly becomes syncretic, as is the case among the Muslims of Vietnam. Ideas about Islam merge with non-Islamic ideas since there is no major corrective force to prevent this. Hermeneutic engagement with the Islamic literature is the defining feature of Islam. If this process breaks down, syncretism results, until it becomes questionable whether the community can be called "Muslim" anymore.

The most explicit case of a breakdown in hermeneutic engagement is when a sect declares that it no longer needs the Islamic literature, as in the case of Baha'ism and the Ahl-e-Haqq, both of which consider themselves "evolved" beyond Islam. Such sects can no longer be called Muslim. Since the process of hermeneutic engagement with the Islamic texts has been

abolished, the sect's concepts (and therefore manners and way of life) will no longer have an Islamic quality.

For a population to be Muslim, therefore, they should embody a large set of concepts *derived* from the Islamic literature, and this concept-set should be *workable* and *transferable*. If they interpret Islam in a way that makes it unnecessary for them to teach it to their children—as is the case with certain "secular" Muslims—their interpretation will quickly die out, since their children will likely not carry it forward, or go back to mainstream Islam. Sociologically, therefore, their interpretation represents a fatal mutation of Islam rather than a valid interpretation of it.

If ordinary Muslims determine what Islam should be, this could mean that a thousand groups could pop up who could push Islam in so many different directions that it would become unrecognizable. There are many reasons this does not take place in the real world; the main reason is the fact of autonomous (free and self-governed) consensus.

No one is forcing people to adopt a certain interpretation of quantum mechanics. The reason why most scientists agree on quantum mechanics' fundamentals is that they study the source materials for this field and come to the same conclusion as everyone else, without anyone forcing them. The scientists have reached an autonomous consensus on the basics of quantum mechanics because anyone of sufficient knowledge and understanding who has studied the matter autonomously comes to the same conclusions as everyone else.

A much simpler example of autonomous consensus is the fact that we all agree that the sky is blue. No one is forcing this belief on us. We have reached a consensus together, autonomously, due to examining the same evidence using the same equipment and coming to the same conclusions.

Consensus in Islam, known as *ijmāʿ*, works in the same way (or ideally, it should). There have been numerous cases of abuse of this concept. Many

have falsely claimed that their opinion is the *only* valid opinion because there is "consensus" on it, ignoring the important minority of respected thinkers who disagree with the opinion.

As stated by the great 20th century Islamic scholar Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh Drāz (1894 – 1958), consensus in Islam should function just like scientific consensus. Scholars and thinkers, in complete freedom of thought and conscience (i.e. in complete autonomy), should examine the issue and come to the same conclusions. That is when a consensus is created.[12] If this process leads to disagreement, then it can be said that there is no consensus and that there are multiple valid choices.

When it comes to such an issue as the Ramadan fast, since every qualified person who has studied the relevant texts has come to the conclusion that a Muslim must fast during this month, this has become a matter of consensus. No one is forcing Muslims to fast in this month; neither is anyone forcing them to believe that fasting is necessary in this month. Rather, there is an autonomously reached consensus; anyone who examines the textual evidence in complete freedom comes to the same conclusion.

This hermeneutic engagement with the Islamic texts ensures that religion does not become an anarchical free-for-all. A person who comes up with strange and outlandish interpretations will be corrected, and if they do not desist, may be shunned unless they keep their opinions to themselves. They are similar to a quack scientist who comes up with an outlandish interpretation of quantum mechanics. They will not be taken seriously and may be laughed at.

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[12] Al-Sayyid Aḥmad Badawī, "Al-Ilzām al-Khuluqī ʿinda al-Duktūr Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh Drāz." In Aḥmad Muṣṭafā Faḍlīya, *Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh Drāz: Dirāsāt wa-Buḥūth bi-Aqlām Talāmidhatih wa-Muʿāṣirīh*, Cairo and Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 2007.

We see these dynamics in the issue of the hijab. There is autonomous, world-wide consensus among mainstream, conservative Muslims that wearing the hijab is obligatory, mainly because a fair-minded reading of the Quran makes any other conclusion impossible. Yet there are certain liberal Muslims who claim that while the hijab may have been obligatory in 7th century Arabia, it is no longer obligatory today in these modern times. This sounds like a valid alternative opinion, yet it is widely rejected. The reason is that Muslim thinkers who hermeneutically engage with the Quran autonomously come to the conclusion that it is from an all-intelligent God who was, among other things, smart enough to only make universal statements when they were meant to be universal. Saying that God's mind was stuck in 7th century Arabia is a grotesque underestimation of God's intelligence. God is supposed to have invented things like quantum mechanics and to have watched the universe age for billions of years before sending the Quran. Such a God would have been intelligent enough to recognize that humanity may continue for hundreds of thousands of years. Therefore, if we are to respect God, we have to respect his intelligence. The belief that God's mind was stuck in 7th century Arabia therefore shows an almost charming naiveté when it comes to understanding the nature of God in Islam. A God worth believing in would not be so foolish as to make commandments that expire over time.

To some, there is supposed to be a struggle between faith and reason; it is only the simple-minded and ignorant who would be so silly as to take revelation literally and treat it as if its words were totally relevant today—as if it was revealed today (as conservative Muslims believe). Even well-educated Muslim intellectuals can have such thought patterns. The British-Pakistani intellectual Ziauddin Sardar, for example, thinks the

Quran should be read historically. According to Sardar God gave humanity a book that is stuck in the mindset of 7th century Arabia.[13]

The mainstream opinion is that a real God who is worth believing in should be capable of giving us a book that can stand the tests of time—and that the Quran is just such a book. I have noticed that the more literally one takes the Quran, and the more firmly one tries to follow it, the more moderate one becomes. The most kind, peaceful and moderate Islamic leaders in modern history have all been ardent lovers of the Quran who treated it not as a historical artifact but as if it was sent down the very day they were reading it: the Turkish revivalist Said Nursi, the widely followed Egyptian scholar Mohammed al-Ghazali, the Kurdish leader Ahmad Moftizadeh. These were not extremists. In fact many of them have been subject to constant verbal attacks by extremists for being too liberal and open-minded. A US government officer recently published a book on how Moftizadeh's Quran-centered view of Islam could be used as a role model for fighting extremism.[14] Much of the Quran is centered on spirituality and ethics, therefore a person who takes it very seriously is going to embody that spirituality and ethics, which teaches, among other things, that the killing of a single innocent person is the same as killing all of humanity, which leads to the logical conclusion that a single human soul is of infinite worth and possesses inviolable dignity (as Christian ethics also teaches).[15]

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[13] See Ziauddin Sardar, *Desperately Seeking Paradise: Journeys of a Sceptical Muslim*, London : Granta Books, 2005.

[14] Ali Ezzatyar, *The Last Mufti of Iranian Kurdistan: Ethnic and Religious Implications in the Greater Middle East*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

[15] It is natural to assume that taking any single book too literally would lead to narrow-mindedness and extremism. We see this when the genre of hadith, or the works of particular thinkers, are taken too literally by Muslims, which always leads to some form of extremism. The Quran is an exception, and the *empirical* evidence shows it. Show me any lover of the Quran, a person who takes it literally and tries to embody its ideals, and I

The reality of autonomous consensus means that Islam is not a free-for-all in the sense that anyone can believe and follow anything they wish. Like scientific fields, there are objective limits to what can sensibly be believed. A Muslim who believes in outlandish interpretations that are not supported by any respectable scholar is like a person who believes in quack scientific theories. Autonomous consensus is real, but there are informal limitations on it. Things have improved greatly due to the adoption of Western scholarly standards in Islamic studies, but political considerations and fears of repercussions still exist and cause scholars and thinkers to sometimes self-censor.

There are other factors that prevent Islam from becoming a free-for-all. Good versions of Islam will lead to *objectively* better results than bad versions of Islam. Muslims who follow it will be recognizable by all fair-minded people, including their own children, as objectively better people than those who follow bad versions of Islam.

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will show you a moderate and open-minded Muslim. I know that this is strange (it does not make sense for any book to be like that *unless* it is from some super-human intelligence) and it is so hard to appreciate that even some, like Sardar, who have been raised Muslim, are unable to grasp it. I stress that the uniqueness of the Quran is an empirical fact that can be verified by anyone. Extremists are always those who either ignore the Quran, cherry-pick verses from it, or abuse the concept of "abrogation" to discard literally hundreds of its verses. Their mode of operation is rather like that of radical Marxists who believe that law and custom should be abrogated, all legal protections removed, in order to enable them to get away with whatever they want to create utopia. One of the main attractions of Wahhabism—an ideology that continues to be exported by Saudi Arabia and that has inspired most terrorists—to the original Saudi state was that it removed the "constitutional" rights of fellow Muslims that mainstream Islam upholds; it enabled them to slaughter and enslave every Muslim who failed to submit to their doctrines. It helped submit Islam to what may be termed the Bedouin ideology; that only tribe members are humans and everyone else sub-human; that only tribe members deserve respect and loyalty and everyone else can be robbed, enslaved or killed as desired. This terrifying vision is what we arrive at when the Quran and its ethics are ignored and a man-made ideology overrides and replaces it.

All humans are auto-scientists, researching conclusions regarding what is best for themselves and those close to them through observation and deduction. An intelligent child brought up in to a family that belittles and dehumanizes women, if she were to move to a more cosmopolitan place and see women respected, would be forced to compare her family's version of Islam with that of others and may conclude that a version of Islam that treats women as humans is objectively better, for it is more meaningful, more fitting to her human experience.

Since humans are not disembodied intellects, since they have the capacity to suffer and to empathize with those who suffer, and since they have the capacity to love, these provide them with *objective criteria* with which they can judge religion. Most humans, including most Muslims, are utterly repulsed by ISIS burning a human alive; that is one powerful *data point* for a Muslim, helping them recognize that the ISIS version of Islam is evil *even if they are not intellectuals and cannot state exactly what is wrong with ISIS's doctrine.*

Humans are capable of comparing different interpretations of different areas of Islam and recognizing the ones that cause the least suffering, that afford them the most dignity, and that live up to the highest standards envisioned by outside intellectual traditions. Their lived experience, as genetic-cultural creatures, provides them with vast quantities of *objective data* for preferring one version of Islam over another. Therefore the *version of Islam a person prefers is not random*; it is very strongly affected by the real world, it is grounded in objective reality.

Good versions of Islam are also more *transferable* than bad versions. A Muslim who moves to a non-Muslim country and reinterprets Islam so that he can drink alcohol, not pray, and not fast, and who says that Islam should merely be a set of ethical teachings (as some Muslims say) will likely fail to pass on this version of Islam to his children. He has thoroughly abandoned a large part of the Islamic conceptual universe and

disconnected himself from the Islamic texts. Children see through the inconsistencies in their parents' religious beliefs and think that they can do better than that, the way they see the deficiencies in their parents' marriage and think they could avoid those deficiencies in their own marriages. The children may either grow up to completely abandon Islam or may embrace its more mainstream versions.

Another objective criterion on religion is that it *must give more than it takes*. There are Europeans who convert to Islam thinking they have joined a new nation that will embrace them with open arms and take care of them. They zealously adhere to the strictest interpretations and cannot understand why the born Muslims around them are so easygoing when they have a whole new world to build. They suffer burnout and sometimes abandon Islam. The effort they were pouring into this new identity was not paying the expected dividends. Meanwhile, the easygoing Muslims continue to practice Islam, not feeling suffocated by it. The fruits they get from their easygoing Islam more than justifies the efforts they put into it.

Yet another objective limit on religion is that a religion's adherents must have above-replacement fertility rates. India's Parsis do not have above-replacement fertility. Because of this their religion is dying out. Any interpretation of Islam that causes its adherents to have below-replacement fertility will be self-limiting. This is seen in countries like Turkey, where conservative Muslims have high fertility, while more "secular" Muslims have low fertility, so that they make up an always-small demographic. In Turkey, while some people continually leave conservative Islam, by leaving it, their fertility rates are lowered, so that their number can never grow so large as to overwhelm the number of the conservatives, and in this way the country as a whole remains largely religiously conservative (a tourist may have to visit the small towns and the countryside to meet this conservative majority).

The above are *objective* limits on the survivability of a religion. Anyone who changes too much of Islam runs the risk of failing to achieve one or more of these factors of religious survival, and the result will be the extinction of that version of Islam. An evolutionary survival-of-the-fittest-concepts process is taking place wherever Islam is practiced, and this is as it should be, since the only reason a conceptual framework is embraced and passed down is its *utility* (the meaning it gives to life for its believers, etc.).

Shahab Ahmed himself drank wine according to his sister.[16] His Islamic conceptual framework made it possible for him to justify and even celebrate wine-drinking despite Islam's prohibition on it. Is his interpretation of Islam a valid interpretation? The fabric of reality answers this question. *Can you as a Muslim drink wine, prosper, have above-replacement fertility, and convince your children to follow Islam?*

The common trajectory of cosmopolitan Muslims who abandon parts of Islam appears to be the generational dissolution of their religion. Many old men can be found in the Middle East who are called *ḥāj* (a title of respect for a man who has performed the Hajj) but who were too easygoing to pass religion down to their children so that their daughters do not wear the hijab and their sons do not pray, despite the family's maintaining some respect for Islam, perhaps fasting in Ramadan and celebrating Eid. What happens to the children of these children? I have met many of them, and they are generally secular, consider Islam backward, and have below-replacement fertility. The Islamic conceptual universe of the grandparents was incompletely transmitted to the children, who themselves barely bothered to pass it on to their own children, and in this way the conceptual universe disintegrated; that interpretation of Islam was an evolutionary dead end, it failed to survive.

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[16] QMUL School of History (2017-06-14), *What is Islam-Session 3,*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4g0kwx5awuw (retrieved January 24, 2018).

Therefore the argument over the validity of certain interpretations of Islam over others is not merely about who has more power to enforce their interpretation. And it is not a process where everyone randomly comes up with their own interpretation so that some of these happen to grow and others happen to collapse. The interpretation of Islam is a very real evolutionary process where dysfunctional interpretations get culled, whether they are too strict or too lax, too literalist or too metaphorical, too backward or too modern. A religion must give more than it takes. It should make life feel meaningful, more meaningful than it would be without it. It should insult people's intelligence or conscience. It should *feel* fitting to its human carriers, rather than feeling jarring and conflicting. It should be possible to take it seriously despite human progress and scientific discoveries. All of these serve as serious limits on the flavors of Islam that can survive.

Text and pretext

Shahab Ahmed criticizes the way that among modern Muslim thinkers, there has come about a "downsizing" of Islam, so that when they think of reform, nearly always they focus on Islamic law and ignore the vast wealth of non-legal Islam-derived concepts (such as ethics and philosophy), resulting in a barebones and decontextualized view of Islam that ignores over 1000 years of intellectual development.

What Ahmed calls the "Pre-Text of Revelation" refers to conceptual framework created by humans who thought about the purpose behind said revelation; Sufis read the Quran and thought it pointed to a higher truth. In this way they built a superstructure on top of Islam, derived from Islam but different from it, capable of feeding back into Islam and redefining it. To engage with the Pre-Text of revelation is to read it so that one sees "between the lines", relating what the revelation says to what one already knows, synthesizing new visions, values and epistemologies in the process.

In Ahmed's view, the decoupling of Persian (the language of the philosophical Sufism, ethics and poetry from the Balkans to the Bengal) from Islam resulted in a deculturization of Muslims, causing their religion to go from something human and soft to something rigid and legalistic.

While I agree that some Muslim intellectuals suffer from having an exaggerated view of the importance of law and its scholars to Islam, I believe this is a personal problem of the intellectuals and that it does not reflect on the larger Muslim society. The severe problem of deculturization that Ahmed imagines is, in my experience, non-existent.

Intelligent and cosmopolitan Muslims do have a soft and human Islam. We can verify this by talking to intelligent cosmopolitan Muslims. In speaking to them, we find that they have hearts that resonate with Rumi's poetry and derive value and meaning from it; they read Mark Twains *The Prince and the Pauper* and their hearts go out to both heroes; Egyptians love their Sufi national hero Ibn ʿAṭā-Allāh al-Sikandarī and quote him often. I have met many of these humans and their religion is very much *not* deculturized; it is, rather, sophisticated and humanistic.

Looking at extremists who believe that all books should be burned except their own religious literature, one may pessimistically conclude that this is the state of Islam today. But in reality those extremists make an almost negligible minority of the world's Muslims.

The problem of culture is a problem of demand rather than a problem of supply. Ahmed imagines that the supply of Sufism and philosophy has diminished and that this has caused deculturization. In reality, in middle and upper class Muslim homes where there is demand, there is also supply. There exists scarcely a middle or upper class Persian home except that they have collections of the poetry of Hafez and Saʿdī. These Persians may, like Ahmed, mourn the "loss of culture" among Persians when they see that many Persians are not interested in their national heritage, not

realizing that it has always been the vocation of the middle and upper classes, the educated elite, to appreciate cultural works. Literacy rates in Iran before the modern world were as low as 1%.[17], so that the number of people who could actually read and appreciate Persian Islamic culture was quite limited throughout history, and with the vast increase in literary in modern times, the number of cultured Persians appreciating the Pre-Text of Islam may have actually greatly increased.

Ahmed's error is an error of sampling. It does not signify much that people who would not have been cultured in 1500 are not cultured today, so comparing the elite of medieval Iranian Islam with today's uncultured Iranians is an invalid comparison; the cultured of the past should be compared to the cultured of the present, and it may be seen that today there is far more appreciation for culture than there was in 1500. Even if it there has been an increase of the appreciation of culture from 1% of the population to 3%, that is a significant increase. Rather than signifying a crisis of culture, it signifies progress in acculturation.

But if it is so, why are Muslim intellectuals so focused on the law? This may actually be due to intellectual *progress* among Muslims. In the past the law was left to the religious scholars to do with as they saw fit, so that Muslims who wished for a more humanistic Islam had to make use of Sufism and other softening conceptual frameworks. Today Muslims are standing up to the religious scholars, daring to challenge them at their own game. In ages past, open-minded Muslims who disliked certain features of the Islam of the religious scholars would have had to resort to poetry and private communication to voice their opposition. Today, thanks to the progress of the past 200 years, these Muslims no longer have to resort to extra-scholarly genres to try to soften and humanize Islam, they have started to engage and challenge the religious scholars directly,

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[17] See Hooshang Amirahmadi, *The Political Economy of Iran under the Qajars: Society, Politics, Economics and Foreign Relations 1796-1936,* New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012, 121.

using the scholars' own tools and terminology. The focus of these Muslims on the law does not necessarily mean that they have lost appreciation for culture. It means that while in the past they were content to use culture as a means of balancing out the rigid and sometimes inhuman religion of the scholars, today they are empowered to speak up through the law itself. The religion of cosmopolitan Muslims has not disintegrated; they continue to be humanists and sophisticated and tolerant in their view of religion. While in the past they were fearful of challenging the religious scholars (who had their own guild-like madrasas that acted as gate-keepers of religious knowledge and keepers of orthodoxy), today, thanks to the wide availability of religious references, ordinary Muslims can study the same source materials that the religious scholars use, and in this way they are able to critique and challenge scholarly doctrines and interpretations.

The world of Islamic scholarship has totally changed in the past 200 years due to the spread of literacy. Far more people have access to the great classics of Islam's past. Few middle class Muslim homes in the West fail to contain important classics, such as Rumi or al-Ghazālī's works, and works by modern Muslim intellectuals interpreting the works of the past.

There has been no loss of culture. There has been a rediscovery of culture. I know of children of Muslim immigrants who are shocked at the ignorance of their parents about Islam and who themselves are vastly better educated about Islam's history and literature thanks to their own efforts and the wide availability of books and online lectures. This can be taken as a sign of the spread of culture; even when the parents are uncultured, the modern world offers so much Islamic literature and so many Islamic voices that many children often cannot help but be better cultured about Islam than their parents are.

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3. The Decline of Islamic Civilization and the "Closing" of the Muslim Mind

In his essay "The Problem of Islamic Decadence", the British historian J. J. Saunders (1910 – 1972) mentions the many theories that Westerners have proposed to explain why Muslims went from being the all-powerful rulers of the world to being backward and politically weak.

Considering Islamic civilization a weak and backward one is a relatively new thing. Saunders writes:

> Not until the Age of Enlightenment did the West awake to the fact that its enemy and former mentor had slipped so far behind: only then were attempts made to account for this decline. Up to the end of the seventeenth century Islam presented the appearance of great strength and viguor, at least politically: the three leading Muslim States, the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Persia and Mogul India, ranked among the world's great powers, and even the Sharifian kingdom of Morocco was treated with respect by Christian nations as late as the age of Louis XIV. Around 1700

there was a noticeable change. The final repulse of the Turks from Vienna (1683), the Christian reconquest of Hungary, and the Peace of Carlowitz (1699), registered the unmistakable decay of Ottoman might. The death of Awrangzib (1707) was followed by the rapid disintegration of the Mogul Empire. The fall of the Safavid dynasty (1722) ended the political greatness of Persia.[1]

Among undeniable signs of the decline of Islamic civilization were the fact that the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb needed a *Dutch* passport to perform the Hajj in 1706,[2] and the fact that the Ottomans were so geographically ignorant that they were taken aback by the appearance of a Russian fleet in the Mediterranean in 1770, not knowing that the Baltic Sea was connected to the Atlantic Ocean according to Saunders.[3] As early as 1670, a European traveler through Persia and India noticed the lack of intellectual curiosity and the low technological sophistication of these lands.[4]

The French intellectuals Montesquieu (1689-1755) and Voltaire (1694-1778) and the English historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) blamed government tyranny and mismanagement for the state of Muslim societies.[5] Ernest Renan, one of the most prominent intellectuals of the 19th century, blamed Islamic theology. According to Renan:

> Only by freeing themselves from the paralysing grip of the Koran and the Law could the Muslim people hope to contribute again to the general advance of civilisation.[6]

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[1] J. J. Saunders, *Muslims & Mongols: Essays on Medieval Asia*, ed. G.W. Rice, Christchurch: University of Canterbury and Whitcoulli Limited, 1977, 27.

[2] Eric Tagliacozzo, *The Longest Journey*, 26.

[3] Saunders, *Muslims & Mongols*, 106.

[4] Ibid., 102.

[5] Ibid., 103.

[6] Ibid., 104.

Since Renan, the idea that Islam causes backwardness has been thoroughly taken up by the West's intelligentsia so that it is taken for a fact these days—despite its banality and its sociologically amateur understanding of the functioning human societies. The works of Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis are a more sophisticated restatement of Renan's ideas. One of the latest contributions to this field of Islam-blaming is *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis* by Robert R. Reilly.[7] This chapter focuses on a critique of Reilly's writing while introducing an alternative, and far more plausible, explanation for the decline of Islam suggested by Saunders and supported by the ideas developed so far in this book.

Reilly argues that the Islamic theological doctrine of predestination and other Ash'arite—the dominant theological framework within Sunni Islam—teachings have driven Muslims to a fatalistic, anti-intellectual dead-end, a "suicide" as Reilly describes it, quoting Fazlur Rahman (1919 – 1988), the famous Pakistani Islamic intellectual.

Reilly's thesis is that scholarly theological positions hamper Muslim curiosity and intellectual achievement. He asserts that religious scholars and their doctrines have the power to put a damper on the freedom of thought among Muslims. In his rather depressing vision, intelligent Muslims are almost mind-controlled by a fatalistic Islam, and if only they would abandon this version of Islam, they would, as if by magic, acquire the ability to stop being narrow-minded and develop into full human beings. As is sadly typical of Western discourses about Islam, Reilly compares the very worst examples of the people of the Middle East with the best of the West, and from this highly skewed comparison he concludes that Islam must be the reason why the Middle East is not doing as well as the West.

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[7] Robert R. Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis*, Wilmington: ISI Books, 2010.

If Reilly is right that the presently dominant version of Islam causes narrow-mindedness and is tantamount to "intellectual suicide", then we would expect the intellectual elite of the Muslim world to be severely affected by this suicidal doctrine. Men and women who would have been scientists and inventors in a different reality would instead be narrow-minded and anti-intellectual worshipers at the feet of the religious scholars. It sounds like the set-up for a good story, but is there any reality to this scenario? The question to ask is: are city-dwelling, cosmopolitan Muslims hampered in their intellectual curiosity by theological doctrines?

Reilly's answer should be yes. These people would be responsible for intellectual progress; but there is supposedly little intellectual progress, therefore these people are instead narrow-minded anti-intellectuals who need to be freed from harmful Islamic doctrines.

In the Reilly's imagination, Muslim hordes listen to their religious scholars then zealously go on to implement whatever backward thing said scholars recommend.

But in the world of reality, like George Eliot's Christians and George Orwell's proletarian Catholics, Muslims politely listen to the preachers at the Friday sermons, then go out to think whatever they themselves choose to think. If the sermon makes sense within their personal, familial and cultural conceptual frameworks, they may be motivated to slightly change their behavior in response to it. And if it did not survive this critique, the content will simply be ignored. And if a preacher insults their intelligence or conscience one too many times, they will simply stop attending their sermons and find another mosque to go to (if one is available). If not, they may go to the sermon as late as possible to catch the obligatory performance of the communal prayer after sermon ends, as I have seen some Muslims do.

Reilly writes:

> There are people in Saudi Arabia today who still do not believe man has been on the moon. This is not because they are ignorant; it is because accepting the fact that man was on the moon would mean also accepting the chain of causal relationships that put him there, which is simply theologically unacceptable to them.

Reilly quotes things like the above, thinking that they are somehow representative of all Muslims, when:

1. Saudi's cosmopolitan Muslims would find that just as laughable as any Westerner.

2. There are perhaps tens of thousands of Americans who do not believe the moon landings ever happened. A quick search on Amazon.com for "moon landing hoax" brings up dozens of books.

3. Saudi Arabia, this supposed capital of Islamic backwardness, now produces more scientific research[8] than Hungary, Thailand, New Zealand, Israel or Romania.[9]

Whether Saudi's Wahhabi preachers dislike the country's research institutions or not, the Muslim population not only tolerates them, but is proud of them and their achievements. In 2010, the Saudi website al-Weeam reported that a female Saudi student had come first in her class at Southampton University in England. The article led to 88 comments, most of which praised her achievement. A few of the usual suspects were present to mention how she was suffering moral decay by being in

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[8] 18,953 research papers in 2016 according to Scimago Journal and Country Rank.

[9] Perhaps the larger part of Saudi's scientific growth is due to the importation of foreign scientists. But the fact that the Saudis are willing to spend billions of dollars on research, and the fact that the Saudi population is not up in arms against this scientific growth but actually supports it should give us pause.

England, but these were the exception "that proves the rule"; most readers found positive value in her achievement and expressed pride in it..[10]

An illustration of the independence of the Muslim mind from religious scholars is the way Iran's middle class rejects the Shia practice of temporary marriage, rightly recognizing it as legalized prostitution.[11], *despite* scholarly approval for it.

Egypt is a very conservative country, yet its scientific output has increased from 4,515 scientific research papers published in 2005 to 17,300 in 2016. It is common to brush such data aside by saying this progress is happening *despite* Islam. Even if the research institutions that are producing these papers are staffed by devout Muslims, this is brushed aside by saying that they are not really Muslim in their hearts, that they have abandoned parts of Islam and this enables them to be rational and human. In this way, all *actual* cases of Muslims acting rationally, acting as intelligent and modern creatures, are dismissed in order to maintain the narrative that Islam promotes irrationality.

Western pundits preemptively close all doors to data that would prove their theses wrong; any data about real Muslims behaving intelligently, rationally and humanistically is inadmissible to them (they are not real Muslims, or they are doing what they do *despite* Islam), while all data showing otherwise is admissible.

Reilly, as many other pundits, considers Wahhabism somehow a natural form of Islam that has the danger of spreading to all Muslim minds. This is despite the fact it is likely only practiced by less than 1% of the world's Muslims, largely sponsored by Saudi Arabia, and despite the fact that the vast majority of Muslims strongly dislike it. When the Wahhabi Ibn Saud

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[10] Sālim al-Shaybānī, "Mutaba`ithah saudiyyah tuhaqiq injaz ilmi wa tatafawwaq al-talabah al-baritaniyyin fi jami`atihim", *Alweeam*, December 1, 2010, weam.co/4351 (retrieved January 27, 2018).

11 One can marry someone for a day as long as a cleric is present to officiate the wedding.

conquered Mecca and Medina with the help of British funding.[12] in the 1920's, the people of these two cities so strongly disliked Wahhabi preachers that he had to import clerics from Egypt.[13]

Reilly has to focus on Wahhabism because he is trying to explain why Islam is causing so much terrorism.[14] Like almost all of those who try to answer this question, he tries to find the reasons for Islamic terrorism within Islamic cultures and societies, ignorant of the fact Islamic terrorism is very much a 20th century phenomenon triggered by colonial rule in Egypt, the Jewish ethnic cleansing of Palestine[15], and the US arming, training and funding of the Wahhabi Taliban and al-Qaeda organizations in the 1980's in order to weaken the Soviet Union.[16]

Instead of trying to look blindly grope inside Muslim minds for the causes of Islamic terrorism, Reilly would probably do much better to call up a few of his friends at the Pentagon.[17]

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[12] See Mark Curtis, *Secret Affairs: Britain's Collusion with Radical Islam*, London: Profile Books Ltd, 2018.

[13] See Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

[14] Almost all cases of Islamic terrorism are carried out by Wahhabis and sects following similar doctrines.

[15] For the Palestinian issue, see Ila Pappe, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007.

[16] See Andrew J. Bacevich, *America's Wars for the Greater Middle East: A Military History,* New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2016.

[17] The Pentagon was providing regular flights to al-Qaeda members right before 9/11, as FBI whistleblower Sibel Edmonds has publicized. See Edmonds' interview with Pat Buchanan's *American Conservative* magazine: "Who's Afraid of Sibel Edmonds?", November 1, 2009, https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/whos-afraid-of-sibel-edmonds/ (retrieved December 24, 2018).

The decline of Islamic science

The rise of the rationalist Mu'tazilites coincided with the rise of Islamic science in the 9th century, and the fall of the Mu'tazilites and the rise of Ash'arites in the 11th century coincided with the fall of Islamic science. Reilly considers it his most important contribution to the discussion of the decline of Islam to suggest that the abandonment of Mu'tazilite doctrine and the adoption of the less intellectual Ash'arite doctrine was a *cause* for the decline and fall of Islamic civilization. For him this correlation equals causation.

During the period of decline that started from 900 CE onwards, the Abbasid empire suffered repeated Turkic invasions. The same process that caused the decline and fall of the Roman Empire (centuries of barbarian invasions causing a breakdown in urban networks of professionalism and trade) happened to Islam from the 10th century to the 15th century. The West was spared this process during the same period so that it enjoyed a Renaissance in peace just as the Turkic Mahmud of Ghazni was carrying on his slaughter of cosmopolitan and productive Iranian cities.

Baghdad was the center of Abbasid science and philosophy, which was largely conducted by Iranians coming from the great Persian-speaking cities of Central Asia. These cities were one by one decimated by the Turkic and Mongol invasions, and Baghadad itself never recovered from the destruction of its irrigation system by the Mongols.[18] Two centuries after the Mongols, the Turkic warlord Tamerlane re-destroyed Baghdad even more thoroughly than the Mongols had managed.[19]

Russia and Poland, the only significant areas of the West that suffered Mongol and Turkic invasions during the same period, were until recently

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[18] Saunders, *Muslims & Mongols,* 114.

[19] Ibid.

just as famous for being backward and undeveloped as the Muslim lands, despite being Christian lands. John Saunders writes:

> Since the conversion of Northmen and the Magyars around 1000, Western Europe had been completely free from this scourge. The Mongols, who devastated Russia as thoroughly as they did Western Asia, got as far as Silesia in 1241 before their leaders were obliged to return home in order to elect a new Great Khan. Had they pressed westwards to the Rhine and the Atlantic and overrun Germany, Italy and France, which they could probably have done with ease, there would have been no Renaissance, and the West, like Russia, would have taken centuries to reconstruct the shattered fabric of its civilisation. Western Europe has perhaps never properly appreciated its good fortune in escaping conquest by the last and most dreadful of the invaders from the steppes of Asia. It emerged from the Dark Ages in the eleventh century, at the very time when the first barbarian blows were being struck at the world of Islam, and it was able from then onwards to build up a new civilisation on the Atlantic fringe of the Eurasian continent uninterrupted by the raids and devastations of Turks or Mongols or Bedouins.

Now tha the destruction brought by the barbarian invasions has been repaired and trade has resumed, we should take another look at Muslim societies and see whether things are changing or not. Islam has not changed greatly in the past 200 years. Muslims continue to consider the Quran the literal Word of God and the hadith collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim as canons of the faith. If Renan, Lewis and Reilly are right that Islamic theology is causing a closing of the Muslim mind (John Saunders, too, considers Islam a potential negative influence), we would expect little change to have taken place after the restoration of peace, because they tell us that it is the Muslims' *Islamic beliefs* that is making

them backward and decadent, *not* something outside of Islam, such as historical circumstances.

Today, throughout the Muslim world there is great interest in philosophy, in science, in literature. The top 6 Muslim-majority countries in terms of population (Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Iran and Turkey) have increased their scientific output by three to ten times in the past ten years alone. Iran now publishes more scientific research papers in peer-reviewed journals than Sweden, Poland or Belgium. Muslims are sending their children to Western-inspired universities by the millions. In Iran and Egypt, most Western bestsellers are translated and published a year or two after their publication in the West. It is breathtakingly ignorant to color one's understanding of the Muslim societies of today by prejudices inspired by the decaying societies of 1000-1900. Islamic theology has remained the same, yet *everything else* is changing.

The Scientific Revolution was the edge of edges that enabled Europe to rule the world until the year 2000. It has only been in the past 20 years (since the 1990's) that the nations outside of Europe, Muslim and non-Muslim, discovered the importance of formal scientific research. Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Pakistan, India and China realized they would forever be second-class citizens on the world stage, clients of Europe, as long as they did not have a system for churning out discoveries as Europe did.

All of the 20th century was a difficult lesson for the third world in learning that, to keep up with Europe, it is not sufficient to copy its technologies; one needs to recreate its scientific research culture. Only this enables one to have the well-educated and well-equipped men and women needed to develop the blades of aircraft engines and the connectors used in supercomputers.

At the moment that I am writing this, we stand at the moment in history when the non-European world has finally realized the essential necessity for scientists. China went from publishing 28,000 scientific papers in 1996

to over 400,000 in 2016. Recently it was announced that China had surpassed the United States in its output to become the world's number one publisher of scientific research.[20] Iran has seen even more dramatic growth, going from less than 1000 papers in 1996 to over 47,000 in 2016. Similar growth can be seen in all major Muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia.

We are now in a major turning point in history, perhaps as important as that in 1600 when Western Europe became the world's supreme civilization. The thing that gave Europe its permanent edge over the past centuries no longer solely belongs to it. The culture of scientific inquiry is being recreated throughout the world, so that today any of Egypt, Iran, India or Malaysia is likely perfectly capable of carrying science forward even if Europe and the United States were to vanish from the world.

A theory that blames Islam for the Islamic world's status today will have to tell us that this recent realization of the crucial importance of science to national prowess and prosperity is going to make little difference as long as Muslims remain devout. We are supposedly backward because of Islam, not because of historical circumstances. But a quick comparison between Muslim countries and their non-Muslim equivalents in the next section shows that this is just a figment of the imagination; these nations are remaining devout Muslims while embracing science.

We Muslims are often given the nonsensical choice of either choosing to be human or choosing to be Muslim, and in Western works like S. Frederick Starr's *Lost Enlightenment* and Christopher de Bellaigue's *The Islamic Enlightenment*, the writers make it amply clear that they could never see eye-to-eye with a faithful and devout Muslim (who is invariably an enemy of rationality and intellectual progress). They cannot conceive

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[20] Dockrilll, Peter. "China Just Overtook The US in Scientific Output For The First Time." *ScienceAlert*, January 23, 2018, https://www.sciencealert.com/china-just-overtook-us-in-scientific-output-first-time-published-research (retrieved March 5, 2018).

of someone as intelligent as themselves (or God forbid, more intelligent) being a faithful Muslim.

Caught between Western discussions of often imaginary Muslims are actual, living and breathing Muslims who are experiencing no crisis, who are happy to engage in intellectual pursuits, and who while respecting the religious scholars, do not take them seriously when what they say goes against reason and conscience. Are Muslim doctors systematically avoiding intellectual inquiry because of Ash'arite indoctrination? This is such an incredibly outlandish thought that it would make most Muslims laugh. Are Muslim parents systematically forbidding their children from reading Western classics and studying the humanities at Western universities? No. They see no conflict between intellectual inquiry and Islam because to them there is no conflict, and it is their opinion that matters; it is they who make Islam's history.

Imaginary Muslims live in Muslim "no-go zones", do not read except strict religious literature, do everything the scholars tell them, and keep their women in cages. Real Muslims live wherever they want, read whatever they like, are respectful but inwardly skeptical toward the religious scholars and treat their women according to whatever their human instincts and cultures demand. It is time that we started considering real Muslims in our discussions of Islam. Imaginary Muslims need to be taught reason, rationality and humanism. Actual Muslims do not—they have already embraced these ideas and integrated them into their own lives. In just a single century the Islamic world's scientific output has increased by orders of magnitude, nearly all Muslim families have started to send their children to secular universities that have popped up all over the Muslim lands, and almost all Muslim countries have adopted some form of constitutional democracy. This, I believe, is sufficient progress for just one century.

Harmful theology?

The Ash'arites (represented by al-Ghazālī and others) said that God is capable of willing anything. Reilly thinks this shows a dangerous moral relativism within Islam, since it tells us that God's nature is totally arbitrary.

But this is fantastical nonsense; a Muslim cannot perform the obligatory prayer without referring to God as *the Gracious, the Merciful*, multiple times, amounting to a minimum of 36 times a day. Can a theological idea that the majority of Muslims have never even heard of[21] somehow override this consistent emphasis on God's attributes of grace and mercy?

Reilly writes that the elimination of cause and effect "makes prediction impossible". He refers to the case of certain Islamic scholars getting weather forecasts banned between 1983-1984 as evidence. But his evidence actually takes away from his thesis; even in a traditional and supposedly backward country like Pakistan, *the ulema could not get weather forecasts banned for more than a year*. The scholars won for one year and consistently lost every single year before and after that—despite Pakistan remaining very much a conservative Muslim country. The sensible conclusion is not that Muslims believe in irrationalist nonsense, but that they reject nonsense even if it comes from their religious scholars.

The Safavids and Qajars were not Ash'arites, they were in fact Shia who maintained respect for the opposing rationalist Mu'tazilite tradition, yet they were no more open to intellectual inquiry than the Ash'arite Ottomans. Additionally, today Ash'arite Sunni countries like Egypt,

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[21] In my discussions of Ash'arite theology with Muslims, I have found that they find it very unsettling and outlandish, since it goes against the *normative* Islam they have learned throughout their lives; that God is just and kind.

Turkey and Malaysia are not behind non-Ash'arite Iran and Azerbaijan in science and intellectual inquiry. Both the past and the present show that Ash'arite theology is useless as a predictor of the openness or closedness of the Muslim mind.

If religious scholars abuse Islamic theology to attack common sense, Muslims will feel embarrassed that their religion has to be represented by such people. Reilly continually uses the excesses of certain minor sects and political groups in their support for unreasonable policies as proof for Ash'arite theology's extreme influence, despite the fact that the majority of Muslims consider these groups unrespectable and unworthy of attention. George Makdisi mentions an interesting case of theological abuse by a scholar:

> The Spanish grammarian Ibn Mada' (d. 592/1196) wrote a refutation of the concept of the regent (*'āmil: regens*) in grammar, on the basis that government belongs to God alone. The author, applying the Ash'ari theological view to grammar, denies the power of the regent on the basis that desinential inflections are really the result of God's acts; they are merely attributed (*kasb*) to man. Needless to say that this view had no success in the field of grammar.[22]

A person who views Islam as an anti-intellectual force will consider the above "typical" of Islam. But Makdisi, who understands the functioning of real-world Islamic societies, considers it "needless to say" that this absurd abuse of theology was not taken seriously by Muslims. The quoted anecdote does not show that Ash'arism had a negative influence on Muslim minds, it in fact shows the opposite; Muslims by and large do not accept nonsense even when dressed in the language of religion.

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[22] George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West: With Special Reference to Scholasticism*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990, 124.

It is tempting for an intellectual, especially a Westerner, to think of himself or herself as a knight in shining armor chosen to rid the Muslim world of its backwardness, chosen to bring the Muslims out of the darkness of faith into the light of reason. But such a person, if they were to go to cosmopolitan places like Cairo or Tehran, and if they were to have dinner at a devout cosmopolitan Muslim's home, will find that there is no need for the battering ram of reason and rationality they brought with themselves. The closed gates of the Muslim mind are an illusion; there are no gates. Look at the books sold on the streets of Cairo, Tehran or Baghdad. The openness of the Islamic world of today to ideas from around the world would shock medieval Islamic theologians (and medieval Christian theologians). Even in the Islamic theocracy of Iran the books of freethinkers like Avicenna and the latest Western bestsellers are not merely tolerated but celebrated. This alone should be sufficient to show that the idea of "closed" Muslim societies and minds is uninformed fantasizing.

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4. The Separation of Church and State

Islamic clerics, except for the cosmopolitan, intellectually-minded ones, in general recognize no limits to their own power; given the choice, many would love to have the power to censor books, films and newspapers and to decide what people are allowed to learn at universities. They would like to have the power to make the rulers and everyone else adhere to their version of Islamic law, and to force good morality on everyone, such as by forcing women to wear the hijab.

Some of these clerics will happily plunge their countries into cultural catastrophes with their good intentions. Are Muslims, therefore, not a threat to secular democratic societies, since their clerics have such totalitarian tendencies?

No, because clerics do not have any power whatsoever except what people give to them. In Islamic societies clerics are ordinary citizens just like everyone else, and their power wholly relies on their ability to persuade. The same applied to the Christian clerics of 19th century England. They preached, they wished for this and that to be made the law of the land, but by and large, people continued to do as they pleased.

In cosmopolitan Muslim societies, clerics function as legal references for matters of Islamic ritual and practice, and as spiritual guides for matters of the soul. When the dignitaries of a Muslim village try to work out an issue of governance, they do not go to the local imam to humbly request a judgment. Instead, they decide the matter between themselves, the way a British village might do. They may invite the local religious scholar or mullah as a respected public figure whose input is valued, but when it comes to executive power, *it is the village dignitaries who hold that power*, and they find the idea of giving this power to the local religious scholar or mullah absurd; they do not want some well-meaning but bookish equal to complicate their lives with his idealism.

There are rare cases of radical religious scholars entering a new community and wanting to drag it kicking and screaming into a new Islamic century. Such people are quickly shunned by the Muslim society, which considers such a man uncivil and unrespectable for not respecting the protocols of polite society. Successful and beloved religious leaders are those who integrate themselves into society. Such leaders are *necessarily* not radicals; their religious conceptual framework is contextualized within a larger cultural conceptual framework.

Despite the supposed separation between church and state in Christianity, we know that the Church held immense political power over the politics of Europe for centuries, deposing emperors, being involved in various wars and ruling vast swathes of land. Just because Jesus said "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" does not mean that Christians acted thus; they in fact acted opposite to it when it fit their interests. While Muslims do not always *intellectually* recognize the separation between mosque and state, *in practice*, Muslims have very strong ideas about the management of their countries, cities and villages, and when it comes to these issues of governance, they consider religious scholars their equals; they are all civilians, having the same problems and working for the same project. A religious scholar is little more than a reference for religious texts, and

anything he says in a governance council can easily be challenged by others, whether through other religious ideas or through secular considerations.

A visitor to the Middle East may visit a village and find that it is as I described; the Muslims believe in civilian rule and practice it, and the opinions of religious scholars are considered no more authoritative than that of other civilians. This imaginary visitor may conclude that these people are not *true* Muslims. They may go to the next village only to find the same situation. They may see that in village after village and town after town, the Muslims have clear ideas about the limits of the authority of the religious scholars, even if they are too polite to voice it. This visitor may conclude that this country is not practicing Islam properly, so that they go to another country, and find the same scenario repeated. This situation can be quite taxing to the intellect. Muslims do not recognize a separation between church and state, yet there is a separation between mosque and state everywhere!

Some conclude that most Muslims have no idea what Islam asks of them, saying that we should be thankful that these Muslims only practice 90% of Islam so that they can maintain reasonably civilized societies. But the situation is quite easy to make sense of once we recognize that Muslims are humans, and that Islam is not a total conceptual framework. Muslims who have adopted the Islamic framework still maintain vast room in their heads for other concepts. And as humans with intellects and consciences, they are able to think of the management of their villages, towns and countries the way they think about the management of their businesses.

When it comes to questions of governance, they do not go to Islamic legal references to find out what to do, they, being *humans*, use their intellects and creativity to come up with solutions that are most likely to ensure the good of everyone involved. The sphere of religion and its scholars is law,

ritual and the afterlife. The much greater part of life is the sphere of the individual himself or herself and their culture.

You can be a vegan or an American nationalist and have common sense. In the same way, you can be a Muslim and have common sense. Yes, Islam provides far more definition (is a much larger conceptual framework) than veganism and American nationalism, but it in no way replaces our humanity. Islam is like a mentor that gives us general guidance *then lets us get on with our lives* instead of micro-managing every single instance of thought and action.

And the proof for that is in the thinking and action of Muslims throughout the world. Unless one believes, like certain pundits and militant Wahhabis, that most Muslims do not actually understand Islam or practice it correctly, you have to admit that this Islam that is lived by the majority of Muslims *is Islam*.

A religion is not what religious scholars, historians and spectators imagine it should be; a religion has to be encoded as a set of concepts in the brains of a population before it acquires any reality whatsoever. *That encoded religion, that conceptual framework in the minds of a population, is the religion*. A religious doctrine can only lead to action if it is encoded in people's minds.

Instead of saying that Islam is whatever the religious scholars make of it, as militant Wahhabis might say, we must instead admit that Islam is whatever a population is capable of *embodying*.

The theoretical, ivory tower Islam of Western and Eastern scholars and pundits belongs to an imaginary world. I call this Islam "fantasy Islam" because it is largely in the imagination, and its problems, such as Ash'arite doctrine and the lack of the separation between mosque and state, are imaginary problems having little bearing on *real-world* Muslims. *Actual* Islam is the Islam *embodied* by Muslims, and this real-world Islam is not

hampered by Ash'arite doctrine, and has ideas about governance that are quite similar to those seen elsewhere in the world.

The problem of the separation of church and state in Islam is largely an argument over theory; it is a war of ivory towers. *Embodied* Islam has shown that it is perfectly capable of living within a state that functions according to democratic principles, as in Malaysia, even if the religious scholars have not yet worked out just how this can be possible. The religious scholars are simply a small demographic within a much larger society that has ideas of its own and feels completely free to weigh, critique and qualify what the scholars advocate for.

It is the embodied, practiced Islam that makes the history of Islam, and it is this Islam that we should think about when we consider the effects that Islam may have in Europe or elsewhere as it interacts with systems not established by Muslims.

Sharia law

Due to fearmongering about Islamic law (the Sharia), some American states have gone to the length of "banning" it. It is assumed that since Islam asks us to implement Islamic law, this makes Muslims a danger to the established legal systems of the West. It seems right and just to prevent Muslims from bringing their heathen laws into the West.

A devout Muslim family uses Islamic law to find out right conduct in matters of diet, financial transactions, marriage, divorce and inheritance. Familial religious law is practiced to please God, always within a larger context of civil law. Muslims, as long as they are not forced to abandon the *consensual conduct* parts of their law (the parts that have nothing to do with the judiciary and can be privately implemented in any almost any country without breaking the law), are happy to live within a larger framework of civil law, whether in the East or the West.

Malaysia has constitutional law that applies to all citizens, Muslim and non-Muslim, and the majority of Muslims are not up in arms wanting to bring this system down.

It is true that most Muslim societies contain radicals who believe that all law should be abolished in favor of what they think is God's law. But such people are not taken seriously, the way Marxist radicals in the United States are not taken seriously when they call for the abolishment of private property. The Muslim radicals are a minor group of civilians within a much larger group that considers the legal system a matter of least concern as long as it guarantees them the liberty to practice their consensual conduct law that is concerned only with Muslims and their private and communal lives.

Radicals believe that a top-down approach to enforcing Islamic law will help create an Islamic utopia; people must be forced to follow Islamic law for their own good. Such people are counterbalanced by the Muslim majority that has a grassroots approach to Islamic law; if a country guarantees you the right to practice consensual conduct law, which is 99% of Islamic law for a devout Muslim, what remains is an issue of least concern, something similar to an idealistic political reform that few people have the time to worry about.

It is true that the fantasy Islam of the religious scholars and radicals poses a *theoretical* threat to the Western system. Thankfully, their ideas are limited to books and preaching that people do not take seriously, and unless Westerners funnel hundreds of millions of dollars to these radicals as they did to the Taliban and al-Qaeda, these radicals have no power to enforce their views; they are limited to airing their resentments, and people quickly get tired of them.

Muslims, being humans, appreciate the rights of other humans to exist as they see fit. Islam has not replaced their humanity. In the United States, the various Christian sects and political groups all have different ideas

about law and politics, but they have been able to work out their differences relatively amicably.

The majority of people, Muslim and non-Muslim, do not possess the intellectual sophistication necessary to think properly about legal reform, except in cases that touch their lives directly, such as laws legalizing or prohibiting the consumption of certain substances. In such cases they can zealously defend their legal ideas against their opposition. But when it comes to the entire legal system very few people are capable of intelligently speaking of overhauling it, and Muslims are no exception.

Muslims, by and large, similar to non-Muslims, leave the issue of legal reform to legal scholars, who are part of legislation systems sanctioned by their political systems, as in Malaysia. Letting an ordinary Muslim take charge of this system will likely lead to disaster, which is why the political systems that are largely *upheld by Muslims throughout the Muslim world* prevent such a thing from happening.

The legislature and judiciary operate with sophistication and take the interests of both Muslims and non-Muslims into account, rather than acting like militant Wahhabi activists wanting to force everyone to either declare their humanity by adopting the latest McJihad ideology or be exiled to ghettos and concentration camps.

I saw a map produced by a Christian organization that showed where the United States' 2000 mosques were concentrated. Underneath it, it was written "WHAT ARE THEY PLANNING?"

Even if we Muslims in the West come to live with the non-Muslims around us on amicable terms for the moment, who is to say that we will remain nice if one day we make up the majority in some countries or cities? Are we just biding our time, waiting until the day we can force Islam on everyone else?

While certain religious scholars and radicals, in their fantasy Islam, believe in top-down Islam, that forcing Islam on others (such as forcing American women to wear hijab) will do good in the end, the embodied Islam of Muslim populations has a grassroots view, in which people act by popular agreement. In a gathering of the dignitaries of a Hawrami village on the Iran-Iraq border,[1] if a religiously radical cleric states that it is God's law that women must veil their faces, and he states that he has bullet-proof evidence for this, he runs into the stone wall of what we can call the "voice of the people", whose women do not wear face veils. They are Muslims, yet their internal reasoning system is much larger, and epistemologically *above* the cleric's reasoning system. They may politely listen to the cleric while wishing fervently to leave the man's presence, and they will not plan to say anything to their wives and daughters about veils unless it is to joke about the cleric's absurd opinions.

The embodied Islam of these Muslims is a human meaning-making project that has been going on for generations. A *point of equilibrium* has been reached where the religion does not take more than it gives; it gives some form to life but does not stifle it. They pray and fast and adhere to various rituals and restrictions. But asking them to have their women veil their faces is taking it a step too far, to them it feels like asking them to take part in some ridiculous pantomime; they cannot envision their women veiling their faces, it feels foreign and unnatural.

To these Muslims, forcing a certain dress code on women feels as unnatural as it feels to an American, although both societies do have cultural dress codes (female toplessness is not tolerated in either society, for example). Cosmopolitan Muslims living in the West, like those Hawrami Muslims, have little energy to spare for worrying about what women wear. To them it is a matter of culture and personal choice. They may judge a woman for wearing something too skimpy, the way that non-

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[1] This is the area that my family comes from.

Muslim Americans judge her. But while a militant Wahhabi cleric from Saudi Arabia may think that a woman who shows her hair has gone half way toward becoming a harlot, these Muslims with their embodied Islam are perfectly capable of thinking of her within the context of *her* American culture, seeing that she hasn't done anything wrong. Being devout Muslims, the women among them may wear the hijab, but since in embodied Islam religion is a grassroots matter, there is no desire to force Islamic dress on others. It is the height of ignorance to listen to a radical cleric who says women must be forced to wear the hijab and consider him representative of Islam when 99% of Muslims disagree with him.

Western Muslims have no trouble navigating the Western world's public spheres. A woman who does not wear the hijab is not a stranger, a non-human, a semi-harlot as a militant Wahhabi may think. In the United States, the American Muslims I know have busy social lives that include many non-Muslims, such as friends from their college days. They do not treat these non-Muslims as somehow less human than Muslims. And whether a person is Muslim or non-Muslim is the *last* thing on their minds when they decide whether they should add them to their contact lists or social media friend lists.

If we are to think about what might happen to the legal system if Muslims become the majority population in a Western country, we have to avoid falling into the trap of using fantasy Islam to make predictions, we must instead use the often unstated and uncodified but all-too-real *embodied* Islam. We also should not listen to what Muslims *say*, but what they *do*. A Muslim may think it is expected of him or her to say that God's law should be the law of the land, while in their own lives they may not spare even a second to thinking of legal reform and may even break Islamic law themselves when it suits their desires.

What do the Western Muslims who embody Islam plan to do if their populations get large enough to enable them to use the democratic process to affect the legal system?

They are not planning anything, since they are not radicals who think they can usher in a utopia with a law or two. The majority of Muslims are *not interested* in the legal system and its reform. While militant Wahhabis look forward to overthrowing Western legal systems, the Muslim majority, similar to the rest of the populations of the West, do not espouse utopian ideas about remaking society and are happy enough to get on with their lives unmolested.

Militant Wahhabis and Marxist radicals believe that no sea of blood is too great to wade through if it can help achieve utopia. Most humans, whether Muslim, Christian or irreligious, do *not* share in that vision. It is enough of a blessing for there to be peace and stability.

But even if the average Muslim is not interested in the law, there is still the issue of what Muslim legal scholars and politicians might do once they find their way into the system.

Everyday fearmongering about the Sharia consists of "exposing" a few areas of Islamic law that sound barbaric and unconscionable. Isn't there a danger that Muslim legal scholars will want to make Islamic laws parts of Western law?

The danger of this happening is infinitesimal, because Muslim legal scholars are not radicals; they are sophisticated thinkers who are well aware of the challenges of making Islamic law interface with secular law. Malaysia's solution is to have constitutional law that applies to all citizens, and Islamic law that applies only to Muslims.

Presently, five Malaysian states have laws criminalizing apostasy. It shows insecurity about Islam that religious scholars believe apostasy should be punished. They think Islam should function like a mafia that one is allowed to join, but that one cannot leave. Throughout the Islamic world, people freely abandon Islam, such as by stopping carrying out religious duties and not adhering to religious restrictions. As long as they do not speak up too loudly, they are left alone. This is not ideal, and there is good

reason to hope that religious freedom will be integrated into Islamic law in the 21st century due to the existence of a large amount of support for this among Muslim intellectuals and certain religious scholars, such as Mahmud Shaltut, chief religious authority of Egypt from 1958 to 1963.

Ali Gomaa, who held the same office from 2003 to 2013, stated that Muslims have the right to abandon Islam, and that apostasy should only be punished if it "endangers society". His position represents important progress toward solving the apostasy issue, although his reservation regarding apostasy that may "endanger" society leaves great room for legal overreach. What he appears to mean is that as long as a person does not work to cause others to leave Islam, they themselves should be free to leave. This shows a condescending attitude toward a person's rights, but the fact that even religious scholars are supporting tolerance toward apostasy is a sign of immense progress within the Islamic scholarly community.

If people are allowed to leave Islam, then Islamic law becomes part of society's consensual conduct. People who accept to submit to such laws when they have the option to leave Islam naturally state by this that they find sufficient value in Islam to find these laws acceptable. If we consider Muslims worthy humans whose meaning-making is valid, then we would not want to deny them the right to have their own system that applies to themselves, as long as it does not overreach its limits.

How can we be sure that Muslim legal scholars will not force a rigid and inhuman Islamic system on everyone once they get the chance? We can know that because they are humans. Because they practice embodied Islam rather than fantasy Islam. Look anywhere in the Muslim world (except Wahhabi Saudi Arabia) and you will find that the judiciary and legislature are in the hands of Muslims with very sophisticated ideas about the law and with familiarity and appreciation for Roman and French law. They often have PhD degrees from Western universities. The constitution-making process in Malaysia and Indonesia made ample

reference to European constitutions and the issue of religious freedom was seriously considered, for example.[2] A caricature of what a Muslim legislature looks like would be old men reading the Quran and medieval religious literature and making laws without any concern for reason and conscience. Meanwhile, *real* Muslim legislatures are operated by intelligent and sophisticated people.[3] Which one is true Islam, the one imagined, or the one seen in the real world?

A Westerner who thinks as a tribalist, dealing with Muslims and their intentions with extreme skepticism, will naturally never like the idea of any involvement of Muslims with the legal or political system, and will feel threatened by the thought of any growth in the Muslim population and the concurrent increase in political and legislative power that comes with it.

A Westerner who thinks as a humanist, seeing that intelligent and educated Muslims are also humanists, will see that they share they work for the same project. If we can envision Muslims, or at least *some* Muslims, as humanists, it does not require any stretch of the imagination to expect them to act honorably, kindly and with empathy toward the non-Muslims around them. If we see each other as humans, and there is not a tribalist ideology blocking our empathy for each other, then there is nothing surprising about us respecting each other and working for a project that maximizes the happiness of both Muslims and non-Muslims.

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[2] See Dian A. H. Shah, *Constitutions, Religion and Politics in Asia*: *Indonesia, Malaysia and Sri Lanka,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

[3] Such as the Egyptian legal scholar Abd al-Razzaq al-Sanhuri, mastermind of the Egyptian Civil Code and the Iraqi Civil Code, which drew amply on American, French, and Islamic law. He was, naturally, criticized by Islamic scholars for not basing all his thinking on Islamic law, and as a devout Muslim, I do not necessarily agree with all of his thinking. But he is representative of a real *Muslim* legal scholar making sense of a complex world. See Guy Bechor*, The Sanhuri Code, and the Emergence of Modern Arab Civil Law (1932 to 1949)*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007.

Occasionally Muslims are polled about their views of the law, asked questions like "Do you support Sharia law?" or "Do you support implementing Sharia law?" or "Do you consider Sharia law superior to Western law?" and various similar questions that are practically designed to entrap Muslims into saying something that makes them sound like foreign invaders, and certain sections of the West's media run away with these polls: "MUSLIMS TO OVERTHROW COMMON LAW", playing on the tribalist, xenophobic tendencies of some citizens.

If we were to acquire a sociologically sophisticated view of Muslims, differentiating between fantasy Islam and embodied Islam, and recognizing that Muslims are humans and operate within a much larger cultural framework than mere religion, we get a very different picture of what an increase of Muslims in the West might mean. I do not support a naively optimistic view of Muslims. I do not expect most Muslims (and most Christians) to be humanists.

But looking at the dynamics of Muslim societies, it is seen quite clearly that it is the Muslim intelligentsia, who *are* often humanists, who matter most when it comes to matters of law and public policy. It is they who end up as journalists, politicians and law-makers. The radicals, the ideological tribalists, make up a minority who have little power over actual Muslim societies, so that the damage they can do is often very limited.[4]

This dynamic can be seen in the Islamic societies of the United States and Britain, where influential Muslims are almost invariably well-educated humanists like Tariq Ramadan, Hamza Yusuf, Yasmin Mogahed and Yasir Qadhi, and where radicals are limited to venting their anger on Internet blogs that few people read, and much of their spleen, as would be expected, is directed at other Muslims.

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[4] Except in cases where there is some (often Western) power sponsoring them, as has been discussed already. Also See Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, New York: The Free Press, 2001, 68.

Like any Westerner, I wouldn't look forward to having my life and liberty in the hands of a randomly chosen group of Muslims, regardless of their piety. I would want people of intelligence and sophistication to be in charge of legislation and justice. And so it is in the Islamic world.

5. The Muslim Plan for the World

It is undeniable that some Muslims, including religious scholars, look forward to one day there existing a new Islamic empire that represents "true" Islam and that brings back the glory of the olden days. As is usual with fantasy Islam, the thinking is top-down, the caliphate has to be established first, *then* good things will come.

This is the thinking that drives Islamist political parties, who believe in acquiring power *first*, *then* doing good with it. Fortunately, most Muslims do not find their fantasy land ideologies practical or interesting, therefore throughout the world the history of Islamism has been one of perpetual failure.

Among Muslims there are also ideas about the coming of a "Mahdi" who will establish some holy kingdom before the world ends. Similar to the way Robert R. Reilly thinks that Ash'arite doctrines are causing a closing of Muslim minds, there are Western books that study Islamic End Days literature and make sweeping claims about Muslims, their thinking and their potential future behavior. They ignore that almost all of that literature is open to doubt, including the coming of the "Mahdi", since it

is not based on the Quran.[1] It largely relies on dubious and likely fabricated materials. In the view of many Muslims, End Days literature is entertainment for the masses rather than an intellectually compelling framework to base one's thinking on.

The truth of the matter is that among Muslims, there is little agreement over what a Muslim's priorities should be and what they should be working for. Like the Christians of Victorian England, they are happy enough to just get along. This is good, because, like the Christian society of Victorian England, it means there is little room for radical ideologies. Life is peaceful and stable. People do not expect magic solutions to their problems.

Islam is a democratic religion in that everyone is a civilian. Religious scholars, intellectuals, free thinkers, radicals, conservatives, modernists, ultra modernists, feminists, Western spectators and Western saviors all vie for control of the heart and soul of Islam to reform it, to drag it kicking and screaming into the new century, to open its eyes, its mind, to elevate it, to secularize it, to stop it from having such a hold over people's minds. All of them largely fail to recognize the limits of their power over human nature, this human nature that everyone tries to mold, unaware that it is a sovereign, a self-molder.

A few months before writing these words I randomly happened upon an online article by Claude Polin, a French professor at Paris-Sorbonne University that I did not read, except for its first paragraph, which said:

> What used to be Western civilization is indeed threatened today with progressive extinction at the hands of Muslim immigration,

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[1] Even such a prominent religious scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi has voiced the opinion that the "Mahdi" is a fabricated addition to Islam that has no basis in reliable sources. See Yusuf al-Qaradawi, "Al-ḥalaqa al-thāniya: Iḥtilāl al-masjid al-ḥarām*", al-Qaradawi.net*, October 10, 2011, http://qaradawi.net/life/8/948-2011-10-10-13-56-57.html (accessed via the Internet Archive on December 24, 2018).

which considers the West as a worthless relic of a useless past, at best, or, in the minds of Islam's more or less hidden leaders, as a hostile multisecular force to be destroyed, either by sheer violence or by submerging it under a demographic tsunami.[2]

His phrase "Islam's more or less hidden leaders" is such a sad misconstruction of Islam that it is almost charming.

Islam has no leaders, and this is its great strength and weakness. Even if all of the Muslims in the world were wiped out by some calamity, and the world continued without Islam for 500 years, all it takes is for some random person to discover a Quran for them to restart Islam anew.

Islam does not work to establish God's Kingdom on Earth. Islam is best envisioned as similar to yoga; a person can carry it out daily and expect health benefits from it, but it does not promise to magically solve their problems, turn humans into angels or make this world other than what it is.

Muslims, like bees, are a life form that gives shape to the world, only to go on to die. There is no bee master plan to turn the whole world into one big hive, it is sufficient honor for a bee to take part in the dance of a bee's existence, and this dance leads to complex and interesting hives that are not the product of a master plan, but the product of each bee following its instincts.

Those who envision secret Muslim plans and societies should actually be far more worried about Islam the way it is. A Leaderless, plan-less movement cannot be fought. There are no leaders to bribe or kill, no plans to obstruct. A person has believed the negative propaganda about

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[2] Claude Polin, "Love Thyself: The West's Fatal Flaw." *Chronicles Magazine*, October 5, 2017,
https://www.chroniclesmagazine.org/2017/November/41/11/magazine/article/10841894/ (retrieved January 28, 2018).

Muslims may despairingly wonder what one can do about Muslims. Discovering a hidden organization of shadowy Muslims who have no good intentions toward the West and prosecuting its leadership will give one a nice sense of accomplishment. But there is no such accomplishment to be had.

The best way to envision the functioning and thinking of Muslim societies and their ideas about the world is to compare them with late 19th century English society. This society was Christian, yet Christianity was considered nowhere sufficient to give society everything it needed of meaning and identity. It was a Christian society that looked outward. In that society, everyone probably had a relative who saw nothing wrong with bringing up religion in polite conversation, using it to propound how society should work and how people should behave. But most people considered such a person deficient in civility. This is not to say that those Christians did not let religion affect their lives. For them religion was an important part of their personal meaning-making projects and strongly affected their behavior, but they would have found it insulting to be considered "Christians" only, as if that said everything one needed to know about them.

The same applies to the Muslims I am describing. There is a reason why "Islamic" social media networks, magazines and newspapers almost all invariably fail. An "Islamic" alternative to Facebook sounds useless to Muslims (some, out of a sense of religious duty, may praise the idea while never actually wanting to use it). Muslim users of social media in the West almost all invariably have non-Muslims in their networks. An "Islamic" social media network narrows down the scope of their lives. It does not do justice to the complex cultural lives they lead.

The embodied Islam of Muslim populations, compared to the embodied Christianity of Christian populations, are extremely similar in their real-world consequences. When reading novels like *Pride and Prejudice*, I was always amazed at how *Islamic* the ways of thinking and behavior of the

characters were. Certainly my father did not drink wine like Mr. Bennet, but the social atmosphere is so similar to the social atmosphere of my Iranian Sunni background that I could have been reading a novel about a Muslim society. The same extends to later works by Christians, such as *The Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien and the Harry Potter novels by Rowling. There is nothing in the human fabric of these novels, in their ideas and ideals, that feel foreign to me. The characters in these novels could have been Muslim; "Islamizing" the novels would only cause minute aesthetic changes. For example, the people of Rohan would not drink wine when celebrating weddings.

J. K. Rowling, Dostoevsky and Shakespeare are bestselling authors in Iran, according to Adinehbook.com, one of Iran's major online booksellers.

Comparing cosmopolitan Muslim societies of today to the cosmopolitan Christian societies of the 19th century is a very fruitful exercise. If we focus on religious discourse among Muslims and compare that to religious discourse among Christians, we get the misleading idea that the two communities are fundamentally different. But if we look at the *embodied* Islam of today's cosmopolitan Muslims to the *embodied* Christianity of late 19th century England, we see two very similar societies whose differences are aesthetic rather than essential.

For a Westerner, it is of course not easy, and in fact often quite impossible, to get a true sense of the experience of embodied Islam. George Orwell writes:

> It is quite easy to be on terms of intimacy with a foreign 'intellectual', but it is not at all easy to be on terms of intimacy with an ordinary respectable foreigner of the middle class. How many Englishmen have seen the inside of an ordinary French bourgeois family, for instance? Probably it would be quite

impossible to do so, short of marrying into it. And it is rather similar with the English working class.[3]

Orwell beautifully sums up the difficulty in understanding the inner life of a foreign society, and it is this very same problem that has made it so difficult for Westerners to understand Islam. To understand Muslims, it is not sufficient merely to spend time in a Middle Eastern country. It is quite possible for a Westerner to spend a decade or more in an Oriental country only to go back home with nothing but a large bag of prejudices, as so many British colonial servants did.

Westerners who have the best understanding of Islam, as Orwell predicts above, are those who have married into Muslim families. Even Western converts to Islam can have highly inaccurate pictures of the functioning of Muslim societies. They can occasionally be observed on the Internet complaining about how none of the Muslims they meet act as the Muslims of their imaginations. It can take them quite a long time to come to terms with the fact that self-consciously religious people are always a minority whether in Muslim or Christian societies, and that most believers by and large judge things based on custom and do not often think to differentiate between what is religious and what is merely cultural.

A Westerner who wants to find out what will happen if the number of Muslims increases can look at the Muslim middle class of Cairo, Turkey, Tehran and Kuala Lumpur when they get the rare opportunity to do so and see how they conduct themselves. They are busy as intellectuals, researchers, scientists and professionals doing what they can to make the world a better place. Their daughters go to university, write books and read even more books. What is on their minds is not Islamic law and Islamic plans, it is solving the problems they see around them.

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[3] George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 186.

God's stewards

A faithful Muslim eager to live a useful life will naturally look in the Quran to find out if God has any pointers to give regarding what they should do with their lives. For radicals wishing to destroy society then rebuild it, the Quran is vexingly deficient when it comes to utopian ideas. A Muslim who carefully reads the Quran learns that a Muslim's purpose in life is to be God's steward. In a farming society, a steward is someone who takes care of a farm when the master is absent, for example when the master goes on a long journey abroad. Stewardship is the purpose of humanity:

> When your Lord said to the angels, "I am placing a steward [i.e. Adam] on Earth."[4]

> It is He who made you stewards on the earth, and raised some of you in ranks over others, in order to test you through what He has given you. Your Lord is Quick in retribution, and He is Forgiving and Merciful.[5]

> 13. We destroyed generations before you when they did wrong. Their messengers came to them with clear signs, but they would not believe. Thus We requite the sinful people. 14. Then We made you stewards on earth after them, to see how you would behave.[6]

> It is He who made you stewards on earth. Whoever disbelieves, his disbelief will recoil upon him. The disbelief of the disbelievers adds only to their Lord's disfavor of them. The disbelief of the disbelievers adds only to their perdition.[7]

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[4] The Quran, verse 2:30.

[5] The Quran, verse 6:165.

[6] The Quran, verses 10:13-14.

[7] The Quran, verse 35:39.

'O David, We have made you a steward in the land, so judge between the people with justice, and do not follow desire, lest it diverts you from God's path. Those who stray from God's path will have a painful punishment, for having ignored the Day of Account.'[8]

The Arabic word for 'steward' is *khalīfa*, which is often translated as "successor", "deputy" and "vicegerent" in translations of the Quran. The word "steward", however, expresses its meaning better. A Muslim is a steward who looks after the earth in the apparent absence of its master. A steward cares for the land and manages it for the sake of the master, taking the master's wishes into account, but having great freedom to use his or her own creativity.

Muslims, as God's stewards, do what they can to promote what is good and to reduce what is evil and harmful. And this means for every Muslim to do what is best with what they have wherever they are. Every single good act done in this world is an act of stewardship, and thus an act of worship, whether it is the planting of a tree, helping a friend in need, or donating money to a scientific research institute with the aim of making the world a better place. To make the world a better place, to leave it better than you found it, is to be a steward, and by extension this is what it means to be a Muslim.

In Islam, there is no utopian goal to achieve. Even if we create a worldwide caliphate that rules the world for the next 500 years, it too will perish like all the caliphates before it. Whether we rule or are ruled, whether we are weak or strong, it does not matter; what matters is to do good with the time given us.

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[8] The Quran, verse 38:26.

The Quran teaches a long view of history that is best expressed in the thinking of the elves in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels. The elven lord Elrond says:

> I have seen three ages[9] in the West of the world, and many defeats, and many fruitless victories.

The Quran's long view of history teaches that the end never justifies the means. Even if we establish what we suppose to be a state that best represents God's wishes, *any evil we do in the process will be counted against us*. This is a crucial moral teaching that is opposed to the utopianism of Marxists and various other man-made ideologies that always justify evil and murder if it is done for a supposed greater good. The Quran, in fact, goes to an extreme length to teach its lesson that the end never justifies the means:

> Because of that We ordained for the Children of Israel: that whoever kills a person—unless it is for murder or corruption on earth—it is as if he killed the whole of mankind; and whoever saves it, it is as if he saved the whole of mankind. Our messengers came to them with clarifications, but even after that, many of them continue to commit excesses in the land.[10]

Killing an innocent person is the same as killing all of humanity. There is a mathematics of infinity in this; the life of a human is of infinite worth, meaning that no expected good, no matter how great, not even the founding of the world's greatest and happiest empire, justifies the killing of a *single* innocent person.

I can think of no greater affirmation of the transcendence of the human individual and no greater obstruction to Marxist-style utopianism. The verse's other teaching that saving a single life is like saving all of humanity,

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[9] In Tolkien's legendarium, these ages span many thousands of years.
[10] The Quran, verse 5:32.

is equally important. A glorious victory that is accomplished partly through evil might be of little worth compared to uplifting a *single* human soul.

The Quran's view of history is wise and sad. It deflates glory by teaching that it always comes to an end. It deflates human arrogance by teaching that nothing we achieve will last forever except the good we do that God records for us. It does not teach hopelessness, however. A steward has duties that he or she must carry out, and that means they must try to be the best they can be wherever they are. It teaches to work for good but to not get carried away by this, like it happens to so many, by teaching that hurting even a single human is a grave sin no matter what we hope to accomplish.

Westerners who learn that there are positive and constructive interpretations of Islam, and that there also are negative and dangerous interpretations, go on to worry about the bad interpretations taking over. Am I not just one moderate voice among a sea of radicals? What defenses do Muslim societies have against radicalism? We have a very strong defense, and that is our humanity. Muslims, being humans, are blessed with reason and conscience. Coming into contact with non-Muslims, they are capable of appreciating the humanity in them and empathizing with them. No Muslim I know will happily watch a Christian girl get tortured, they would in fact do their best to stop it. Their empathy for this girl is not due to theological principles. They do not need to go look it up in an Islamic law reference whether empathy for Christian girls is allowed. It is due to their being human and their not believing in a tribalist ideology that dehumanizes outsiders.

Our humanity is sufficient for us as Muslims to make us good and kind people who are not intent on turning this world into Hell. Our history and our present shows this. Radicals like militant Wahhabis have never been able to take charge except with the support of powerful sponsors, such as the Saudi family in Saudi Arabia and the CIA in Afghanistan.

Muslims, of course, are not paragons of virtue. They are subject to all of the human weaknesses and vices. But they are humans who also embody the same morality that built Western civilization. In Tolkien's *Return of the King*, Gandalf says:

> But I will say this: the rule of no realm is mine, neither of Gondor nor any other, great or small. But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again in days to come. For I also am a steward. Did you not know?

The character of Gandalf represents what an ideal Muslim would be in this world. Gandalf arrives at Middle Earth (where the story takes place), spends his entire time improving, protecting, educating, not expecting anything in return, never seeking power, and expecting to one day leave it all behind, as he does at the end of the story. I like to use the example of Gandalf because he is a Western character created by a Christian man. This highest ideal that this Christian man could conceive of gets amazingly close to the highest ideal of Islam, showing the closeness of Islam and Christianity once we can get beyond technicalities and see what truly drives Muslims/Christians. Tolkien's *embodied* Christianity is very similar to my embodied Islam.

A Muslim is like a steward who watches over a farm with a sense of duty, knowing that he or she is not its master and that one day he or she will leave it. This stewardship does not seek mastery. It does not condescendingly look down on the world, wanting to control it and remake it for the benefit of the unwashed peasants, like Marxism does. It rather approaches humanity with a sense of respect, honoring it, being considerate toward it, recognizing the dignity of its own meaning-making projects then wanting to do good where it can, without force, but with

gentle persuasion. The steward treats his or her fellow humans as equals, claiming no authority beyond speaking the truth.

A Muslim, unlike Gandalf, is denied the pleasure of considering themselves crucial to the course of history. History does not depend on my success or failure. Even if I fail, even if all my works are lost, God is capable of raising another person like me in very little time the way he measures time. This denies us the pleasure of self-importance, while bestowing upon us the pleasure of knowing that we cannot fail. God is already in charge, so nothing we can do can add to his power.

Rebels, radicals, revolutionaries and fundamentalists are closet aristocrats, as was recognized by Frank Herbert.[II] They patronizingly look down on the masses, invalidating the meaning-making project of ordinary mortals, considering themselves the chosen elite who see through the mirages that the gullible masses cannot see through, and who will remake the world in their own image. They always create a feudal mini-aristocracy with themselves at the top, making decisions for everyone else, always with everyone else's good in mind, of course. A Marxist radical has no plans for being a peasant in Siberia, contributing in their little way to the communist project. They want to be in Moscow at the heart of things, part of a celebrated, powerful and conceitedly benevolent elite that decides things for everyone else. Those who oppose the revolution *of course* should be shot and wiped out like insects, it is for the greater good.

A Muslim steward is exactly what the above are not. A defining characteristic of Muslim stewardship is the non-seeking of power, which is a very morally demanding requirement. We like to think that we need to gain power in order to do good. The Quran teaches to do good *right now*, without regard for power.

[II] See Frank Herbert, *The God Emperor of Dune*.

> Whoever seeks glory, then [let them know that] to God belongs all glory...[12]

All doers of good run the risk of becoming tyrants in the name of the greater good. It is very morally demanding to remain humble, to actually respect other humans and listen to them, when one thinks of themselves as a doer of God's will, one whose actions are sanctioned by the Transcendent. A Muslim, eager to do good and spread God's message, may fervently wish to increase the number of Muslims, which should help achieve some imagined utopia. But the Quran deflates these glorious hopes:

> Had your Lord willed, everyone on earth would have believed. Will you then compel people to become believers?[13]

> 6. Perhaps you may destroy yourself with grief, chasing after them, if they do not believe in this information. 7. [But] We made what is upon the earth an ornament for it, to test them as to which of them is best in conduct. 8. And We will turn what is on it into barren waste.[14]

The second passage quoted above, speaking to someone who is upset that the people around them refuse to live up to their expectations, reminds the reader that this world is a testing hall and that it will one day become a barren waste, so why be so eager, why let desire overcome you, even if it is desire to do good?

Being a doer of good also runs the risk of being a busybody who does more harm than good with their good intentions. The ideal steward gets beyond this too. By respecting other humans as sovereign meaning-makers, they have a humble approach that admits mistakes and claims no

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[12] The Quran, verse 35:10.

[13] The Quran, verse 10:99.

[14] The Quran, verse 18:6-8.

divine sanction or guidance. All power-seeking, glory-seeking and influence-seeking are shunned. If they deserve power, God will grant it, if and when he chooses. Stewards are the servants of an all-powerful master who is already in charge of the universe and who lacks nothing; a steward cannot do God any favors. God has zero need for the steward; rather, any role granted to the steward is a favor from God.

The above is an ideal that Muslims can hope to emulate, although most of them necessarily do not achieve it. And the majority of Muslims will likely not be able to describe their role in the above terms. A Muslim who reads the Quran dedicatedly is gently nudged along to recognize and avoid mistake after mistake until they form a vague modus operandi that is to some degree like that of a steward of God. They know that they should not be attached to wealth, to power, to results, always being reminded that this world will end sooner or later, always being told to be kind and forgiving and to do good deeds, and all of these slowly *narrow down the scope of possible behavior in the name of God*, so that a Muslim who is a dedicated follower of the Quran can, in most circumstances, know the pitfalls to avoid. Through years of falling, of making mistakes, of achieving fruitless victories, and of being reminded and taught by the Quran, a devout and religiously eager Muslim's character is slowly developed into that of a steward.

By learning all the things that a Muslim should *not* be, a Muslim learns what they should be. And along the way, they are offered various Gandalf-like characters in the Quran that they are encouraged to emulate. Gandalf, of course, being a divinely-sent guide who helps humanity then leaves, is almost certainly inspired by the Biblical/Quranic prophets.

All of the lovers of the Quran I have met have been kind, compassionate humanists who can appreciate the humanity even in those who disagree

with them and oppose them.[15] The effect of the Quran's teachings is very clear for those willing to see it. Extremism only results when the Quranic program is abandoned for a man-made program, often put forward by a prominent thinker who replaces the stewardship core of the Quran with a focus on seeking power in the name of the greater good.

Political Islam

To not seek power but try to do good, relying on God, will naturally feel naïve, especially for young people who are eager for action and glory. It may sound like nothing but foolishness to not want to seize the world and make it better, and certainly this is how some will interpret these views about God's stewards. But if there is a God, and if he is as he says he is in the Quran, then the steward's mode of behavior makes perfect sense. The Quran teaches that, when it comes to power, *the game is already over*. God is already in charge and he needs no favors. What he wants is just one thing:

> 1. Blessed is He in whose hand is the sovereignty, and Who has power over everything. 2. He who created death and life—to test you as to which of you is better in conduct. He is the Almighty, the Forgiving.[16]

We are in the presence of an all-powerful Mentor-King; while we cannot do him any favors, and while he already has total power, he is interested in seeing what we will do. He is interested in seeing us work toward the

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[15] One of the greatest lovers of the Quran in the 20th century was the Quran philosopher Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh Drāz, famous for his compassionate, humanistic worldview. See M. A. Draz, *The Moral World of the Qur'an*, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008. See also Aḥmad Muṣṭafā Faḍlīya (ed.), *Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh Drāz: Dirāsāt wa-Buḥūth bi-Aqlām Talāmidhatih wa-Muʿāṣirīh*, Cairo and Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 2007.

[16] The Quran, verses 67:1-2.

highest ideals we can imagine. This world is nothing but God's factory for producing humans who worked toward those ideals.

To a person who does not believe in the metaphysical, a belief system that rejects power may sound self-defeating. How can one hope to do good if one lacks power? If the metaphysical did not exist, it would naturally make sense to seek power, to act according to the physical laws of the world, including sociological laws.

But if the metaphysical exists, if the God of the Quran is a true God, and if one believes in him, then it makes sense to take him at his word; to do as he says, rather than as our human desires would have us do. As Muslims who believe in the Quran, we believe that all power already belongs to God, therefore what must be sought is what is with God, not what is with people.

The ideal of the steward explains Islam's difficult relationship with politics. All party politics is about seeking power; every political party's founding myth is "We will gain power then do good with it!" The point of a political party is to pool the wealth, talents and, in short, power of a large group of people to make it more likely for them to overcome other powers.

An ideal steward does not seek power; therefore he or she cannot be part of a political party without suffering inner moral conflict. To them politics is a game for power-hungry, pathological personalities, or naïve do-gooders.

While Islamists have a top-down view, where they have to be at the top to force goodness on everyone else, Muslim populations have a grassroots view, the view that if everyone were good and wholesome inside, the country's leadership would be good and wholesome. The example of Muhammad and Saladin support this grassroots view, and so does the Quran:

God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is within themselves/their souls.[17]

God has promised those of you who believe and do righteous deeds, that He will make them established stewards on earth, as He made those before them established stewards, and He will establish for them their religion—which He has approved for them—and He will substitute security in place of their fear...[18]

128. Moses said to his people, "Seek help in God, and be patient. The earth belongs to God. He gives it in inheritance to whomever He wills of His servants, and the future belongs to the righteous." 129. They said, "We were persecuted before you came to us, and after you came to us." He said, "Perhaps your Lord will destroy your enemy, and make you established stewards in the land; then He will see how you behave."[19]

The last passage with Moses shows the opinion of one of the Quran's main characters when it comes to politics. He calls his followers to be patient and tells them that God may choose to one day make them powerful. He does not tell them to seek power or to be up in arms against the Pharaoh. Muhammad's life shows the same pattern. Despite years of persecution, abuse and torture, his followers patiently took it all without striking back and without organizing into a mob or militia. In the end, God's promise came true the way it came true for Moses' people; Muhammad was invited to become the ruler of the city-state of Medina, and from there a worldwide power was established, that was soon to be corrupted and turned into an instrument of evil and injustice, again, similar to the story of the people of Moses, who, no sooner had they been

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[17] The Quran, from verse 13:11.

[18] The Quran, verse 24:55.

[19] The Quran, verses 7:128-129.

established in Canaan than they started to worship other gods and engage in evil.

None of the prophets mentioned in the Quran took part in a power struggle as part of furthering their message. Moses did not try to stir up a rebellion against Pharaoh despite the hundreds of thousands of Hebrews who probably took him seriously. The prophets try to effect reform within the existing power structure, through persuasion rather than force. They often attract a following of largely poor and powerless people. They are laughed at and are threatened with expulsion. The prophet and his followers endure until God grants them refuge and safety, such as in the form of Muhammad's migration to Medina. Only *then* he had to be involved in politics.

While the Quran's teachings and its long view of history strongly discourage political power-seeking, they do not discourage *political activism*. The great stewards of the Quran were people who spoke up against evil and injustice and tried to make things better. In fact, it appears that part of the function of a steward is to be a gadfly to the strong and powerful:

> And to Median, [We sent] their brother Shuayb. He said, "O my people, worship God; you have no god other than Him. A clear proof has come to you from your Lord. Give full measure and weight, and do not cheat people out of their rights, and do not corrupt the land once it has been set right. This is better for you, if you are believers." "And do not lurk on every path, making threats and turning away from the path of God those who believe in Him, seeking to distort it. And remember how you were few, and how He made you numerous. So note the consequences for the corrupters."…The arrogant elite among his people said, "O Shu'ayb, We will evict you from our town, along with those who

believe with you, unless you return to our religion." He said, "Even if we are unwilling?"[20]

We meet this same steward in another passage where we meet the only instance of the word "reform" in the Quran:

> 88. He said, "O my people, have you considered? What if I have clear evidence from my Lord, and He has given me good livelihood from Himself? I have no desire to do what I forbid you from doing. I desire nothing but reform, as far as I can. My success lies only with God. In Him I trust, and to Him I turn."
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> 89. "O my people, let not your hostility towards me cause you to suffer what was suffered by the people of Noah, or the people of Hud, or the people of Saleh. The people of Lot are not far away from you."
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> 90. "And ask your Lord for forgiveness, and repent to Him. My Lord is Merciful and Loving."
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> 91. They said, "O Shuayb, we do not understand much of what you say, and we see that you are weak among us. Were it not for your tribe, we would have stoned you. You are of no value to us."[21]

Shuayb is such an annoyance to the power elite of Median that they threaten to stone him to death. His ideas about financial reform are met as follows, which is one of the rare places in the Quran where we see sarcasm used:

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[20] The Quran, verses 7:85, 86 and 88.
[21] The Quran, verses 11:88-91.

> They said, "O Shuayb, does your prayer command you that we abandon what our ancestors worshiped, or doing with our wealth what we want? You are the one who is intelligent and wise."[22]

Muslim stewards, who are meant to *emulate* these stewards before them,[23] are called, through following their example, to be political activists and reformers *without* being power-seekers. It is perhaps every politician's wish to be allowed to do whatever they think is good without being taken to task for it, and for most politicians, this often means doing evil in the name of the greater good, something that is wholly rejected by Islamic morality. Muslims are taught to think that all power belongs to God. This teaches them to not be intimidated by powerful people. A steward looks at a king or dictator and sees them become a footnote in the history of such and such 100 years from now. It is an annoyance and a challenge for the elite oligarchy of a nation to not be taken seriously; for their wealth and power to be devalued and their authority rejected whenever they justify evil in the name of good. And that is exactly what the ideal steward does.

The ideal stewards are also perhaps the ideal citizens of a democracy, because they hold politicians to the highest standards and take them to account whenever they deviate. They cannot be silenced or intimidated because they do not take the world and its powers seriously. They cannot be bought with promises of wealth and power because they reject these things, believing that the wealth and power that God grants is better. And since they themselves do not partake in the game of politics, they have no attachment that blinds them. They critique everyone and speak their

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[22] The Quran, verse 11:87.

[23] The Quran, in reference to the prophets who came before Muhammad, such as Shuayb, has this to say: 'Those are they to whom We gave the Book, and wisdom, and prophethood. If these reject them, We have entrusted them to others who do not reject them. Those are they whom God has guided, so follow their guidance. Say, 'I ask of you no compensation for it; it is just a reminder for all mankind.' (The Quran, verses 6:89-90)

minds freely, considering none too holy or dangerous to be critiqued. Ideal stewards are threats to established power whether they are in a Muslim or non-Muslim country, unless the power is truly benign and benevolent. In Saudi Arabia they would criticize the excesses of the Saudi family, the evils of Saudi's servility to the United States, the evils and corruptions seen in their own neighborhoods and towns. In the United States, instead of acting like an interest group that allies itself with whatever politician who promises Muslims good things, they judge everything the way God would judge them. A politician who tries to woo Muslims but has a record of supporting unethical corporations will be judged by that record by a true steward.

The Muslim population, like any population, is subject to manipulation and intimidation. The above only describes the *ideal* steward that the pious and intelligent among the Muslims try to emulate.

While political power-seeking is rejected by the best Muslims, political activism is not. A Muslim can be involved in all kinds of activities meant to reduce corruption and create reform, as long it does not involve power-seeking. Instead of creating the American Muslim Party that seeks to gain power to do good, they donate their money to institutes that seek to hold the government accountable, or they themselves work as writers, journalists and activists working for various political causes.

Turkey's Muslims support Recep Tayyip Erdoğan because he is a charismatic personality who promises to work toward empowering the Turks. The fantasy Islam view would seek to find in Erdoğan an embodiment of Islam, then it would seek to generalize this; *this* is what Islam looks like if it were to be allowed to gain power.

In reality, had Turkey been an entirely Christian country, an Erdoğan would still have been very much possible; a populist who seeks power in the name of nationalism and caters to the religious feelings of the population is nothing special. This is what any clever populist would do,

and this is what many Eastern European leaders do to attract Christian voters.

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood has tried to spread its ideology of seeking power in the name of the greater good to the rest of the world, yet despite the fact that it has a moderate Sunni ideology, its history has been a history of perpetual failure. Even though its various offshoots claim to have nothing in mind but the betterment of Muslims, Muslims, being humans with independent and skeptical minds, judge them as humans do. The Islamist parties may claim to have the best ideas about how society should function, their ranks may even contain certain individuals admired for their piety and sincerity, yet due to their politicized nature, the average Muslim feels uncomfortable associating with them; there is no compelling reason to do so, and the existence of hierarchies of power within these organizations makes them feel dirty to Muslims. Even if a Muslim has a positive view of them, joining them feels like losing one's independence and freedom, since one immediately becomes subservient to the party's power structure.

The translation of the Western institution of a political party into an "Islamic" one leads to inherent contradictions and dysfunctions. The Quran teaches an extreme egalitarianism where no person is superior to any other and where every person retains the right to critique any other. The Islamic political party invariably clashes with this framework of thought; for a self-respecting intellectual to join them is to degrade himself or herself. One automatically becomes associated with a power structure full of individuals of questionable sincerity (even if a few are known to be sincere). This attachment to this structure is a loss of intellectual independence and a loss of the God-given freedom of the soul, and it always feels too similar to associating oneself with the rich and powerful for it to feel elevating, regardless of one's intentions for joining the party.

In the Kurdistan region of Iraq (population over 5 million), there are multiple moderate Islamist parties seeking power, the main one

considering itself the Kurdish branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite the fact that the region is a Muslim-majority, Sunni-majority region, these parties have had little success, even among devout Muslims.

When it comes to an Islamist party, the individuals working for it are judged individually. Some of them are the butts of jokes, others are admired. And to devout Muslims, joining the party feels like taking part in some ridiculous pantomime, the way joining a political party feels to many Americans and Europeans. It feels especially degrading to an intelligent person who values their own independence of mind. They may, of course, vote for an Islamist candidate in a local election if they consider him or her to be sincere and worthy, or if they consider him or her the lesser evil compared to other candidates.

The example of the failure of political Islam to gain ground in Iraqi Kurdistan has been repeated everywhere else in the Islamic world. When the Islamic world is given a chance to function on its own without foreign interference, as in Malaysia, what comes about is a very Western-style civilization where Islamists have little reach. Muslims, rather than giving into Islamist hysteria, remain culturally conservative, respecting their institutions and shunning radicals.

Iran had a democratic government that was overthrown by the CIA and British intelligence.[24] A violent and incompetent military dictator was reinstated, whose forced secularization project and all-powerful police state engendered sufficient hatred and disgust among the Iranian population that they were glad to accept any alternative. The Islamist Ayatollah Khomeini exploited this opportunity, attracting both the religious and the secular through professing respect for the principles of

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[24] See Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*, New York: Macmillan, 2007.

democracy and religious freedom.[25] After gaining power, Khomeini quickly moved to secure his position, making himself absolute ruler, with direct control of the military and the political process.[26]

It would be a mistake to see in Iran an expression of the natural tendencies of a Muslim people. Iran is what happens when a country is made the plaything of Western powers that support a despotic dictator and his police state. Khomeini appeared at the right time and was given constant coverage by the West's media during his stay in France, helping convince the Iranians that he was their natural leader against the tyrannical Shah.[27] Khomeini did not show his true colors until months after the founding of the revolutionary government, and for a few years into his rule, the pretense of true democracy was maintained.

I consider the failure of political Islam a good thing despite the fact that I consider many of the people involved in it good people, and despite the fact that I believe them when they say they have the best of intentions, because political Islam *always* ends up being a vehicle for oppression if it achieves its goal of gaining power.

To clarify the problem with political Islam, let's think of an imaginary Muslim village in which there is an Islamist who wants to create his own political party. The Islamist thinks, 'If only *everyone* joined this party, we'd be able to do so much good!' This thought, in itself, is dehumanizing toward his fellow humans, because it ignores the fact that many among his fellow villagers could have powerful human reasons for not associating with him and his friends, and for not wanting to belong to a power structure that operates in parallel to the one already in force (law, custom,

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[25] For Khomeini's relationship with the Sunni Kurds and his later betrayal, see Ezzatyar, *The Last Mufti of Iranian Kurdistan*.

[26] See Robin Wright, *In the Name of God: The Khomeini Decade*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.

[27] Ibid.

friendship and social positions). Perhaps they remember his past, and knowing that he is not infallible, are not comfortable with giving him even more power.

The Islamist has to believe in the utopian but inhuman idea that everyone could become a member of his party. It is only in the heights of arrogance that a person cannot see that people could have thousands of reasons for not wanting to join him. What occurs in reality is that the Islamist is able to attract a following of like-minded people, closet aristocrats who, just like Marxists, think they should think for the benefit of everyone else and make their decisions for them. The party grows until it attracts perhaps 5% of the village's population, more if it has wealthy backers.[28] Then it stalls. Unless a preponderance of unfortunate circumstances enables them to gain power as happened in Iran, the party will remain on the margins of society. People may appreciate any good they do, they may even befriend them closely, but they will not submit themselves to it.

The reason that Muslims do not join Islamist parties is the same reason that most Americans do not join political parties. Americans may identify more with one party than another; the Republican Party continues to profess some allegiance to Christian morality, and this helps attract devout Christian voters. But the parties are not treated as representative of the heart and soul of the population; they are rather treated like artificial structures, similar to corporations. They are not the will of the people; they are the will of the people who work for the party.

Similar attitudes can be seen among Muslims toward Islamist parties. Even in a conservatively Muslim country like Egypt, in the 2012 presidential elections, the Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi won by a narrow margin over the secular candidate Ahmed Shafik (51.73% versus 48.27%).

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[28] Iran is a major financial backer of Iraqi Kurdistan's *Sunni* Islamist parties as I have seen admitted by the leaders of these parties on Kurdish television. Iran finds them useful in spreading its influence over the region.

Morsi's government, reflecting the usual Islamist mindset (as is also seen in Erdoğan's Turkey), tried to give itself sweeping powers, leading to violent protests and opening the way for the Western-backed coup the ousted him.[29] Morsi appeared to be a sincere and a well-meaning leader, but this does not excuse his lack of interest in dealing with his detractors on equal terms. Feeling himself blocked and hindered at every turn by the seculars, he tried to give himself the leverage of power in order to overcome these obstacles. This is not stewardly behavior, since a steward works through persuasion rather than compulsion. His thinking was probably that he could do so much good if only these dinosaurs left over from the previous regime could be taken out of the way. His wish for leverage was nothing more than a wish for overcoming the will of nearly half the population supposedly for their own good. This is not civilized behavior, since it discounts the human sovereignty of this section of the population. If he had been rightly respectful of his fellow humans, he would have worked to create a new political system that equally pleased the seculars. This would have meant creating a secular government that respected religious freedom and that did not impose Islam on secular citizens.

If a Western country ends up having a population that is half Muslim, this in no way suggests that this would open the way for an Islamist takeover of the government. Islamists have failed miserably in the heartlands of Islam, it is sheer fantasy to think that they would have more success in the West. Over half of Albania's population is Muslim, yet it has a stable Western-style government. The president is Ilir Meta, a Muslim who claims adherence to Islamic values, yet he is indistinguishable from any Western statesman in his manners and politics.

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[29] Daniel Steinvorth and Volkhard Windfuhr, "Egyptian Revolutionaries Take on Radical Islam." *Der Spiegel*, November 26, 2012, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/egypt-at-a-crossroads-after-morsi-grants-himself-sweeping-powers-a-869291.html (accessed December 25, 2018).

Similar to so many other issues concerning Muslims, the issue of Islam and politics has a "fantasy Islam" version imbibed with the worst prejudices, and a real-world version that is complex and full of human elements.

Jihad

It is a fact that up to the 20th century there was a mainstream view that jihad (literally "striving in the way of God") was meant as a military endeavor aimed at the constant expansion of Islam. Taking such views seriously, as representative of Islam-the-sociological-phenomenon, is like reading the sermons of the Catholic Church in support of the Crusades as representative of Christianity.

The vagueness of the concept of jihad in the Quran lends itself to many interpretations. The religious scholars, from their ivory towers, continued to favor the interpretation that jihad was a call to constant expansion. The Muslims were the good guys, so it only made sense to spread this goodness as far and wide as possible, and to only make peace with the infidels only when too weak to carry jihad forth.

The world-jihad idea continued to survive in the madrasas of the scholars while the real world around them completely ignored it. Muslim states maintained diplomatic ties with those around them and acted similar to non-Muslim states, dealing with the world according to the needs of the time. The concept of jihad continued to be used by rulers who wished to drum up support for their wars, but the theoretical idea of permanent, non-stop jihad was just that, a theory, that was used when convenient without *defining* the modus operandi of any Muslim government.

It has been common to take the scholars at their word, completely ignore history, and paint the picture of Islam as a permanently aggressive force that can never live in peace with the outside. One should distinguish between the fantasy Islam of the scholars and the real-world Islam

embodied by Muslim populations. *It is completely irrelevant what scholars write in their books if the average Muslim does not take their writings on some topic seriously*. And this has been exactly the case when it comes to jihad. There is no urgent need for reform of the Islamic literature to prevent the Middle East from blowing up as some reformers think. The overwhelming majority of Muslims themselves stand against Jihadi ideologies because they have a human understanding of the world around them and know that the utopia promised by Jihadism is complete nonsense, and the American-trained head-cutters in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria provide ample proof to Muslims for the horror and misery that Jihadism promises. For Muslims, it is not necessary for the jihad to be taken out of their medieval books for them to be safe from Jihadism; being blessed with living somewhere that is not relevant to the United States' geopolitical goals, such as Morocco, is the best way to be safe.

Things are actually even better than that. With the increase in literacy and learning over the past 200 years and the wide dissemination of Islamic references among the population (references are no longer locked away in madrasas) has enabled Muslim intellectuals to start engaging with the scholars and challenging them to reform their thinking when it comes to jihad, so that throughout the world today Muslims, including the most respected and admired scholars, are busy redefining and clarifying the concept. As already said, this is not of crucial importance to the world's Muslims, what is taking place is that *embodied Islam is finally seeping into theoretical Islam* now that Islamic scholarship is no longer bound to the ivory tower atmosphere of the madrasas.

500 years ago, the majority of Muslims lived in states that acted like modern states; with borders, diplomatic policies and sophisticated diplomats and statesmen. That continues to this day. Modernizing jihad doctrine will not change anything when it comes to the realities of daily life for Muslims. It will only help remove an annoyance; that of Muslims being considered potential Jihadists by the ignorant.

As a devout Muslim, I naturally take the Quran's statements regarding jihad seriously. My interpretation, which is the interpretation of the overwhelming majority of Muslims one way or another, is that jihad refers to two things at the same time: the duty of every Muslim to contribute toward defending theirs states against aggressors, and the more general duty of every Muslim to strive to please God: to be a steward. Most of the Quran's discussions of jihad are centered on warfare, but not all of them. While he was a subject of the pagans of Mecca, Prophet Muhammad was commanded to conduct jihad against them (in the Meccan chapter 25 of the Quran). Did this mean that he started to gather up an armed group to take over the city? Of course not, since he was receiving revelations from God, not from the CIA. God had forbidden him from fighting. While being commanded to conduct jihad, he was also commanded to forgive the pagans and be lenient toward them (verse 86:17, 15:85, 15:94). An intelligent reader of the Quran has therefore to reconcile these facts, and the reconciliation, which has been conducted everywhere in the Muslim world in some form, is that jihad's general meaning is to strive for the sake of God in whatever way possible, while one of its specific applications is toward conducting warfare when the circumstances justly demand it. Violent jihad is a matter of statecraft; it was only permitted to the Prophet once he had become the ruler of the sovereign state of Medina.

I have been asked why the Quran contains violent verses; why is it not a nice book telling us just to be nice? The reason is that life is not nice. Is there a single state in the world whose rulers say that they will not keep an army because niceness is sufficient? Even Sweden, perhaps the most strongly environmentalist and feminist nation in the world, keeps a powerful army. The Quran, among its many moral and ethical teachings, provides suggestions toward proper foreign policy; it recommends that Muslims keep well-equipped fighting forces (as every country today does), it defines where and when fighting can take place and where and when it cannot, and always recommends that the Muslim side should accept peace

offers from the other side (2:193, etc.), and asks Muslims to respect their contracts and treaties. The Quran has a no-nonsense but ethical view of foreign policy. Calling the Quran violent because it defines and regulates the violent requirements of foreign policy is like calling the US Constitution violent, since it does the same.

The fate of Western civilization

The comparatively high fertility rate of Muslims living in the West has created fears of an "Islamization" of the Western world. Some people talk about Eurabia and Londonistan. By placing the issue of the growth of Muslims outside the bounds of public discourse, leftist media organizations like the *New York Times* have been able to stifle discussions of the topic, so that anyone who brings it up can be automatically dismissed as a bigot.

Opposite them stand a minor group of dissident intellectuals who think they are bravely fighting for the fate of their civilization against foreign invasion, having fallen into the trap of confusing fantasy Islam with real-world Islam.

Today, Portugal's population is shrinking. Its countryside is being abandoned, thousands of villages are being reclaimed by nature.[30] As the population deteriorates, the remaining citizens have to move to larger towns in order to get the services they need. According to the World Bank, Portugal's fertility rate has been below replacement levels since 1982, meaning Portuguese women have been having fewer children than is

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[30] Andrei Khalip "Bled by emigration, abandoned Portuguese villages lose hope of surviving." *Reuters*, April 28, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-portugal-villages-widerimage/bled-by-emigration-abandoned-portuguese-villages-lose-hope-of-surviving-idUSKCN0XP1HC (retrieved December 25, 2018).

needed to maintain their population.[31] It usually takes over 30 years for a population to start shrinking once it hits below-replacement fertility. Portugal's population peaked at 10.57 million in 2010. By 2016 it had fallen to 10.32 million.

Portugal's fertility rate in 2015 was 1.23, meaning that women of fertile age were on average having 1.23 children throughout their fertile period. The women in a population need to give birth to approximately 2.1 children in their lifetimes in order to produce a new generation that is the same size as the one before it. What Portugal's fertility rate means is that each generation will only reach 58.5% the size of the previous generation. In this way, a village that has a population of 250 fertile-age women (total population 1000) will only have 10 fertile-age women left in 6 generations (168 years), due to the successive shrinkage of each generation. By then, this imaginary village would probably have long been abandoned.

What is happening to Portugal, which has been spared Muslim immigration, seems to be a run-of-the-mill process that happens to all civilizations. A socially conservative, high-fertility-rate population establishes itself in an area and builds it up. Prosperity and growth come about until a stage of civic life is reached where people question the virtue of having children; life goes on well enough without them, so why burden oneself with them? Having children becomes a choice rather than an unquestioned part of life as it used to be for the supposedly naïve forefathers of old. Why burden oneself with children when there is so much to do, and when one hasn't yet figured out the meaning and purpose of life, and when one is already under so many financial pressures?

Western youth by and large do not consider themselves part of the project that is Western civilization and those who have passed through the

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[31] All demographic figures quoted in this chapter are from the World Bank, available at http://data.worldbank.org.

Western university system are likely to have been taught by their professors to consider this civilization evil and harmful, something to apologize for and dissociate themselves from. Such youth will naturally not feel bound to contribute to this civilization, nor will they look forward to the civilization's flowering.

It is culture that leads to civilizations. The Victorian bourgeoisie (i.e. middle and upper classes) had a reliable and predictable social system that led to so much free time and energy that everyone was in some way thinking of doing good works, of *making themselves useful*. In an uncivilized society people do not have to worry about being useful. One is either useful or dead. The material world's demands fully capture one's attention. One has to seek food, shelter, avoid predators, avoid social threats, find mates and keep mates. Victorian Christianity suppressed that "noise" of the material world; it put them all out of the way. Food and shelter were plenty; a rigid social code made social life very predictable; a rigid sexual morality made mates reliable. While religion is often thought of as a restrictor of freedom, it can actually be thought of as a *creator* of freedom. It suppresses the noise of the material world and its demands, creating a reliable structure within which one is free to act.

> Seek freedom and become captive of your desires. Seek discipline and find your liberty.[32]

An imaginary "free" society where no man can trust his wife (who is free to flirt and cheat), where he cannot trust his business partner, where he cannot trust his own children, where he uses drugs and prostitutes without being sanctioned, is not a free society. It is a society that is very much oppressed by the material world. It is an unproductive society.

The best sign that a society is too oppressed by the material world to have free energy for other things might be below-replacement fertility rates.

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[32] Frank Herbert, *Chapterhouse Dune*.

Having and raising children requires great commitment of one's energies, and the presence of trust in one's mate. In a modern society, both of these are lacking. The material world drains one's energies through financial need, unhelpful relatives, unkind and uncharitable employers who are determined to give as little as they can to their employees, and not the least of its oppressive qualities: the unreliability of mates. In this world of misanthropes, how is a man or woman to find the energy and stability to produce children? Women's strong instinctive desire for children ensures that many will have at least one child in their lifetimes, and a few will have two. But they stop there. And that is nowhere enough to sustain civilization.

The usual story of a civilization is one of acquiring a culture that suppresses noise and makes life stable (think of the Germanic tribes converting to Christianity and becoming the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire), which leads to the *freeing* of energy to build and create. Eventually the population questions the worth of their culture, so that its elements are slowly abandoned. Life loses its reliability and stability, noise reasserts itself and drains energy, fertility rates fall below replacement levels, the civilization enters into a centuries-long era of twilight until it either goes extinct, is conquered, or acquires a new culture that revitalizes it.

A civilization can continue functioning for centuries during its twilight. If Portugal's population continues to shrink at its 2014 rate of 0.5% annually, it will still have 6.2 million people a hundred years from now, and 200 years from now it will have 3.7 million people.

What will happen if this dying civilization acquires Islam? To avoid the racial issue, let us imagine that this happens through the conversion of the local population, rather than immigration.

If we are to use ideas from fantasy Islam to make projections about what may happen, as is so often done, one may imagine a militant Wahhabi dystopia coming about.

But if we are to think about real-world Islam, the embodied Islam of Muslim populations, we get a very different picture. Iranian society provides a very useful data point. Being the largest Muslim Indo-European nation, they are distant cousins of the Portuguese. Looking at Iranians (whether the Shia majority or the millions of Iranian Sunnis), we may ask if they are doing anything that is fundamentally at odds with the Portuguese Western-style way of life. Are Iranians systematically destroying their pre-Islamic heritage and rejecting it? No, in fact they are quite proud of it and celebrate it. Iran's national epic is the *Shahnameh*, which is largely concerned with pre-Islamic Iran. Iran's most important annual festival is Noruz, which is a pre-Islamic celebration.

Iranian women, instead of being docile women in need of rescue, could shock Victorian women with how independent and opinionated they are. You can scarcely meet a middle class Iranian girl who does not consider herself something of a philosopher and a poet, and who does not have a strong voice in her family, feeling free to contradict and make fun of her brothers and give advice to her father.

Iran has a thriving intellectual atmosphere, with most Western bestsellers translated into Persian within months. Not everything is well with Iran, of course, but despite the fact that the government uses and propounds Shia Islam to maintain its rule, the population itself is made up of independent-minded citizens who think for themselves.

We can use the example of Iranian society to project what may happen if a Portuguese ghost town was to be re-inhabited by 100,000 Portuguese Muslims.

I should mention here that I do not wish to suggest that I support open borders and uncontrolled migration. I respect each country's sovereign right to decide its own fate.

Similar to Christianity, Islam would suppress the noise of material life, making social life stable and predictable. While the Portuguese cultural elite are content to merely exist and enjoy life while it lasts, this town's population will have optimistic, purposeful, forward-looking culture. The town will have above-replacement fertility and a growing economy.

Similar to the way a person in India can go from a Muslim to a non-Muslim town with ease, a person can visit this town without feeling like they have entered a foreign, non-Portuguese land. There will be more women wearing the hijab, and fewer places to drink alcohol at, but the city's growing economy will likely attract many non-Muslim workers from the rest of Portugal.

The town will not be a utopia, but it can be expected to show the best features seen in other intelligent and cosmopolitan Muslim populations, such as in Tehran and Kuala Lumpur. It will be a society similar to late Victorian society, a mix of religiosity and European common sense.

The fear of Islam among Western intellectuals is the fear of loss. We do not want a beautiful German town full of beautiful Gothic architecture to become an Arabian desert. Would Muslims not want to destroy the Western heritage to replace it with an "Islamic" one?

What would be lost if a Portuguese town converted to Islam? The town's alcohol-drinking culture would be lost. Casinos and brothels would have to close down due to the lack of a customer base long before any law is passed banning them. If the town is on the Atlantic coast, there would no longer be scantily clad young women to view on the beaches. Any existing pig farms would close down. Restaurants would stop offering pork-containing dishes.

What else?

It is actually quite difficult to come up with anything else beyond these largely cosmetic differences. The same way that devout Muslims have no trouble contributing to Egypt's various civic institutions, devout Muslim Portuguese would have no trouble continuing their town's hundreds of institutions. Newspapers, book clubs, libraries, philosophical societies, animal welfare societies, sports clubs, museums, in short, everything a Westerner considers "Western" institutions would continue to function like before. Egypt, Iran, Turkey and Malaysia have these same institutions, why would the Portuguese fail to maintain theirs?

Migrants and converts

Economic growth requires increases in population or increases in productivity. Since increases in productivity are limited by physical laws, the European elite prefer immigration as a way of replenishing lost productive capacity and going beyond it. Immigration helps increase economic growth, which leads to increases in military, economic, technological and political power on the world stage, and most importantly, helps ensure that the government can continue to make interest and pension payments by importing more young people to tax.

Canada has had below-replacement fertility rates since 1972. By now it would have been a country with a shrinking population, with villages and towns suffering Portuguese fates. Instead, thanks largely to immigration, the population has doubled since 1960. Canada is a rising star that will soon overshadow Spain in achievement and power. Canada's immigration policies prefer people with educational achievement. This has ensured that the migrant population has been productive and largely problem-free, so that the Canadian population has a far more positive attitude toward immigration compared to other Western countries. Canada's over one

million Muslims are so boringly middle class, similar to California's Iranians, that they rarely make the news.

The issue of immigration is a sensitive one. The very rich of the West like it because it means that they can maintain their wealth and power. Their real estate would lose value and their businesses would lose customers if the population shrinks, therefore they constantly lobby for increased immigration while confident that they can continue living in exclusive and expensive mostly-white neighborhoods that migrants cannot afford to live in. The rest of the population either like it or dislike it depending on where they live and their social positions and cultural values. For some immigration means increased taxes, fewer jobs and worse services, and they dislike it for these.

Some dislike it for increasing the number of strangers in their societies, they dislike constantly meeting people whose morality and beliefs are a mystery. It was so much simpler back in the old days when basically everyone you met throughout the day followed the same cultural protocols as yourself.

And then there are those who out of humanitarian considerations like the idea of helping less privileged people enjoy a Western life.

If the Syrians in Germany are less prosperous and slightly more criminal than Germans, the exact same thing would be seen if Brazilian Christian immigrants or even Appalachian whites from the United States were to be admitted into Germany. Making it about religion feels satisfying to some Westerners since it "shows" the superiority of their civilization. This is a hasty jump to conclusions that does not bother to look beneath the surface since focusing on the surface is so gratifying.

Whatever good or bad things that *Islam* (rather than *Arabs* or whatever race or ethnicity) will cause to the West can only be studied accurately *if we hold all other things constant*. This is one of the basic principles of the social sciences. It means that we should look at converts to Islam in the

West and their descendants rather than foreigners, since foreigners do not just bring Islam with them, but a far larger cultural heritage. Converts have the same cultural heritage as the native non-Muslims, with their only difference being religion, helping us see the effects of Islam in isolation from confounding factors like culture.

Do Europeans become less productive, less intelligent or more criminal when they convert to Islam?

Der Spiegel reported in 2007 that 4000 Germans were annually converting to Islam.[33] In 2011, there were supposed to be 100,000 converts to Islam in Britain.[34] If we keep in mind the imaginary Portuguese example, these conversions do not represent a loss to European culture, but a gain. While secular Westerners are not carrying their weight, not doing what they must to continue their civilization, these Europeans are embracing a new conceptual framework that enables them to continue their civilization. Even if there are only a few hundred thousand converts to Islam among ethnic Europeans in Europe and North America, these people are perfectly capable of carrying forth both their European genes and their European heritage. Iranians are not rejecting their pre-Islamic Iranian heritage, why would Europeans do that?

The Europeans who could synthesize their humane and beautiful Christianity of the Victorian era out of the rigid and sometimes inhuman Christianity of the Middle Ages can very well do the same with Islam. Iranian intellectuals have done that for Islam, why not Europeans?

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[33] Lutz Ackermann, "Angst-Ridden Germans Look for Answers -- And Find Them in the Koran." *Der Spiegel*, January 18, 2007), http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/muslim-converts-in-germany-angst-ridden-germans-look-for-answers-and-find-them-in-the-koran-a-460364.html (retrieved January 14, 2018).

[34] Catrin Nye, "Converting to Islam - the white Britons becoming Muslims." *BBC News*, January 4, 2011, http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-12075931 (retrieved January 14, 2018).

An important convert demographic in the United States is African American inmates who convert in prison. These men, when they are released, rather than becoming more criminal as a simple-minded view of Islam might suggest actually, perhaps for the first time in their lives, start to think very seriously about forming a family and holding down a job.

My long view of history prevents me from gleefully looking forward to the Islamization of the West. Even if Islam spreads greatly for the next century or two, some new force can come about that wipes it out, as it happened to every former Islamic power. The Quran says this regarding past nations:

> That was a nation that has passed; for them is what they have earned; and for you is what you have earned; and you will not be questioned about what they used to do. [35]

My view of future nations is the same. Whatever good or evil they do is their business, and nothing they accomplish will last forever. Our duty is to do good with the time given to us.

It will, of course, be very interesting to see what Europeans will do with Islam. I trust in the humanity and common sense to enable them to make something good and beautiful out of it. European Muslims have already produced incredible Islamic works, such as Brown's *Canonization* and Wymann-Landgraf's *Malik and Medina*, works that are just as sensible, moderate and sophisticated as any other European work of scholarship.

If we want to perform an intellectually honest comparison between Western civilization's representatives and Islam's representatives, we must compare the best of the West with the best of Islam, rather than comparing the intellectual elite of the West with the criminal underclass of Muslim societies. Look at the American math professor Jeffrey Lang, the American scholar Hamza Yusuf, the British philosopher Martin Lings, the

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[35] The Quran, verse 2:134.

British scholar Timothy Winter, the German diplomat Murad Wilfried Hofmann, all of whom deeply studied Islam and embraced it yet remained every bit as dedicated to contributing to Western civilization as any Western intellectual.

The only way we can have an intelligent discussion about Islam's future in the West is to compare the intellectuals Westerners respect with the intellectuals Western Muslims respect. Conceptualizing Muslims as a horde of invaders may be satisfying to some, but it does not get us anywhere toward making empirically accurate predictions about future Muslim behavior. It is our intellectuals who are busy preparing the Muslim "program" in the West. One needs to be familiar with the thought of this intellectual elite of Western Islam before considering themselves in any shape or form well-informed about Muslims and their thought and potential future behavior.

6. Sexuality and Women in Islam

What makes something "obscene"? Roger Scruton argues persuasively that obscenity is the case of treating a person not as an individual, but as a piece of flesh.[1] A woman may enjoy an admiring glance if she feels she is being admired as a person, even if she is admired for her beauty and sexual attractiveness. Yet the moment she feels she is being admired for her sexuality alone, not as a person, but as a replaceable piece of flesh, the admiring glance becomes obscene. She feels dirtied by the glance, reduced to an animal with sex organs, and she will fervently wish to get away from that glance in order to regain her sense of personhood.

While a nude painting of Venus is not automatically obscene (even if we consider it morally questionable), a painting depicting the sexual act *is* certainly obscene, because it depicts humans not as persons, but as bodies, as animals. The obscenity of depictions of the sexual act is similar to the obscenity of depictions of a human defecating.

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[1] Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986.

No amount of cultural conditioning can remove our sense of the obscene; even in primitive tribes that spend their lives in the nude, a woman will be made very uncomfortable by a lustful glance, a glance that looks at her as a sexed animal rather than as a person. [2] A woman may be comfortable in her nudity if it is culturally accepted—for example if she is a nude model in an art class—but the moment she feels she is being sexually objectified, she experiences obscenity and wishes to avoid it.

Understanding obscenity helps open the way to understanding Islam's view on women and sexuality. And no discussion of sexuality and its relationship with culture and civilization can ever be complete without a discussion of obscenity.

A nude painting of a woman is not obscene *if* we can see the depicted woman as an individual, with a character, a past and a present, a morality, a sense of humor and goodness—in other words if we can see her in all her human complexity. For this to be the case, the painting has to show the woman's face, because the face is where we experience other people's personhood. A painting of a woman's nude body that omits the face is obscene, because we cannot experience the individual in such a painting. We merely see flesh. A painting of a woman's body that shows the face, but focuses on her sex organs (for example, if her legs are open) is also obscene. A painting of a nude woman who is facing the other way, so that we only see her body and the back of her head, is also likely to be obscene.

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[2] Lust is obscene sexual desire. Non-obscene desire ("erotic love") sees an irreplaceable individual with whom one can unite. In non-obscene desire, the person never loses sight of the quality of the other as a person; I want to be with *her*, not her body. But in lust, it is her body that has my full attention, not herself. In erotic love, the object of desire is irreplaceable. If I love and desire Jane, an equally beautiful Susan will be completely irrelevant to my desire. But in obscene lust, all women are the same. If Jane has aroused my lust, Susan can satisfy it just as well.

Most Muslims would not approve of nude painting regardless of its position on the obscenity scale, and the same applies to certain devout Christians. Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* fresco in the Sistine Chapel came under persistent attacks during the Counter-Reformation for depicting nudity, and some Christians, known as the "breeches makers", would put cloth or fig leaves over depictions of nudity in public places.[3]

Even if a painting does not *feel* as obscene as a pornographic image, it still feels like a potential promoter of obscenity. I may be able to admire Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1486) for its artistic beauty and its atmosphere, but the moment I start to see the main character in the painting not as an individual, but as an object of sexual interest that arouses me as a male, the experience automatically sinks from being aesthetic to being obscene. By partaking in obscenity, I am degraded, made to feel like an animal with bodily desires. For this reason as a devout Muslim, while I do not feel what you might call prudish horror toward nude paintings, I do not seek such paintings out in order to appreciate them, because, despite their artistic merit, they are a gateway to the experience of obscenity.

The ability to appreciate a nude painting *without* experiencing obscenity is very much a middle and upper class phenomenon. The same nude painting that an upper class family hangs in the living room will be treated as nothing but an enjoyable piece of pornography if it were to be hung in a bar room frequented by workmen. The upper class family may feel revolted if they were to witness the obscenity that the painting causes among the workmen, who will be likely to talk about what they would "do" with that woman. What the upper class family sees as a beautiful individual, a representation of a loved and honored man or woman,

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[3] Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, eds., *Human Sexuality: An Encyclopedia,* New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1994, 46.

becomes a degraded sex object in the bar room. This is similar to a statue of Abraham Lincoln being defaced by graffiti; the thing goes from a representation of an honored human to an abused piece of dishonored matter that degrades the person represented.

We humans know instinctively that obscenity is wrong even if we cannot explain why. Hardly a man can be found who would view pornography in front of his children (even if they have grown to adulthood) or his wife, even if he is an atheist born to atheists, and even if he can come up with all kinds of clever arguments about how what he is doing is not wrong.

The strange sense of shame that always accompanies the experience of obscenity is often rationalized as nothing but the consequence of cultural conditioning, the detritus of a past that should one day be forgotten and transcended. Since there is nothing "wrong" with admiring a pornographic picture (no one is "harmed", for example), it should not be morally wrong. But why does it *feel* wrong?

Muslim and Christian intellectuals have tried to explain the wrongness either by speaking about the supposedly harmful consequences of perusing pornography, or by speaking of the fact that people are harmed in the production of pornography. Neither of these explanations is satisfactory. If one can avoid the harmful consequences, and if one peruses pornography in which no one is harmed (such as computer-generated pornography), would that make it acceptable? Would that take the sense of shame away?

Imagine if you were watching your mother entering a stage at an awards ceremony. Some unkind person has placed a banana peel in her way. She walks on it, slips and falls in front of everyone. That is an extremely embarrassing situation because, in her slip, your mother is revealed not as a person, but as an *object*. From the world of respected and honored humans she sinks into the world of objects; her body becomes paramount,

her own personal will is taken out of the picture, she helplessly flails around and falls. She becomes a joke; it is very difficult to take her seriously after she gets up to give her speech.[4] And we would be filled with a sense of shame if we were to learn that people were sharing the video of our falling mother on the Internet to laugh at it.

The same would be true of a video of a man having sexual intercourse with his wife. Despite the fact that nothing is wrong with what he and his wife are doing, *there is everything wrong with looking at it*, and again, if we found out that such a video of us is being watched by people on the Internet, we would feel extremely ashamed and *degraded* by this, even though *we were not doing anything wrong*.

The reason is that *we do not like to be revealed to people as if we were nothing but our bodies*—as if we are not honored persons with will, choice and control. The case of a loved one falling and people laughing at them, and the case of the viewing of socially acceptable sexual intercourse, are equally degrading because *they depict humans as something less than human*. The individuals, with their moral depth and sophistication, are stripped away until nothing but the body remains. This feels gross and indecent to us: something to turn away from.

For the same reasons, dead and mutilated human bodies are obscene to look at. It is revolting and highly unsettling to see a previous human revealed as nothing but a piece of destroyed flesh.

And that is what engaging in obscenity does to some degree, whether we do it voluntarily or not. A woman feels respected and honored until she is groped by a random man in a crowded public place, at which point her world comes shattering down. She is *forced* against her will to feel that she is just a body, and that objectification makes her feel that she is now in a

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[4] This example of slipping on a banana peel is taken from Roger Scruton's *Sexual Desire*.

lower plane of existence. A moment before she may have been appreciating the beautiful architecture of the town around her, considering herself a partaker in a complex and beautiful human society. Yet this moment she feels like a helpless animal, revealed to herself as weak, powerless and dishonored. She feels less of a human, and more of an animal who is used, made the object of someone else's will. Being catcalled is demeaning in a similar way, although it is less traumatic.

Men have similar experiences when government officials treat them as sub-human. This is a very common experience in Third World countries. A Syrian government official acts as if the people coming to him for his services are little more than dirt on his shoes. It is an extremely humiliating and degrading experience to need the services of such people, and this is a daily experience for many in the Third World, whether in Muslim countries in the Middle East or Christian countries in Latin America.

A woman may enjoy being sexually admired, and she may wear a low-cut dress that shows the upper part of her breasts, going about in a gathering of classy people who treat her as an honored human. If she leaves this gathering, loses her way and finds herself in an alley filled with lower class men, being admired by them gives her no pleasure, it in fact feels degrading, because she knows they probably see her as nothing more than a pretty piece of flesh, while at the gathering she was a person, something far greater than merely her body.

Numerous classical English novels celebrate the type of man who treats women as persons, not bodies. From Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) to George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871) all the way to the Harry Potter books. What lies at the heart of the "code of honor" of these men is that they treat their fellow humans as if each human is more than their body, more than their poverty, their lowness of status, their looks, or their race. Coming from such a place, a man treats a

woman as a person regardless of what she is wearing. Even if she were naked, he could continue to see her as a person (of course, her state of undress would be a serious distraction).

When a man lustfully admires a woman's picture, he knows he is leaving that higher plane of human existence, making something lowly of himself, no better than other lowly men. No man wants to be caught looking at pornography, knowing instinctively that others will see them as lowly and degraded. For a man, to lustfully look at random females is to betray his humanity. He no longer belongs to the high plane of free-willed and morally responsible humans who look at an attractive woman and see an individual rather than a piece of flesh look back, he has sunk down to a lower plane, degrading himself by engaging in obscenity, by stating through his action that he is just an animal with animal desires.

A man who gives in to his desire to watch pornography and makes a habit of it will go on to feel his degradation more and more, until he starts to feel like a hypocrite when he treats a real-life woman like a person, when he has made it a lifestyle to enjoy women as pieces of flesh. The same applies to a man who makes it a habit to sleep with prostitutes. Some of the darkest, most cynical and most hopeless works of literature written in the 20th century were by men who frequented prostitutes or engaged in other obscenities, such as Sartre and the American diarist Arthur Inman. To engage in obscenity is to leave the warmth of human associations behind, it is to leave a world of honored and honoring persons to enter an animal world where everyone is your tool and you are everyone's tool.

Enjoying obscenity, such as by admiring a woman's body without her awareness and without interest in her as a person, may not be too significant in isolation. Most men, seeing an attractive and scantily clad woman on the street, will need to exercise their willpower in order not to admire her body. What changes the man's character is when engagement

in obscenity is normalized for him and becomes a habit. What happens if every man you knew had no trouble enjoying pornography on his phone in front of other men? What happens if every man around you is an unabashed groper who would *always* grope any female unfortunate enough to come under his power?

A habitual and unabashed groper has renounced his humanity. He does not treat women as people; he treats them as animals, objects to be acted upon. Such a man is a cynic who feels like a stranger in polite society. In a social gathering, he sees the women around him as walking pieces of flesh. If women become aware of his nature, they are made very uncomfortable by his presence. To him, it is only a silly pretense to morality that is preventing this gathering from devolving into an enjoyable orgy. Knowing that he thinks like that, we feel degraded and disgusted with ourselves just by being in the same room as him.

What kind of world would it be if *every* man was like this, and if every woman had come to expect and accept such a situation, so that she saw nothing strange about being groped and enjoyed being looked at as a mere piece of flesh? Such a world takes obscenity to its logical extreme.

It is a commonly portrayed nightmarish scenario of classical English literature for a self-respecting person to unknowingly walk into a place populated by the criminal underclass whose society is the obscene society described above, as in the case of the young Evelina finding herself in the company of a few prostitutes while attending a festival in London (*Evelina*, 1778). Evelina goes on to meet the vile Lord Merton, whose manners are just as obscene as any member of the underclass despite his high social class. Lord Orville, in contrast, is an honorable man who treats Evelina like a dignified person and rescues her on several occasions, and wins her love and respect in this way.

Even in this enlightened and secular age of the 21st century, the distinction between Lord Merton and Lord Orville continues to be taken very seriously. Today's romance novels continue to celebrate the man who sees a woman as a spirit of infinite worth, while disdaining and ridiculing the man who sees a woman as a replaceable pretty thing that can be used and discarded.

Even if we recognize no religion, we continue to distinguish between the honorable and the obscene. Only honorable men are worthy of friendship—men who have not devolved into obscenity, men who continue to maintain their faith in the distinction between the human person (whose worth is infinite) and the animal. A man who has devolved into obscenity no longer recognizes those around him as persons, he has become a member of the antisocial jungle world of the underclass even if he continues to go around in polite society. He makes a bad friend because by not recognizing the infinite worth of the humans around him, he is capable of treating them as mere tools toward getting what he wants. He may act nicely and kindly when he wants, but he is just as equally capable of the cruelest acts.

The horrors committed by every communist regime tell us what happens when we throw away law and custom and replace them with an ideology that does not recognize the infinite worth of humans. Millions of humans can summarily be killed without trial if they are in any way thought to be a threat to those in power, or if killing them serves some purpose. As Lenin called those who were suspected of not being fully in line with his Marxist ideals, they were mere "insects". Insects can be gassed, set fire to, or wiped out in any other way. Killing one insect and killing a million insects is very much the same thing. All that matters is the purpose to be served by this.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant, coming from a Christian background, neatly summarized the two attitudes toward humanity in terms of treating fellow humans as "means" or as "ends". If you treat your fellow humans as "means", they are mere tools, instruments, for getting what you want. While if you treat them as "ends" (the word "end" is used in the sense of "goal", "something aimed for"), you are treating them as intrinsically worthy regardless of their utility for you.[5]

Christian and Islamic morality teach us to treat fellow humans as ends, and it is upon this basis that Western civilization's laws and customs are built. The only reason a criminal has a right to a defense lawyer is because we consider them to be intrinsically worthy. But in Lenin's Russia, criminals were often shot on the spot to save time and money, since, by abolishing Christian law and custom, what remained was the inhuman Marxist-Leninist ideology that recognizes no intrinsic worth in humans. In this ideology, merely disagreeing with the ideology caused you to lose the *right to exist*.

We humans prefer to live in the world of humans rather than animals. We like to be treated as intrinsically worthy and we like to treat others the same way. We dislike men who grope women because they are betrayers of society, they insult our human world by sinking themselves and the women they abuse into the world of animals.

Nakedness and lust

All of Islam's doctrines regarding sexuality can be seen in the light of the combating of obscenity. In one of the most interesting passages of the Quran, the issues of clothedness and nakedness are addressed:

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[5] See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Translated and ed. Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

O Children of Adam! We have provided you with clothing to cover your bodies, and for luxury. But the clothing of piety—that is best. These are some of God's revelations, so that they may take heed.

O Children of Adam! Do not let Satan seduce you, as he drove your parents out of the Garden, stripping them of their garments, to show them their nakedness. He sees you, him and his clan, from where you cannot see them. We have made the devils friends of those who do not believe.

And when they commit an obscenity, they say, "We found our parents doing this, and God has commanded us to do it." Say, "God does not command obscenity. Are you attributing to God what you do not know?"[6]

The passage associates nakedness with the committing of obscenity. It begins by asking us to clothe ourselves (verse 26), warns us against celebrating nakedness (27), and ends by affirming that God does not command obscenity (28). The chapter goes on to suggest that the celebration of obscenity is something that happens when humans ally themselves with Satan (verse 30, not shown above).

In Islamic theology, rejection of God often, if not always, leads to the passive, unawares acceptance of Satan and his "whisperings". In another chapter, the Quran mentions Satan as one who commands obscenity:

O people! Eat of what is lawful and good on the earth, and do not follow the footsteps of Satan. He is to you an open enemy.

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[6] The Quran, verses 7:26-28.

> He commands you to commit evil and obscenity, and to say about
> God what you do not know.[7]

The exposed human body calls toward obscenity. It is easy for a man to treat a woman as an individual if she is modestly clothed. It is extremely difficult for him to do the same if she is naked. The same would be true of a woman when faced with a naked man. But due to the different sexual natures of the sexes, a man will find it very difficult to be disgusted by the obscenity of seeing a naked woman; she continues to be utterly captivating if she is young and attractive. The same is not true of a naked man in the sight of a woman; most women will likely find it easy to be revolted at seeing him and may immediately feel the degradation that comes with experiencing obscenity—even if he is young and attractive.

For a man, due to his much faster-acting libido, he may experience nothing but pleasure at the sight of a naked woman until he leaves the situation and "comes to his senses"; once the experience is over, once his libido has subsided, *then* he may feel revolted toward her for dragging him down into the animal world. However, it is possible that if the woman is of sufficient charm and beauty he may never feel any revulsion toward her and may in fact fall in love with her.

This is an important fact about obscenity; it can be pleasurable to experience. It is only later that a person may feel degraded by it. In both the East and the West, promoters of sexual freedom make the deceptive claim that by enjoying looking at a pornographic image one loses the right to criticize it. A religious man who cannot help glancing at a woman's exposed cleavage is supposed to somehow prove the emptiness of his moral system. Freudians use the hydraulic imagery of "bottled up" tensions and "dammed" desires to explain such experiences; morality is

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[7] The Quran, verses 2:168-169.

supposedly a negative force that prevents us from experiencing our true natures.

The truth is that, as will be shown, morality *helps* maintain our true natures as individuals by keeping obscenity at bay. All men, moral or immoral, are capable of enjoying gazing at an attractive naked woman. But while the obscene Lord Merton embraces this experience, the self-respecting Lord Orville controls himself and turns away from the sight despite its pleasurableness. Merton, in his obscenity, is content to be an animal and to see other humans as instruments of pleasure. Orville *wants something more*. If he were to make love to a woman, it would have to be within the context of love; he wants to unite with her as another person—he does not want to merely use her as an instrument of sexual pleasure. Merton lives in the animal world while Orville lives in the world of humans and continues to remain human *even in the embraces of love*.

For Merton, sexual intimacy is an act of the body. For Orville, sexual intimacy is an extension of his *social relationship* with a woman he loves and honors.

The fast-acting nature of the male libido often makes a man unfit to make moral judgments while he is sexually aroused. Today when pornography is often available just a few clicks away, a man, when in private, suffers an increased danger of falling into obscenity that he may only be ashamed of later. He may randomly see the image of a very attractive woman in skimpy exercise clothing while reading an article about health on a health-related website. He may become aroused by the image and *feel* that there is nothing "wrong" in this experience, because his very desire shuts down his ability for sensing obscenity. A beautiful and smiling female with her body exposed feels like an expression of all that is good and beautiful in this world. In this state of arousal he may seek out ever more explicit images, while always wondering at the back of his mind what it is that

makes looking at such images wrong *when he senses nothing wrong*, when the woman depicted in every picture appears good and lovely.

The wise man who values his self-respect will immediately cut the experience short when faced with the chance to enjoy an obscene pleasure. If a woman tries to seduce him by showing him her naked body, he will not wait to admire her before judging whether he should submit to her whim or not, he will be extremely foolish if he were to do that. A self-respecting Orville would instead instantly turn away and leave the scene. Every second he waits is a second in which his desire strengthens and his moral sense weakens.

A man who runs into a picture of a scantily clad woman on the Internet is in a small way repeating the same experience; obscenity tries to seduce him and make an animal out of him, revealing him to himself as nothing but "a little wrinkled creature with a hungry face and bony groping hands".[8] He will feel extremely ashamed if his wife catches him admiring some random woman's body on Facebook or Instagram.

In Sonnet 129 Shakespeare describes the attraction of lust and the emptiness of what it promises:

> Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
>
> Is lust in action; and till action, lust
>
> Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
>
> Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
>
> Enjoyed no sooner but despisèd straight,
>
> Past reason hunted; and, no sooner had

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[8] Tolkien's description of the way Frodo sees Bilbo when Bilbo suffers a bout of intense, obscene desire for the Ring in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Past reason hated as a swallowed bait

On purpose laid to make the taker mad;

Mad in pursuit and in possession so,

Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;

A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;

Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.

All this the world well knows; yet none knows well

To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

According to Shakespeare, lust cannot be enjoyed without experiencing a degradation of the spirit. A pornographic image (or scantily clad woman) is "bait" laid to make a man "mad" (to make him lose sight of his moral purpose).

The same way that a naked woman is a gateway toward experiencing obscenity, a half-naked woman is too, but of course, to a lesser degree. Civilized societies develop dress codes that minimize the chances of experiencing obscenity by commanding that men hide their sex organs, and that women hide the area between their breasts and their thighs. Dress codes can be thought of as *technology* that less technologically advanced societies lack.

At nudist resorts in the West, men are customarily required to carry around towels to hide their erections if they ever get one, since the sight of an erect penis is undeniably obscene and therefore unacceptable to display, *even to a nudist*. Such resorts do not allow in single men, since such men would quickly turn what still remains a human society into an obscene, animal society. They are required to have a female partner, in this

way proving that they are there for more than merely enjoying the obscene pleasure of beholding the nudity of fellow humans.[9]

Clothing is not always necessary to prevent obscenity; it merely helps. In the Victorian era, women wore dresses that exposed their shoulders and parts of their backs at parties and balls, clothing that would have led to much obscene gazing among the men of the underclass of that time. The pain of wearing the wrong dress in front of the wrong crowd is portrayed in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (which portrays contemporary England), in which Hermione magically transports herself and her friends into a random London street in which she immediately starts to get sexually harassed. Prior to that, she and her friends were attending a wedding. Hermione was wearing a dress fit for the occasion, presumably revealing. Hermione was none the worse for her dress while she was in the company of her classy acquaintances; they could admire her beauty *and* continue to treat her as a worthy person. But the moment she sinks into a London street at night, obscenity reveals its ugly head and degrades her.

Clothing is a useful technology, similar to toothbrushes, that helps achieve a certain aim; that of reducing the risk of the incidence of obscenity. In the West, feminists have worked to put an end to the dehumanizing glances and catcalls coming from obscene men. They consider it a right to be able to wear what they want without being harassed. While ideally it would be true that a woman could wear whatever she wanted without being treated degradingly, it is part of the reality of human life that there are always some men who have sunk into obscenity and therefore feel no

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[9] For the details of the nudist lifestyle and its distinguishing between the obscene and the non-obscene, see the Reddit discussion "Nudists of Reddit, what taboos or no-no's exist in Nudist culture?" November 5, 2016, https://redd.it/5bbkyq (retrieved December 24, 2018).

compunction toward degrading a fellow human by causing her to sink to their level. It is unrealistic in the extreme to expect to one day put an end to obscene behavior through indoctrination. It is similar to expecting people to stop committing theft and murder.

The reason people commit theft is not because they failed to get the memo that thievery is wrong, it is because such people do not treat fellow humans as having infinite worth; they are like predatory animals that prey on other humans for gain. In the United States, a perpetrator of sexual violence is four times more likely to have an *unrelated* felony conviction compared to a member of the general population.[10] To put it another way, a violent robber is much more likely to be a rapist than the average American. Obscenity at least partly explains why this is so. Robbery dehumanizes people by treating them as instruments for gain. Sexual violence does the same. A robber has the habit of seeing people not as persons, but as mere animals, therefore as would be expected, he is also much more likely to be a rapist. A person who sees a man not as an individual but as an animal will have no qualms about mugging him, and this same person, meeting a woman in a dark alley, *also* sees her as a mere animal that he can do with as he wishes. This robber-rapist lives in the obscene animal world where the rules of the jungle are in effect, other humans, male or female, are fair game for his predatory desires.

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[10] This is a rough estimate adapted from Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Felony Defendants in Large Urban Counties, 2009." December 2013, https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/fdluc09.pdf (retrieved December 25, 2018) and Michael Suede, "What Percentage of The US Adult Population Has a Felony Conviction?" *Libertarian News*, June 5, 2014, https://www.libertariannews.org/2014/06/05/what-percentage-of-us-adult-population-that-has-a-felony-conviction/ (retrieved January 28, 2018).

Civilized, law-abiding humans, on the other hand, live in the human world were the Kantian morality is in effect—where everyone honors everyone else as persons.

Anti-obscenity "technology"

Islamic morality and ethics provide various solutions to the problem of obscenity. The Quran commands both men and women to "lower their gaze", which is a euphemism for avoiding lustful glances. Addressing men specifically, the Quran says:

> Tell the believing men to lower their gaze, and to guard their chastity. That is purer for them. God is cognizant of what they do.[11]

In its address to women, the Quran has more to say:

> And say to the female believers to lower their gaze, and guard their chastity, and not display their adornment except such as is outward, and let them fix closely their head-coverings over their bosoms...[12]

> O Prophet, say to your spouses and your daughters and the women of believers, that they draw their outer garments closer to them; that will (make) it likelier that they will be recognized and so will not be hurt. And God has been Ever-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.[13]

These two verses define the hijab the way it is worn throughout the Islamic world. Besides the aforementioned passage on avoiding nudity, the above is all that we have in the Quran regarding dress code.

Of the verses addressed to women, the second one above has been a cause for much debate; what does it mean that "they will be recognized and so will not be hurt"? The main interpretation that the Iranian exegete al-

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[11] The Quran, verse 24:30.
[12] The Quran, verse 24:31.
[13] The Quran, verse 33:59.

Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE) mentions in his famous commentary on the Quran is that free women should dress more modestly compared to slave women so that they may be recognized as free women and thus not treated with disrespect.[14] Three centuries later, the Iranian exegete al-Rāzī (d. 1210 CE) offers a more universal interpretation. He says that the "recognition" referred to in the verse means recognition as self-respecting women who are not interested in engaging with men who want to gaze at them lustfully.[15] The verse that follows, 33:60, adds more context:

> If the hypocrites, and those with sickness in their hearts, and the rumormongers in the City, do not desist, We will incite you against them; then they will not be your neighbors there except for a short while.

This verse suggests that the matter at issue here is sexual harassment. This harassment is not from devout Muslim men, but from the "hypocrites", men who have not bought into the Islamic "social contract" and who therefore do not desist from sexually harassing women. The advice offered in 33:59 is meant to help Muslim women deal with such men. It asks them not to present themselves to such men when dressed revealingly, because these men will harass them if they do that. By "drawing their outer garments closer to them" (meaning to go from the relaxed dress code of the home to a stricter one), they achieve two things. First, they signal their lack of interest in being lustfully admired. Second, they prevent their bodies from acting as gateways to obscenity for such men.

When men see nuns, they immediately know that these are women who should not be approached or admired sexually. Even the most degraded men often become quiet and respectful when faced with a nun. Hijab is

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[14] Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl al-Qurʾān,* ed. ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī, Giza: Dar al-Hijr, 2001, vol. 19, 180.

[15] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīh al-Ghayb,* Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981, vol. 25, 231.

meant to do the same for Muslim women, signaling to such men that these are women who are not interested in being sexually admired or flirted with, and additionally, providing no temptation for such treatment.

The hijab is partly technology for dealing with men who are described as either "hypocrites" or "sick at heart" in verse 33:60. And partly it is for the benefit of all men, helping discourage their libidos from finding anything to sexually admire in a woman. Despite the fact that they are told not to gaze lustfully at women, the anti-obscenity policy is enforced on both ends: men are told to resist the temptation to objectify women through lustful gazes, women are told not to provide temptation for being objectified.

Due to the differences between the sexuality of the male and the female, dress code is not as important when it comes to males. This is something recognized by society after society throughout the world. The male body does not act as a gateway to obscenity as much as the female body does, for this reason the male is allowed to expose more of his body. In middle and upper class societies throughout the world, however, men too are required to dress up; it is unacceptable for a man to be topless, for example, in English, Kurdish or Japanese society. People will see it as gross and indecent if he were to wear only shorts in a formal social gathering. This is not because of a deficiency in "men's rights" in those societies; it is because hiding the male body helps keep social interactions closer to the human side.

Westerners find the hijab confusing, intimidating and unnecessary. I am perfectly capable of treating a woman with respect and honor regardless of what she wears, so what is the point of her wrapping herself up like that? The point, of course, is the same as why Western men and women do not go about naked. Nudity makes civilized conduct more difficult due to

revealing too much of the animal in us. It requires too much mental effort to treat a woman as an individual when a man can see her naked breasts. The same would be true for a woman if she could see a man's penis while talking to him.

Nudist resorts show us that we are capable of maintaining civilized societies even if we go about naked. But most people do not prefer that lifestyle, it requires too much effort; it is too distracting to deal with naked people all day (especially if you constantly run into strangers whose character you cannot trust). It is far more comfortable and relaxing when society is dressed up. No good is served by a very old woman being naked at dinner. We will find it repulsive; her body will constantly and unnecessarily *intrude* on our human experience.

The hijab helps a Muslim woman go about her day without having her sexuality intrude into her interactions. She is less likely to suffer a demeaning lustful glance from one of the hundreds of men she runs into during her day. By having both men and women dress modestly, the public sphere is cleared of sexuality, so that people can get down to business without obscenity intruding.

The author of the Quran is enough of a realist to know that merely telling people to avoid lustful glances is not sufficient to prevent it. It will be sufficient for some people, but not all people. For this reason dress code is added as a second defense against obscenity. By removing the temptation to gaze lustfully at a woman, the frequency of lustful gazes drops far more than if we were to merely tell people to not gaze lustfully.

The Quran's vagueness when it comes to the hijab allows for the great diversity seen in the dress codes of Muslim societies. The hijab is not meant to impose, it is rather meant to *free* both men and women from the degradation that comes from obscenity. Men are less likely to be tempted to obscenely gaze at women, and women are less likely to suffer such gazes.

Men will *necessarily* be tempted to engage in obscenity when faced with revealingly-dressed women, those with self-control and honor will overcome the temptation, those without will lustfully gaze at her and in this way make her and themselves degraded. The hijab is there to eliminate this dynamic. It is there to *civilize* male-female interactions by hiding away the animal and its physical attractions and desires. Many people will be able to maintain highly honorable and civilized interactions with the opposite sex regardless of dress code. The problem is that not *all* people can do that, and not all the time. A self-respecting man who finds it easy today to not lustfully gaze at a revealingly dressed woman may find it much more difficult a week from now when, for whatever hormonal reason, his sex drive is far more active. The Quran wants to tame and reform the animal in us so that we can remain civilized and human at all times despite all the challenges that the animal poses to us.

A mania for unveiling

In Western thinking, it is common to think of the hijab (and other restrictions on sexual expression and behavior) as a limitation, an imposition, a degradation, that is *forced* on women. It should first be noted that this view is breathtakingly misogynistic and dehumanizing toward Muslim women. You can hardly find a medieval Islamic scholar who looks down on Muslim women as helpless animals totally devoid of agency, willpower, dignity and self-assertion. Yet the self-elected modern saviors of Muslim women look at them almost like that. *Muslim women are not humans, but we can help make them so!*

The thought is often expressed, overtly or otherwise, that when women are brought up in a wholesome Muslim family wearing the hijab, they will have "bottled up" tensions that will cause problems later on. This banal analysis that a 6 year-old could come up with is somehow considered the height of enlightened thinking, that 1.6 billion Muslims need to be shown

it so that they too may come out of their Dark Age into the Age of Enlightenment where men are not denied the benefits of seeing exposed cleavage and women enjoy the benefit of being judged by their hair styles.

Thinking that Islam's restrictions on sexuality cause issues is as naïve as saying that forcing people to not urinate in public causes issues since it is a limitation on their self-expression. Why do we restrict people's self-expression by preventing them from urinating in public?

The reason civilized societies prohibit public expressions of urination is that bodily functions are *distracting and degrading* when performed in public. We shun people who act thus, punish them, curb their desires, restrict them, impede them, cramp their freedoms, by telling them to use the bathroom. We do this because it is necessary in order to maintain the functioning of our societies as civilized, human societies where people are treated like individuals, not like things. A person who urinates right in front of us *imposes his body and its functions on us*, and by that he grosses us out and repulses us. Therefore most people have sufficient common sense to recognize that there is no need to bring urination out of the bathroom.

Islam's view is that, similarly, there is no need for a movement to bring sex out of the bedroom. It is right and justified that public expressions of sexuality are suppressed and that there is a taboo against discussing the intricacies of sex at dinner. Sex is a bodily function *except* when it involves the erotic love of a couple for each other, only then it becomes something more. And the only place where this erotic love can be celebrated without it being obscene is in private. As soon as a third person's perspective is invited into the mix, the act becomes obscene, because this third person's perspective sees the sex act in its physicality, there is no erotic love involved for this person.

There is no way to experience human sexuality without it being obscene *unless* it involves erotic love for another individual.

We all have sufficient common sense to know that it is gross for a family to sit in the living room and watch a pornographic video on the television, even if the children are all adults. This is not because of unresolved psychological issues as a Freudian might say. It is because whenever we observe others in their sexuality, we stop seeing them as humans, and by extension, we are reminded of our own bodies, which are *brought to the foreground*, with our individuality thrown to the background. The family members suddenly "wake up" to their own bodies like Adam and Eve. They start to wonder how to interact with one another. Communally watching a pornographic video makes a very strong *statement*: *It is OK to see humans as mere bodies and take sexual pleasure from them without caring for them as persons.*

That horrible statement causes a feeling of extreme awkwardness and alienation among the family members. The *moral* of a pornographic video is that humans are just bodies. So why should I respect my father, who is just a body? And why should I not sexually admire my sister, she too is just a body. It starts to feel like a silly pretension that we family members take each other so seriously when we are all just bodies with bodily desires. What is wrong with having sex with one's sister when this is merely the satisfaction of a physical desire, similar to eating ice cream?

In fact, there is much literature with scientific pretensions (that of "sexology") designed—by people deeply sunk in obscenity—to pass off sexuality as if it is nothing but physical desire, to convince us that all sexual morality is pretension and superstition.

But we know instinctively that there is something wrong with this picture. We know that there is no such thing as a wholesome family life if pornography is watched on TV by all of the members together.

Pornography celebrates humans as mere bodies while family life celebrates humans as *persons having infinite worth*, not as mere bodies. There is an *inherent contradiction* between family life and the watching of pornography. One of them celebrates the body, the other celebrates the person. The two things are opposed because the more we focus on the body, the less we can see the person, and the more we focus on the person, the less we can sense their bodies.

The best social interactions are those where we feel that it is our hearts and minds that are meeting rather than our bodies. It is for this reason that talking in the dark feels so intimate and comfortable; we can fully forget about our physicality and talk as if we were nothing but intellect and conscience.

Pornography does not increase social intimacy, it destroys it. It makes it difficult for us to see others as persons by constantly conditioning our brains to see other humans as pieces of flesh.

Watching pornography communally *makes a political statement* about the relationship between the watchers. We become bodies to each other, we stop being individuals. A group of men walking out of a theater after watching a pornographic movie there will *absolutely not* be able to look each other in the eyes and respect one another as individuals. They, with shame and furtiveness, with fear and loathing, will get away as quickly as they can from the scene of that degrading debauchery.

Islam, through its various teachings, helps de-pornographize society. If we were to consider again the family that watched pornography together, if they were to become practicing Muslims, besides ceasing that activity, the mother will start to wear clothing that covers her cleavage so that her son's attention is not needlessly drawn to her body. The daughter will do the same. The females will wear hijab and *start to identify less and less with their bodies* and *more and more as persons*. Pornography destroys social

intimacy by making the body paramount; Islam stands opposite to it, rebuilding social intimacy by taking the body out of the picture as much as possible.

Islam, by suppressing public expressions of sexuality, *frees* society from the oppression of the body. The more I see my father as a body, the less I can respect him, because he is made exactly equal to myself. But the more I can see him as a person within a social context, the more I can respect him. The same applies to everyone else around me. The hijab is there to de-emphasize the female body, the way that male clothing is there to de-emphasize the male body. Both of them help create freedom by taking our physicality out of the way so that we are no longer judged for our bodies, so that we start to identify as *persons* with a place in society rather than as cheap bodies belonging to an animal class made of billions of similar bodies. We stop being collections of atoms and become persons of infinite worth with places reserved for us in society.

We do not like to think of members of the opposite sex that we love and respect (such as favorite writers or professors) as having sex organs and as using the bathroom, even though we know theoretically that they must have them and do so, because we like to experience a connection of the heart and mind with them. Their bodies have nothing to contribute to this. If your favorite writer slips on a banana peel on his way to the podium, if he farts loudly, if he burps or throws up, all of these things make you aware of him as a body and make it harder to take him seriously. You may be able to get over it if this happens once. But if *every time* he was to give a speech he acted thus, you would want to have nothing to do with him.

Islam provides dress codes for both males and females. It is just that the dress code for women is slightly more involved due to the all-too-real genetic and social differences between the sexes. A man's libido responds

instantly to an exposed female body. He always has to *exert effort* to avoid obscenely admiring her. If he is a good man, he exerts that effort. If he is not, or he is experiencing low willpower at the moment, he will succumb to the temptation. But a woman, when faced with a shirtless man, does not instantly respond to him. She keeps her cool and can ignore him with little effort. It requires effort on her part to feel sexually attracted to him.

There are thousands of websites on the Internet dedicated to displaying pictures of scantily clad or unclad anonymous women. There is no equivalent phenomenon dedicated to scantily clad or unclad *anonymous* men. Women would not find such websites interesting (except perhaps a very small minority of them), even if they had no moral difficulty with perusing such materials—because that is not how their sexuality works. For females, sexual desire is a background to social context; she needs to know a man well before she can judge whether he is worth being attracted to. For males, sexual desire is at the forefront, he can instantly feel attracted to a female without knowing anything else about her.

Women never fall in love at first sight; they must always know more about a man. She will quickly lose interest in a most attractive-looking man if she were to discover he is jobless, degree-less and lives in his mother's basement. Men fall in love at first sight all the time; they often could not care less about a woman's job, degree or position in society if she is beautiful and does not have any significant character flaws.

Evolutionary psychology answers why things are so; male sexuality is designed to be *opportunistic*, male primates are designed to never miss sexual opportunities presented to them. Female primates, on the other hand, are designed to be *discriminatory*, a female primate needs to know the male somewhat well before she decides he deserves her. She requires *social proof* of his worth. If she sleeps with the wrong male, she may get abandoned during pregnancy, or her children may lack a strong male to

support and care for them. She needs to worry about all of these before she decides a male deserves her. And for this reason her sexuality is genetically designed to be slow-acting and discriminatory.[16]

Scientifically, there is nothing strange about Islam providing different dress codes for different sexes. Each sex has its own sexual characteristics, therefore it is quite short-sighed, even if fashionable, to act as if there are no practical differences between the sexes. Islam has to deal with the difficult issue of civilizing primates whose males and females have differing sexual natures and aims. To accomplish this, it teaches them both to avoid lustful gazes, while compensating for the male's opportunistic sexuality by making it more difficult for him to see exposed female bodies.

Westerners who have never entered a Muslim home may imagine that the hijab causes Muslims to think about sexuality *all the time*, when the reality is the *exact opposite*; the hijab takes sexuality out of the picture. It should be mentioned that women do not wear the hijab in front of close relatives, so inside the home, the majority of women do not actually wear the hijab. But when a male visitor comes, they put on the hijab, and then interact with him the way any Western woman would interact with a visitor, the difference being that the male visitor focuses on her as a person and his opportunistic sexual desire is not given encouragement through being given a glimpse of the woman's desirable body.

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[16] Men on average have ten times the levels of testosterone as women; see Richard G. Bribiescas, *Men: Evolutionary and Life History*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008, 159. The activity of the libido in both males and females is strongly dependent on testosterone; see Steven Platek, Julian Keenan and Todd Shackelford, *Evolutionary Cognitive Neuroscience,* Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2007, 246-248.

Muslims do not think about sexuality when thinking about the hijab. It is about propriety. A Western businessman does not need to think about sexuality all the time in order to know to put his pants on in the morning. He does it out of habit; it is what his society has taught him. The same way, Muslim women put on their hijabs when going out or receiving male visitors. It feels *improper* for her to show her cleavage to a man, the same way that it feels improper for a Western male to show his underpants in public.

There is no good to be served by having strangers admire your wife or daughter's bodies. Islam helps prevent the dynamic of lust by requiring modesty from both sexes. Imagining that this causes psychological issues or sexual dysfunction is uninformed fantasizing.

It is true that strictness over the hijab and thinking of females as loose sexual cannons that must be controlled, as is believed by the Wahhabi minority, can be psychologically harmful. But has anyone done a study to find out just how common such problematic cases are? And what are the differences between Muslim families that wear the hijab and the ones that do not? It is quite possible that *not wearing the hijab* brings with it far more problems than wearing it. Perhaps 1% of Muslim families suffer psychological issues directly attributable to the hijab, but perhaps that pales in comparison to the 2% of Muslim families that have abandoned the hijab, who suffer other and more serious types of problem.

Those who write about the issues of gender and sexuality among Muslims are often psychologists and social workers who only get to deal with the problematic cases, and this gives them the highly skewed view that the cases they see are the norm rather than the exception. They are like doctors at a cancer ward who, seeing so many cases of cancer every day, become convinced that everyone has it.

Look at any Islamic publication, magazine or blog and you will often meet the activist who says that our community needs to "talk more" about sex, that we need to remove the "stigma" on sexuality, that that taboo on sexuality is somehow doing harm. I have nothing against people reading books on sexuality and I am in fact considering writing a highly scientific book on sex education for Muslim adolescents. But the idea that as a society we need to become comfortable with talking about sex in public is utter nonsense.

The concept of doing real scientific research and using "controls" is quite foreign to such well-intentioned activists who are ready to destroy social protocols and customs without a care that doing so may have unintended consequences.

If talking more about sex reduces that 1% of problematic cases (extremely doubtful, since sexual identity issues seem to be almost always associated with parental *cruelty* rather than how often they talk about sex), but if it gives rise to a new and more serious problem, that of people respecting their parents, relatives and spouses less and of considering sexuality a pornographic part of life rather than a personal and erotic one, then talking more about sex will actually destroy the very thing these people thing it will accomplish.

Becoming more comfortable with sexuality does not make us appreciate it more; and it makes appreciate it less. In the early 20th century, many writers, such as Aldous Huxley, Jean-Paul Sartre and the American diarist Arthur Crew Inman thought that they would achieve a higher plane of existence by abandoning the foolish taboos of Victorian Christianity. Did they achieve the spiritual sexual utopia they worked for? Not at all. What they achieved was a life of darkness and misery. When in your social circle every man has had sex with every woman and every woman with every man, this does not heighten your pleasure in life and your love for these

fellow humans. It rather does the opposite. Being so submerged in the sexuality of everyone around us makes us stop seeing them as persons. Inman thought that he could have sexual relations with a wide number of women and girls around him and still be loved and taken seriously by his wife. But the story of his 30 years of marriage was one of his wife looking down on him and being disgusted by him (and cheating on him with a man who treated her like a person). He thought that by breaking the sex taboo he would enjoy life more. But he enjoyed it much less. A wife can no longer see her husband as a "husband" with an inviolable social place when she keeps imagining him as a naked body with other naked bodies. The word "husband" becomes quite meaningless because it is a social word applied to persons, not to animal bodies. And so does the word "wife". Respect for one another breaks down, and love is extinguished. The husband's naked body can unite with *any* attractive female body, the wife is made to feel replaceable and degraded, she too is just a body among so many bodies that her husband has access to.[17]

Merely speaking more freely about sexuality will not bring such dramatic harm, but where do we draw the line? Every effort to bring sexuality "out of the bedroom" threatens to bring us closer to obscenity. There is, in fact, no way for a family to talk about sex without suffering a tiny bit of obscenity. I do not want to think of my parents as having sex organs, but if they talk about sex freely, that is just what I am made to think of. The more I think of them as having sex organs, the more I am made aware of them as bodies, as animals, and the more I forget about their personhood. The two are always opposed; the more we think of the person, the less important their body becomes, and the more we think of their body, the less important the person becomes.

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[17] See Arthur Crew Inman, *The Inman Diary*, ed. Daniel Aaron, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1985, 2 vols.

A civilized society will continue to strictly limit public expressions of sexuality the way it limits public expressions of other bodily functions. If this causes problems, we should compare it with the problems caused by its opposite (removing the limits), instead of judging the issue in a vacuum like everyone possessed with unveiling mania does.

I should clarify that limiting public expressions of sexuality does not mean to limit information about it, similar to the way that limiting public expressions of urination is not opposed to the study of the urinary tract.

Relations between the sexes

What is the Islamic policy toward the way the sexes should conduct themselves toward one another?

I imagine that both Muslim writers and Western researchers will go on to quote from the Quran, hadith, medieval texts and modern scholarly opinions to tell us the "Islamic opinion" on this matter.

In reality, Islam tells us *very little* about how the sexes should conduct themselves toward one another. A few points of definition determine limits on behavior, but everything else is left blank for the culture to fill in. Asking a Muslim about Islam's opinion on the relationship between the sexes will cause them to give an answer that largely reflects their own cultural practices.

Based on the available Islamic literature, we can defend and attack almost any opinion on ideas about proper conduct between the sexes. We can speak of the way women intermingled with men in Medina and bravely voiced their own opinions and disagreements. We can speak of how Umar, one of the most intimidating characters of Islamic history, was supposedly dominated by his wife. We can speak of Aisha's independence of mind in not easily forgiving the Prophet Muhammad for doubting her chastity. Her sense of dignity was so great that she did not servilely submit

to the Prophet, despite his supposedly being God's messenger. We can speak of the opinions of the *salaf* (the Pious Predecessors, referring to the early generations of Muslims) regarding how the best women are never seen by the eyes of strangers.

This contradictory mixture of signals has little bearing on the way real-life Muslims conduct themselves. The core of Islam is made up of a few simple ideas, such as the oneness and transcendence of God and the truth of the Prophet Muhammad and his mission; the necessity of praying, fasting and doing a few other obligatory things; the necessity to avoid wine and a few other things. The more distant we get from this core, the fuzzier, less binding and more culturally-colored the concepts become. The core drives Islam, the fuzzy cloud of concepts that surrounds them provides inspiration, but is counterbalanced by cultural concepts. This vast fuzzy cloud may contain concepts that support having zero contact with members of the opposite sex unless absolutely necessary, while also strangely containing other concepts mentioning men and women interacting casually or learning about religion together. The confused mess is largely ignored; few people other than religious scholars bother to read medieval religious literature. This leaves most choices to the culture and common sense of the people.

Each Islamic culture has its own conceptual framework regarding the proper way for the sexes to conduct themselves toward one another, and among them different sections of society have different practices. Among Iranian peoples, both Sunni and Shia, it is common for families to visit other families and sit together, with men and women mixed, something that a militant Wahhabi may find "un-Islamic". Yet these Iranians see nothing wrong with this; to them the very concept of bringing religion into this well-established cultural practice is nonsensical, almost obscene (in that it treats these humans as misguided animals who can enjoy such a wide cultural practice without sensing that it is wrong). They have read

the Quran and books of hadith. They know what is good and what is evil; they are blessed with reason and conscience and can tell when something evil is taking place. A person who calls their way of life un-Islamic when they carry out all that Islam clearly asks them to do is merely being rude.

The reason these Muslims can comfortably sit together in a mixed gathering is not that they are less Islamic. They know what is Islam and what is merely Arab culture. They intrinsically appreciate the "smallness" of Islam, the fact that it is not a total system of definition but rather a system that leaves most decisions to humans themselves and their clutures.

A Muslim who follows the ethics and morality of the Quran, and who is endowed with reason and conscience, is capable of making sense of almost any situation on his or her own without having to consult a jurist. For instance, Wahhabis say that celebrating birthdays is *ḥarām* ('forbidden by Islam'), while, to many other Muslims, the very thought of asking a jurist whether one can celebrate birthdays or not feels so dimwitted that it would make them laugh.

It is in fact a common genre of humor in the Middle East to satirize ridiculous religious rulings. If reason, conscience and the Quran do not tell me that there is something wrong with celebrating birthdays, a Muslim who says so better come up with some very convincing evidence in support of their absurd opinion.

Learning about the intricacies of the science of hadith and Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), instead of making one a fundamentalist, actually takes one in the opposite direction; one is made to recognize more room for interpretation. This makes a person more respectful of diverging opinions and makes them recognize the smallness of Islam compared to the largeness of culture within society's conceptual framework.

An urban legend among Christian missionaries is that the Quran never uses the word "love". Our harsh religion of sand and camels could not possibly recognize this human emotion. This illusion is easily dispelled by a few verses from the Quran:

> ...those who have faith are stronger in their love for God...[18]

> ...God does not love those who transgress.[19]

> ...God loves the doers of good.[20]

> ...God does not love corruption.[21]

> Say: "If you truly love God, then follow me, and God will love you..."[22]

It is true, however, that the topic of love between man and woman is not covered in detail by the Quran, although it does receive a mention:

> And of His signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves, so that you may find tranquility in them; and He

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[18] The Quran, verse 2:165.

[19] The Quran, verse 2:190.

[20] The Quran, verse 2:195.

[21] The Quran, verse 2:205.

[22] The Quran, verse 3:31.

planted love (*mawadda*[23]) and compassion between you. In this are signs for people who reflect.[24]

A person who thinks Islam should be a total religion may think that this is a sign that Islam "teaches" that love is not very important. And looking at "Islamic" books, such as books of legal commentary by medieval religious scholars, one has difficulty finding any mention of love between the sexes.

But of course, the idea that a religion should teach men to love women is nonsense. This is part of the blank space that religion leaves to culture. Arab culture has had a thriving tradition of love poetry (*ghazal*) beginning from before Islam and continuing to the present day. The Arabian *Romeo and Juliet*-style story of virgin love, *Layla and Majnun*, has been celebrated since at least the 9th century CE. Love, being such a powerful force in our lives, does not need religion's encouragement. In fact, a sensible religion should dampen it in order to ensure that love remains within the bounds of civilization and does not devolve into obscenity.

Islam leaves each culture to celebrate love the way it sees fit the way each culture is free to develop its own cuisine. A kind Creator would certainly give us what we need in order to experience the joys of love. But he does not need to do that through religion if he has already provided it in our genes and spirits. Our human experience pushes us strongly toward love,

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[23] From the root w-d-d, which literally means "to lovingly wish for" (see Ibn al-Athīr al-Jazarī, *al-Nihāya fī Gharīb al-Ḥadīth wa-l-Athar*, ed. ʿAlī al-Ḥalabī al-Atharī, al-Dammam: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1421/2000, 964). This word is different from the more common *ḥubb* ('love') that is used in the verses quoted earlier. From the w-d-d root also derives one of the Attributes of God in the Quran; al-Wadūd (the Loving One). *Mawaddah* has a platonic, rather than erotic, sense to it since it includes God's love for His servants and a man's love for his friend (See al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qurʾān*, [Mecca]: Maktabat Nizār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, n.d., 669-670).

[24] The Quran, verse 30:21.

so strongly that we are at times tempted to abandon religion for its sake. This phenomenon is needless of religion's encouragement.

Islam, of course, provides many important teachings toward conducting love in the best manner possible. It prohibits forcing women to marry someone they do not want,[25] it also prohibits preventing women from marrying people they want to marry.[26]

A common theme among works by detractors of religion, both in the West and the East, is the concept that religion stands in opposition to love. Films, including Iranian ones, often celebrate the attractive and noble young man and woman whose love is impeded by religion, often incarnated in the form of the woman's religiously conservative father who as the story progresses is taught, through difficult lesson after lesson, to become more human. Such stories are touching and are enjoyed widely in the Middle East. Devout Muslim viewers do not see such stories as being about love versus religion. They instead see them as being about the difficult politics of family life when one has a close relative whose rigid ideas make him less human. For devout Muslims the story *obviously* has nothing to do with religion per se because there are gentle and kind men all around them who do not act like that father in that film. But for an irreligious viewer, the story is *obviously* about Islam and its problems; the father in the story is the proof for that.

The view of culture as a man-made mosaic with religious elements should help put an end to the circular arguments about Islam and its relationship with love and to women's status. Islam's goal is to prevent negative behaviors by prohibiting obscenity in all its manifestations so that society may function as a *human* society made of persons, not animals. It provides

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[25] The Quran, verse 24:33.
[26] The Quran, verse 2:232.

the infrastructure needed for preventing humans from sinking into the animal world. Beyond that, it leaves humans to themselves.

Social integration

Islamic law does not have anything strict to say on the topic of romance. As religious scholars admit, falling in love is something we cannot help. But there are ways to engage in romantic relationships that fit within Islam's framework of ethics and morality, and there are ways that conflict with it. Islam is not made to be applied in a vacuum. It is assumed that people who embrace Islam will, generation after generation, build their own culture around it, using its morality and ethical teachings to create their own standards of manners, etiquette and appropriate behavior. We see this in all Muslim societies. They often have a vast set of standards of behavior that cannot be found in any religious text. The reason for this is simple. Human life is so complicated that there is no way to define every single detail of life in a religious text. Rather, Islam provides general guidelines, people fill out the specifics except in those rare cases where specifics are given (such as in the case of dividing an inheritance).

In Islam the appropriate, safe and socially integrated way for a man and woman to be in a relationship is through marriage. In many Western societies that have lost their religious beliefs, marriage is just a formality. Many people engage in intimate relationships without seeing a need for officially marrying. That is the primitive, natural way for humans to do things. Islam (and Christianity, and Judaism, and most sophisticated cultures) add an extra layer of formality to the relationships between men and women that greatly complicate matters.

This formality enables the man and woman to relate to each other as *socially integrated humans*. A religiously conservative husband (assuming he is a relatively well-educated and civilized man) does not just see his wife

as a piece of attractive flesh that can be treated however he likes. The solemnity of marriage, the fact that it involves so many people's approval and attention, means that he is forced to look at her and see her not just as a body, but as someone's daughter, someone's sister, someone's niece. She is not detached from her society and background. She is a great deal greater than her body and her personality.

And that means he is forced to respect her as a person. He is beholden to dozens of other people who will all have something to say about it if he mistreats her. Through constant interactions with her family, he is reminded over and over again that she is more than just a body, that she is a person with an honored social status.

Theoretically, we can have such relationships without involving our families; we do not need our families to force us to be nice and considerate toward our spouses. But the reality is that human nature always "reverts to the mean". At the beginning of a romantic relationship we can treat the other person with the greatest consideration. But once the honeymoon is over, the couple start to take each other more and more for granted and start to do less and less for each other. This is something that has been experienced by most people. The point of socially integrating a romantic relationship into society is *to extend the honeymoon-level of consideration to the period that comes after the honeymoon*. That is the magic that social integration achieves and that is almost impossible to achieve without it.

A wife, in a religiously conservative society, is not just a random woman who signed some paperwork. She has a defined and honored social status. It is similar to the way a queen is honored and respected by the virtue of her social status, without anyone caring what her body or personality are like. Just by being queen, she gets all kinds of rights and privileges. In a similar way, marriage in a conservative, religious society forces men to treat women as if they are more than their bodies, their beauty or their

personalities. You can see this at work in classical English-language novels like *Pride and Prejudice*, when the West was still highly religious. Mrs. Bennet, the mother of the novel's heroine, is an extremely ignorant and annoying person. But thanks to the institution of marriage, everyone around her is forced to treat her with great respect. This is respect that she does not "deserve" if we were to look at her personal qualities. That is the point of marriage; it *integrates* people into society, gives them a status and position, and in this way protects their honor and dignity—regardless of their individual merits or failures.

Today a person like Mrs. Bennet would be made fun of by her children for being stupid and ignorant. She would probably have to take antidepressants because no one will treat her like she matters. In a society like that of *Pride and Prejudice* or like today's conservative Muslim societies, she will be treated like she matters, because the society's values and the institution of marriage force everyone around her to treat her with great respect and dignity and to take her opinions seriously regardless of how ignorant or stupid she is.

That makes her feel like she is important, like there is a place for her in society. She feels appreciated and is happy with her lot in life.

Such a system has its own problems. But as a person who has experienced such societies in countries like Iran and Iraq, and their opposite in the United States, I can say that such a social system is far superior to the disintegrated societies of the West (of course, things are not bad everywhere in the West and there are still many happy families and societies). In secular societies a woman has to prove her worth to be respected and taken seriously. In a traditional society *she does not need to prove anything*. She is a wife, a mother, a sister, an aunt, and since these social roles are taken very seriously, they grant her all the respect she

desires *without having to do anything*. She is like a queen who is born into a social position without having to work for it.

Naturally, the system also provides similar benefits to men. A wife has to treat her husband, even if he is not very intelligent or attractive or interesting, as a person who matters. In a class I was attending in Ann Arbor, Michigan, a woman said that her husband had "the most boring job in the world." It was a funny statement, but it made wonder why a woman of my society would consider it extremely vulgar for a woman to say such a thing about her husband in public. The reason, of course, is that in my society a husband is not just any random man. A wife and her husband together rule their own little private kingdom where they are honored and valued, and it would be as foolish for her to make fun of her husband as it would be for a queen to make fun of her king in public. In a religiously conservative society, a wife does not treat her husband as if he is a random male, she treats him according to the demands and duties of the offices they both hold; the offices of "husband" and "wife". It is similar to the way a company executive treats another executive; or one government official or minister treats another. They cannot treat one another as random humans who met on the street, they have to respect the office or rank held by the other person and treat them according to that.

In a religiously conservative society a marriage is an election. The extended families on both sides are given a proposal and study it until they cast their votes in favor of or against the marriage taking place. This process is sometimes taken as seriously as the cardinals take the process of electing a new pope. Once the marriage is approved, the husband and wife end up wearing the "robes of honor" that signifies their new offices or ranks that society has *elected* to give to the two of them through its approval. In a disintegrated society "walking down the aisle" does not have that much significance (although it can still be quite affecting), while in a religiously conservative society "walking down the aisle" is quite similar to the

coronation of a new king or queen and just as serious and solemn. It is how society integrates these two new people into its future. The wedding process in Islamic societies is often similar to two kingdoms coming together to agree on the formation of a new kingdom on their borders with one side providing the new king and the other the new queen.

In an Islamic society, when a man wants to marry a woman, he has to first present himself to her family. The family judges him and *casts votes* either in his favor or against him. A critic of Islam, on reading this, may jump to the conclusion that that means the family control's a woman relationships. But the woman, being part of the family, also casts her own votes. If she is in favor of the man, her vote may count as 50% of the necessary vote. If her mother also approves, that may add another 25% to the vote, meaning that the family as a whole is 75% in favor of the marriage. If the father disapproves, his 25% negative vote would have to stand against the 75% positive vote, meaning that he will be under pressure to justify himself, and this pressure may make him slowly change his mind in favor of the man. These percentages of course change from family to family, and if the woman has siblings, they too will cast their votes. Ideally, and in most cases, the marriage will *only* go forward once the man has 100% of the vote of the woman's family, and the woman has 100% of the vote of the man's family. This makes the formation of the marriage something that is done with the unanimous vote of both of their families.

Courtship

In Islam, as in *Pride and Prejudice*, the relationship between a husband and wife starts from here. The two are not merely animals who have to sign a contract before they can satisfy their animal urges. They are representatives of a human "high office" that is never forgotten. The relationship between Caleb Garth and his wife in George Eliot's

Middlemarch is a good illustration of the type of husband and wife relationship created by such a society.

Such a marital relationship does not kill sexual pleasure. It actually heightens it. If we have not sunk into obscenity, what we desire from the other sex is not merely their bodies; it is the *person* himself/herself. When I am in love with a woman, I desire her as a person, not as an object. No other woman can take her place, even if equally attractive, because it is *her* that I desire, not merely her body. When individuals who treat each other as infinitely worthy make love, it is not merely their bodies that unite (although that provides great pleasure). The greater pleasure comes from the fact that one human, with a history and a future, with freedom and responsibility, unites with another individual of similar depth.

This is what makes the difference between a "cheap" pornographic sex scene and a "romantic" scene[27] in which true lovers unite. The cheap scene is gross; they reveal to us human bodies in all their ugly, slimy physicality. The romantic scene, on the other hand, keeps sight of the individuals. I do not care that a female body is coming together with a male body, what I care about is Jane Eyre, with all of her *human* depth, coming together with Edward Rochester. The context enables the viewer to continue seeing the couple as humans, rather than as animals (although the more explicit the scene is, the more obscene it becomes, even if it is part of a touching love story).

There is never need for a romantic film to depict the sexual act; this in fact takes away from it. While it is possible to remain human while making love, *viewing other people* engaging in it always obscene. Even depicting a passionate kiss is unnecessary. Iranian films, censored by religious

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[27] Technically such a scene would be called an 'erotic' scene, but due to the way this word is commonly used to mean merely 'sexually exciting', I prefer to call it 'romantic' in this non-technical context.

authorities, are capable of portraying the most intense love scenes despite the fact that everyone keeps their clothes on and there is no touching. The romance in *Jane Eyre* is far better appreciated when the bodies of the couple do not intrude on our imagination (the novel contains no explicit scenes, yet it is a great love story). With the bodies out of the way, we can appreciate the fact of two humans intensely desiring one another *without it feeling obscene*. The atmosphere continues to be beautiful and wholesome, and this is what novels like *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice* accomplish. Everyone involved is utterly civilized, there is no lust, but there is love and desire.

What Islam (and 19th century Christianity)'s anti-obscenity and personhood-celebrating ethic create is a sexuality that is not cheap, but that is meaningful and romantic. The husband and wife continue to see each other as persons even during lovemaking.

There is perhaps no way for a one-night stand to not be obscene because a few hours are not sufficient time to discover the moral depth of another human. In order to be able to unite with another human, both of us as persons rather than mere bodies, I must first come into contact with the *human* in them, and that means observing their character. Are they cruel or kind? Are they selfish or generous? Do they have a history of noble behavior toward those around them or are they murderers and rapists? The institution of marriage forces me to come into contact with the other person's human character before consummating the union. I am forced to interact with her family and observe how her family treats her and how she treats her family. My own relatives interact with hers and in this way find out what type of humans she and her relatives are. I am forced to see her as a person with a complex social history and future, and she sees me in the same light. If we already know each other very well, for example if she and her family belong to my family's social circle, going through the process of courtship and marriage may feel like a mere formality, since we

already know each other's characters very well. But if the families are strangers, the process is important in helping avoid giving one's son or daughter to a dangerous person.

In the West, a boyfriend and girlfriend may be able to create a relationship that is just as warm, beautiful and human as that ensured by marriage in a religiously conservative society. What the institution of marriage ensures is that *such beautiful relationships should be the norm rather than the exception*. Instead of having a culture in which some boyfriend-girlfriend relationships are functional and others obscene (loveless and largely about sex in its physicality), the solemnity of marriage, and the involvement of family members in setting it up, ensures that most relationships will be closer to the human side rather than the obscene side.

A young Western man who is not used to traditional marriage and cannot comprehend the difference between an obscene relationship and a romantic one (they both involve sex, so what is the big deal?) can experience the difference in this way: he has recently met a pretty woman and has initiated a relationship with her. At the moment, he knows little about her and his interest in her is largely physical and out of a desire for the comfort that a woman's love and care brings. But if he were to visit the woman's family and see her interact with them, he will start to see her in a new light. She stops being merely a physically attractive woman. He sees her as something greater, she is an individual within a larger human society. The stakes are suddenly higher. Uniting with her no longer merely means uniting with her body and having her around in the house, it means uniting with her who is the daughter of so-and-so, sister of so-and-so, the respected friend of so-and-so. He is forced to appreciate her importance and infinite worth to *those around her*. And *this* creates the grounds for true love, love that appreciates the woman in her uniqueness the way she is appreciated by those who love her most.

A man who is used to seeing women in an obscene light will strongly dislike interacting with his girlfriend's family, because that is *too demanding*. He prefers to be only beholden to himself and his desires, and to treat his girlfriend with the minimum effort that he thinks she deserves. Involving his girlfriend's family in his relationship brings down on him the heavy burden of having to live up to their expectations, and of treating their daughter the way they themselves treat her. In their presence, he may pretend to be more civilized and caring toward her, while once out of their sight, he may immediately revert to treating her with indifference.

The ideal, non-obscene relationship that stands against the above is the one where a man always sees his woman in her social context, as if her loved ones are always present. His behavior does not change in front of her family compared to when they are in private. He always maintains the same respect and consideration for her. This is the secret of the beauty of the world of *Pride and Prejudice*. Men always saw their women as social persons. Mr. Darcy loved Elizabeth as an honored member of her society.

Marriage in Islam (and Christianity) is about helping human sexuality remain within the bounds of humanity, preventing it from sinking into the obscene animal world. Rather than stifling sexuality, it takes it to new heights by ensuring that even during love-making, both partners keep sight of the irreplaceability and infinite worth of the other. In fact, as Roger Scruton argues, the heights of erotic pleasure available in a conservative society are impossible to be had in a sunk society that only sees sex as an item of physical pleasure. In such a society, the possibility of enjoying a higher form of sexuality will sound like a myth. People from that society will think that conservative societies need to take off their "shackles" in order to enjoy better sex, when in reality what they call for is the dark dead-end of gross, animal sexuality that knows nothing more and is *incapable* of knowing more, because, having taken off the shackles that make human society *human*, what remains is a slimy animal society where

nothing and no one matters very much and where everyone merely floats in Sartre's *visqueux.*

Some Western men, knowing that every woman they meet has already had many sexual partners, see themselves as replaceable and disposable to women. Highly popular songs like Beyonce's *Irreplaceable* proudly advocate for considering men replaceable. In such a world, what is the point of worshiping this woman who might still have a soft place for a former sexual partner, and who, in a month or two, might be sleeping with another man? This cynical attitude toward relationships reduces trust and reduces marriage and fertility rates, since the erotic desire that binds a man to his wife and his wife to him, the seeing of one another as irreplaceable, is absent from most relationships in this culture. The conservative marriage system, by turning sexual relationships into an official and solemn relation, ensures that relationships are not abandoned casually, that cynicism is not developed, and that the couple see each other within a social context most of the time, in this way forcing them to keep sight of the irreplaceability and infinite worth of each other.

Sex, when it is merely physical, ends with orgasm. In the erotic love of Muslims and traditional Christians, however, sex is merely an episode in a much larger love story. The music never stops.

Islamic societies are not without their problems; not every marriage is full of love, and not everyone is kind and generous. But within the limits of our humanity and its attendant weaknesses, Islam, as applied by people with intelligence and common sense, leads to a society that is *better* than what can be achieved without it. In reviews of *Pride and Prejudice* (both the book and its film adaptations), I have seen many Western women pine for living in a similar society. In reply to them, others mention the problems of that time, such as women's lack of opportunities and the existence of strict class distinctions. The Islamic society I come from is the

world of *Pride and Prejudice* shorn of all of the problems that make it unacceptable to a civilized contemporary person. Yes, the women around me wear the hijab, and I respect them all the more for it.

The non-marital

I have stayed clear of the issue of homosexuality since my aim has been to explain the types of relationships encouraged by Islam. In Islam's view, while there is nothing wrong homosexual attraction, acting upon such an attraction is similar to acting upon an attraction to a member of the opposite sex that one is not married to. The attraction is natural, the acting upon it is forbidden for a supposed greater good. Islam considers homosexual sexual acts "obscene" (*fāḥish*), similar to the way that sex outside of marriage is "obscene". Obscenity, as has been discussed, is any expression or behavior that takes humans from individuals to animals by overemphasizing the body and its nature and demands. Non-marital sex is obscene (when it is not normalized in a society) because it is antisocial; it goes against the presently maintained social order. Similar to a family's watching of pornography, engaging in non-marital sex is a *political statement* about the nature of the relationships of the individuals in that society.

Political statements are either in support of the present social order or are opposed to it. A family's communal watching of pornography shatters the fabric of society because it causes family members to start to have an obscene view of one another. Rather than enjoying a warm family life with everyone feeling irreplaceable as father, mother, son and daughter, the family members start to feel as if they were replaceable bodies defined by their physicality rather than their social personhood. When this happens, it becomes natural to judge one's father for his physical shape and to not take his opinions and wishes seriously. He is made of the same stuff as myself, both of us are physical beings controlled by physical forces,

so what right does one animal have to tell another animal what to do? His being a father is just an accident of history; it is ridiculous to say it causes me to have any duties toward him.

That is the obscene type of thinking that Islam wants to prevent by ensuring that individuals, rather than physical bodies, are at the forefront of our interactions with our fellow humans. Non-marital sex is obscene because it prefers a couple's wishes to the wishes of their families and society. Even if they are in love and consider one another irreplaceable, they are attacking society by acting as if two humans have the right to be intimate without reference to the other people they are related to. No one is "harmed" by an non-marital relationship, similar to the way that watching pornography communally causes no observable harm. What is harmed is society, this thing that is so fashionable to dislike and criticize. In a well-functioning society, as that of *Pride and Prejudice*, a man and woman who desire one another have to go through a ritual that *integrates* their relationship into society. This enables the man to continue respecting everyone around him, and the woman to continue respecting everyone around her, and who all in turn continue to respect them even more than before.

But if this man and woman allow their love and desire to overcome them so that they start an non-marital relationship, this is a very strong political statement; the man tells the woman's family: you guys are just a bunch of bodies, rather than individuals of infinite worth whose opinion matters very much to our self-conception. The man says the same to his own family. And the woman says the same both to the man's family and to her own family. Such a society therefore treats a non-marital affair as you would expect; as a catastrophe and political attack. It shakes everyone's social position; a mother can no longer tell her relationship to her daughter; before, she was "Mother", now she is just a female body who happens to have given birth to this woman. A father who loves her

daughter and has treated her as the light of his life will feel as if he has been punched by her; he will feel as if his relationship with her has been a lie the entire time. How could she ignore his wishes, when previously he though himself infinitely worthy and important to her?

In a conservative society sexual relationships have to be integrated into socially-acceptable forms, because any celebration of sexuality that is not socially integrated weakens society and threatens to disintegrate it, similar to a celebration of any other bodily function. Urination is safely integrated by having it take place in the bathroom. If it takes place in the living room, and if this is normalized, it will change the nature of society. A business conference turns into a hilarious farce if old man after man gets on the table to urinate into a bottle when he feels the need. This is not just a funny scene; it completely changes the relationship of these men to each other. They start to see each other less as persons and more as buffoons defined by their bodies and their body's functions.

Society forbids incest; a brother and sister who have an incestuous sexual relationship threaten to tear their family apart. This is a case of sexuality that is not integrated into society. Even if it is consensual, even if the brother and sister are both adults, and even if no one is harmed by their relationship, the relationship is wrong because it is non-integrable. A modern or post-modern society may come to the conclusion that a ban on incest is a silly vestige of the past and may try to eradicate incestophobia by celebrating incestuous relationships, such as in films. What would happen to such a society if incest is made normal and commonplace, so that fathers found it a run-of-the-mill thing to have sex with their daughters when the desire struck them and when the daughters were willing? What takes place is that the family stops being one. The relationships between the family members become confused. The mother-daughter relationship will be completely changed if both have a sexual relationship with the same man. Is there any way to make this wholesome? There is not,

because what is at issue is the fundamental nature of human sexuality. It is physically impossible for a father and son to take one another seriously as persons while sleeping with the same woman.

And once those barriers have been breached, why should the mother and daughter not have sex with the father simultaneously? And why should not the father and son also have sex? Once the lines of the family are blurred by incest, the logical conclusion is that anything and everything goes, there is nowhere to draw the line;.

What is lost by this "freedom" to engage in incest is the comfort and warmth of the family atmosphere, which will be irrevocably destroyed. A daughter will no longer be able to point to that man and proudly say "That is my father" or "That is my brother". She can no longer identify as a daughter or sister in relationship to these men. She is a female animal who has sex with these two male animals. She no longer has a *place* within a family. She lives in a cold and harsh new world of physicality, the world discovered by everyone who has abandoned society to experiment with sexual hedonism.

It is a good thing to *limit* the daughter's sexuality so that she is no allowed to sleep with her father and brother. This limitation on their freedom preserves her place in her family and society. Destroying this place is the beginning of feeling lonely, lost and homeless in this world. The taboo on incest is a good thing because it preserves our places as individuals within society. It is fashionable to attack society for its shortcomings, but this is like attacking the electricity company for not providing an ideal service. It is extremely dangerous, suicidally foolish, to want to destroy society and its customs because of its shortcomings, thinking that one can bring something better in its place. There is no better alternative. One either chooses to accept society so that one enjoys being celebrated and appreciated as an individual, or they leave society and work to destroy it,

so that they end up being mere animals controlled by the harsh, physical laws of nature.

A man may laugh at the idea of marriage and go on to sleep with prostitutes instead, thinking that society is foolish to want to put limits on his freedoms. But what he discovers is that while marriage offers him the priceless benefit of being considered an infinitely worthy, loved and appreciated individual within a social context, sexual hedonism offers him nothing but quick spurts of excitement in a world that is dull and grey and loveless and lonely.

The prohibition on non-marital sex in Islam (and other wise societies) is aimed at the preservation of the place of the person within society. You can only have a wholesome life if your sex life is conducted in a way that enables everyone around you to *continue loving, respecting and admiring you*. If you want to continue living in the warm and loving atmosphere of the family, your sex life should be something that your family approves of, rather than something that shocks the family and threatens its foundations.

Marriage is about safely integrating sex lives with the life of society, so that sexuality neither damages the couple nor those around them.

In the West, boyfriend-girlfriend relationships have become socially acceptable, and since many people seem to have reasonably wholesome and successful relationships, one may mistakenly think that this means that marriage is not essential to society anymore. Such relationships *are* actually marriages, they just are not called by that name. The requirements of fidelity and social acceptance remain. A marriage is simply a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship that has been upgraded. To put it another way, the boyfriend-girlfriend system is a defective marriage system. It is a type of marriage lacking many of the formalities and protections that an ordinary marriage contains, so that the boyfriend and girlfriend are encouraged to

be far less responsible toward one another and one another's families, so that the boy and girl can do one another the gravest harm, such as through one of them casually abandoning the other, something that would be far more difficult to do in a marriage. Marriage forces the couple to see one another socially, which forces them to be polite and humane toward one another, feeling responsible not just toward the person, but toward the person's family and society. This is not a bad thing. It is a very good thing. Humans are selfish and short-sighted; it is often society that forces them to be civilized and humane. A husband who does not feel beholden to anyone but his wife can do anything he wants toward her, fearing only *her* reaction. While in a conservative society, a husband is beholden to her and her family and friends, this is a far more serious restriction on what he is allowed to do and not to do toward her.

If a society was to truly destroy marriage to find out what happens next, it would have to destroy the requirement of fidelity within relationships. If it became commonplace and accepted for every woman to have multiple sexual partners, as in Huxley's *Brave New World*, then we could say that that is a truly post-marriage society. In reality, it appears that such societies cannot exist, a society that has gone down that path will have gone extinct due to low fertility rates or conquest before it gets completely there.

One who has never known a Muslim family may think that their teenage daughter is being repressed for not being allowed to engage in premarital sex. What the Muslim family is trying to accomplish, which all girls of sufficient intelligence are capable of appreciating and perpetuating, is for her to have a sex life that is integrated into society in a way that *preserves her place* as a dignified person. She is not just an animal who needs to experience the pleasures of sex as some secularists in their grossly profane and dehumanizing view of human sexuality think. She is also a social person who needs to maintain her personhood while enjoying the pleasures of sex, and marriage is the system to accomplish just such a thing.

The boyfriend-girlfriend system tries to accomplish the same while placing fewer responsibilities on the two persons. The result is a low-grade marriage where sexual pleasure is far more important than it is in a conservative society. Men and women start to be judged by their physical qualities as they pertain to the enjoyment of sex. People start to feel less as honored persons within society and more as bodies judged by physical attributes. The marriage marketplace, where almost anyone could get married, is replaced by the dating marketplace, where men and women are judged like goods for sale, with a man's height, muscularity and wealth, and a woman's physical attractiveness, the main things that matter.

In order to *really* find out, scientifically, whether a solemn marriage system like that of Islam is superior to a casual boyfriend-girlfriend system, we need to conduct controlled social research in a population that has the same genetic and cultural background, such as among British whites. We need to find out the rates of abuse and trauma, mental illness, suicide, happiness or its lack, between the women, men and children of the conservative group (second generation *converts* to Islam in England, for example) compared to the other. I expect the conservative group to come out superior on most measures.

Homosexuality

When it comes to homosexuality, Islam's view is that while having homosexual desires are not sinful, acting on those desires is sinful. Homosexual relationships are corporealizing[28].

In order to find whether homosexuality is "wrong', the question that needs to be answered is this: "Is it a corporealizing force?" In other words, does it tend to emphasize the body over the person? If the answer is yes,

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[28] A made-up word that means "to dehumanize humans so that they are treated as mere bodies."

and I think it is, then that is sufficient reason to avoid homosexual relationships and not celebrate them.

Another example is non-marital sex. As has been mentioned, marriage is an election that helps integrate the sexuality of a man and woman into society in a way that maintains the dignity of everyone involved. Non-marital sex, whether before marriage or outside of it, is a political attack on social order because it bypasses society, reducing the couple's relatives to non-entities while raising the desires of the couple to a position of primacy. In a religiously conservative society, non-marital sex is an act of immense *disrespect* everyone else. Non-marital sex is disrespectful; it degrades and dishonors family members; it corporealizes them, meaning that it treats them as more like animals than persons. A man who gives himself the right to engage in intimate relations with a woman without the approval of his family is telling them by this very act that they are not of infinite worth, that they are not irreplaceable, that he is their equal, that there is no such thing as reserved social places for each and everyone of them. If I take Mother's opinion to be irrelevant when it comes to the woman I wish to be intimate with, that reduces Mother to "just any woman". I do not care about some random woman's opinion regarding the woman I wish to be intimate with, and I do not care about Mother's opinion. Therefore Mother is made equal to something random, replaceable and unimportant. It is therefore quite logical if she takes non-marital sex by her children as an attack on her social position in society.

If it is agreed that sexual non-freedom is a good thing (as I have been arguing), then the main question regarding homosexuality should be: can a society remain religious and conservative, avoid sexual freedom, and yet celebrate homosexual marriage the way it celebrates heterosexual marriage?

The empirical evidence of the real world seems to definitely disprove the possibility of such a thing. It appears that the celebration of homosexuality always comes *after* the celebration of sexual freedom.

This is not the place to launch a lengthy philosophical discussion on the morality of homosexuality. It is sufficient to justify its avoidance if it, or its prerequisites, make a *Pride and Prejudice*-type society impossible.

This naturally leads to the question of what homosexual Muslim men and women should do with themselves. There may be no ideal solution unfortunately. Some may be able to enjoy marriage, since in conservative Islamic societies the offices of "husband" and "wife" confer dignity and status regardless of the level of sexual satisfaction inside the bedroom. Others may prefer to remain unmarried.

Some have asked me about the progress that can be expected for the rights of homosexuals in Muslim societies. The reality seems to be that the suppression of sexual freedom and high respect for traditional marriage make the acceptance and celebration of homosexuality impossible. The Quran's prohibition on homosexual relationships serves to make an acceptance of it even less likely.

There could be progress in implementing stronger constitutional defenses for citizens in Muslim societies, including giving them the right to leave Islam. A homosexual Malaysian Muslim could be allowed to leave Islam and avoid its rulings so that only the democratically-chosen constitutional law applies to him or her, meaning that they could avoid the threat of punishment for being in homosexual relationships. While conservatives may consider such a system a threat to the integrity of their societies, I do not expect more than a handful of people to take the choice if it is made available. Most people are happy to remain Muslim even if they have the right to leave it, as the example of the millions of devout Muslims living in the West shows us. I would expect that to many homosexuals the spiritual

and material benefits that come from being part of their Islamic societies outweighs the sacrifices they have to make.

From a cultural evolution perspective, since sexual freedom appears to always cause fertility rates to fall below replacement rates, any Muslim society that embraces sexual freedom and, by extension, homosexuality, will suffer such low fertility rates that it will become self-limiting; it will never grow large, the way that Turkey's secularist population remains small despite many people leaving conservative Islam to become secular. Conservative Islam's higher fertility rates ensure that it is the conservative interpretations that continue to be mainstream. To put it another way, sexual freedom is something of an evolutionary dead-end; it slowly kills off the population that embraces it. Meanwhile, populations that suppress sexual freedom continue to grow and prosper. The suppression of sexual freedom can therefore be considered an evolutionary survival strategy.

7. Wife-beating and the Quran

Among middle class Muslims wife-beating is highly taboo. Muslim men do not need to look at religious references to decide whether they should approve of wife-beating or not; they justify a highly discriminatory attitude against wife-beaters in cultural and ethical—rather than legalistic—terms. A man who thinks it is acceptable to beat women is so crude, vulgar and uncivilized that he is considered unworthy of befriending or even speaking to. He is excluded from social circles and sympathy is extended to any women unfortunate enough to be associated with him. Yet these men who consider wife-beating completely unacceptable are devout Muslim men who believe in the letter of the Quran, including verse 4:34, which appears to encourage wife-beating.

This leads to a sociological conundrum that is often naively solved by asserting that these men are abandoning parts of Islam in order to be more humane and civilized. As I will argue in this chapter, a sociologically sophisticated analysis shows that it is quite possible to accept and adopt the plain sense of verse 4:34 while remaining humane, civilized and completely opposed to domestic violence.

Islam is often considered a misogynistic religion. But if one checks out traditional works of Quranic exegesis, one finds a striking phenomenon:

almost every scholar who has tried to interpret verse 4:34, in which a man is given the right to strike his wife in certain circumstances, has been at pains to place restrictions on it, as Karen Bauer discovered in her important study of the historical Islamic sources on this issue.[1] There were no feminists in the 8th century pressuring these scholars to be politically correct. We are speaking of a time when the Viking campaigns of rape and plunder against the rest of the world were just starting to take off (and would continue for the next three centuries). What was making these men of those Dark Ages so sensitive toward women's rights? I would argue that it was because they were humans taught by Islam to see women as fellow humans, and a chief feature of the human psyche is empathy when this empathy is not blocked due to the dehumanization of others. They had mothers, sisters, daughters and wives and did not like the thought of these loved humans suffering oppression and injustice.

Be that as it may, an uninformed reader who picks up an ancient Islamic text expecting to read things like "beat your wives, they are your property anyway" will be highly disappointed to find the depths and nuances of the Islamic discussions of the issue. Those who study Islam closely, the most important group being Western, non-Muslim scholars of Islam, are forced, often against their expectations, to respect it more the more they learn about it.

Like the scholars of ancient times, and like Prophet Muhammad himself (as will be seen), many Muslims feel uncomfortable with verse 4:34 of the Quran. It is difficult to find a balanced and holistic interpretation that does not either defend wife-beating or that does not nullify the verse completely. This section attempts to provide such an answer; taking the traditional meaning of the verse seriously while explaining how it fits

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[1] Karen Bauer, *Gender Hierarchy in the Quran: Medieval Interpretations, Modern Responses*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

within a modern society in which violence against women is rare and taboo (as it should be). To begin addressing the issue, the first principle we can state on this matter is this:

> There is no such thing as humanely striking a woman.

Contemporary Islamic scholars who wish to defend 4:34, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, often mention that there are various restrictions in Islamic law on the way a man can strike a woman, as if this somehow justifies it. It does not. What needs to be answered is why the Quran allows any form of striking at all.

Let's now take a look at verse 4:34:

> Men are the **protectors and maintainers** of women, as God has given some of them an advantage over others, and because they spend out of their wealth. The good women are obedient, guarding what God would have them guard. As for those from whom you fear disloyalty, admonish them, and abandon them in their beds, then strike them. But if they obey you, seek no way against them. God is Sublime, Great.

The Arabic word *qawwāmūn* is often translated as "protectors and maintainers" in English or something similar. This leads to the verse sounding a bit nonsensical. Why would the Quran go from the idea of financial support and protection for women to the idea of *striking them* in the same verse? The problem is that "protector and maintainer" is not exactly what *qawwāmūn* means. *Qawwāmūn* means "figures of authority who are in charge of and take care of (something)".[2] Verse 4:34 is speaking of the issue of authority and law-enforcement within a household as I will explain, the idea of financial support and physical protection is only a subset of it.

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[2] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīh al-Ghayb*, vol. 10, 90-91.

Verse 4:34 establishes *qiwāma*, the gender framework within which Muslim families are meant to operate. The concept of *qiwāma*, along with that of *wilāya* (guardianship), have been the focus of concentrated feminist efforts that aim to defuse them in order to create gender equality within Islam.[3] In a chapter of *Men in Charge?* Omaima Abou-Bakr tries to trace the way the concept of *qiwāma* developed in Islam. She mentions the Iranian scholar Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī's commentary on the as the "first" work of *tafsīr* (Quranic exegesis), going on to say:

> Hence, not only did al-Tabari initiate and put into motion the hierarchal idea of moral superiority and the right to discipline (*ta'dibihinna*), but he also instituted the twisted logic of turning the divine assignment to provide economic support into a reason for privilege: 'they provide because they are better, or they are better because they provide'.

The truth is that the pro-*qiwāma* interpretation of verse 4:34 starts not with al-Ṭabarī. It started as early as the Islamic scholar and Companion of the Prophet Muhammad ʿAbdullāh ibn ʿAbbās, in whose work of *tafsīr*[4], authored two centuries before al-Ṭabarī, he says:

> "Men are *qawwāmūn* over women" means *umarāʾ* ("commanders", "rulers", "chiefs"); she is required to obey him in that which he commands her. His obedience means that she should be well-mannered toward his household, she should watch

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[3] See Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Mulki Al-Sharmani, *Men in Charge?: Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition*, London: Oneworld Publications, 2015.

[4] Commonly known as *Ṣaḥīfat ʿAlī bin Abī Ṭalḥa*, as it was collected by ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭalḥa (d. 143 AH / 760-761 CE).

over his property and [appreciate] the virtue of his taking care of her and striving for her sake. [5]

Incidentally, among other works of *tafsīr* predating al-Ṭabarī, also by two centuries, are the works of Mujāhid and al-Ḍaḥḥāk. Another early work of *tafsīr* is that of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150 AH / 767-768 CE), who predates al-Ṭabarī by a century and a half. Muqātil interprets *qawwāmūn* as *musalliṭūn* ("having lordship and authority"), a word that is largely similar to Ibn ʿAbbās's *umarāʾ*, from the word *sulṭa* ("authority", "dominion"). [6] Al-Ṭabarī's understanding of *qawwāmūn* was not new; he was following a *tafsīr* tradition that had been established centuries before him. The pre-Ṭabarī Ibāḍī scholar Hūd b. Muḥakkam al-Hawwārī (died in the last decades of the third century AH), reflecting a North African *tafsīr* tradition, also interprets *qawwāmūn* as *musalliṭūn*. [7]

Abou-Bakr goes on to conclude that al-Ṭabarī was responsible for the changes she mentions in the following passage:

> Thus, the original direct meaning of *qawwamun/bima faddala* (financial support by the means God gave them) developed this way: 1) from descriptive to normative/from responsibility to authority; 2) introducing the noun *qiyam* (which paved the way to the later *qiwamah*) as an essentialist notion of moral superiority; 3) from the restricted meaning of providing financial support to a wider range of a generalized status of all men everywhere and at all times; and 4) from a relative, changing condition of material

[5] ʿAbdullāh ibn ʿAbbās, *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*, ed. Rāshid ʿAbd al-Munʿim al-Rajjāl, Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfīya, 1991, 146.

[6] Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil bin Sulaymān*, ed. ʿAbdullāh Maḥmūd Shuḥāta, Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Tārīkh al-ʿArabī, 2002, vol. 1, 370.

[7] Hūd b. Muḥakkam al-Hawwārī, *Tafsīr Kitāb Allāh al-ʿAzīz*, ed. Balḥāj b. Saʿīd al-Sharīfī, Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1990, vol. 1, 377.

bounty on account of inheritance to an unconditional favouritism based on gender.

According to Abou-Bakr, an innocent and harmless verse 4:34 was over time given a patriarchal, male-centric interpretation by scholars like al-Ṭabarī. Such a narrative, if it were true, would certainly be strong support for the feminist cause. But Ibn ʿAbbās and Muqātil's aforementioned interpretations are strong historical evidence against her thesis; the notion of *qiwāma* did not go from being merely about financial support among the early Muslims to something more later on through the harmful influence of *tafsīr* scholars; *qiwāma* was thought to be about authority from the time of the Companions. A second and equally serious flaw in her thesis is her considering financial support to be central to the verse's reasoning. Verse 4:34 actually mentions financial support as the *second*, rather than the first, rationale for giving men authority over women (I will later discuss what this authority means, whether it can ever be fair and just, and the limitations Islam places on it). Let us take another look at the relevant part of the verse:

> Men are *qawwāmūn* over women **as God has given some of them [i.e. males] *faḍl* [a preference, advantage, superiority in rank] over others [i.e. females]**, and because they spend out of their wealth.

The first reason for this authority is *not* men's financial support of women, but a *faḍl* ("preference") that God has given to men over women, as is recognized by Muqātil. To clarify further, the verse can be rephrased as:

> Men are *qawwāmūn* over women because 1. God has given men a *faḍl* over women, and 2. because men spend out of their wealth.

The superiority in rank, status or nature supposedly granted to men by God is what comes first, it is the main justification for *qiwāma* and has

nothing to do with financial support as far as one can tell, since financial support is mentioned separately. As I will discuss below, this does not mean that men are morally superior to women, we can use the Quran to argue for the opposite. But to continue the discussion of rank, the Arabic wording of the verse can be said to go out of its way to make the separation between men's rank and men's financial support of women clear by using two *bi-mā*s ("because"s) rather than one: *because ... and because ...* . It is quite unwarranted to collapse these two given reasons into one and claim that the verse is merely giving men the duty of supporting women's welfare.

There are many hadith narrations that mention women as deficient in intellect and morality. I make no references whatsoever to those narrations in this discussion; the "preference" I refer to is the plain meaning of the Quranic verse; it is a rank granted by God, the way an army grants different ranks to different soldiers without suggesting that the lower ranks are morally inferior to the upper ranks. The concept of men having a superiority in rank over women is not unique to 4:34, it is also spelled out in verse 2:228:

> Divorced women shall wait by themselves for three periods. And it is not lawful for them to conceal what God has created in their wombs, if they believe in God and the Last Day. Meanwhile, their husbands have the better right to take them back, if they desire reconciliation. And women have rights similar to their obligations, according to what is fair. But **men have a degree over them**. God is Mighty and Wise.

Scholars, such as al-Wāḥidī, Ibn al-ʿArabī, al-Rāzī, Ibn al-Jawzī, Abu Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī and Ibn al-Qayyim, mention that women are intrinsically mentally and morally inferior to men in their justification for the Quran's special treatment of them in the matter of testimony (a man's

testimony equals two women's, with various differences and nuances among the schools).[8] A strong argument against the mental/moral inferiority thesis is that the Quran treats women as men's equals throughout, considering them equally responsible for their actions and holding them to the same standards. If women were as irresponsible and foolish as children as some scholars suggest (such as al-Wāḥidī, Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Rāzī, who mention that women are perma-adolescents, never maturing), it would have been only fair to treat them as children in the matter of duties and punishments, yet the Quran treats them as complete humans. Karen Bauer writes:

> But if women were deficient in rationality, then why did they have spiritual responsibilities similar to men? Although the majority of exegetes simply took inequality for granted, several explained why such inequality was fair, just, and according to God's will. Such interpretations may reveal more, however, about the worldview of the interpreters than they reveal about the Qur'ān.[9]

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[8] ʿAli b. Aḥmad al-Wāhidī, *al-Tafsīr al-Basīṭ*, ed. Muḥammad b. Ṣaliḥ b. ʿAbdallāh al-Fawzān et al., Riyadh: Imam Muhammad bin Saud University, 1430/2008-2009, vol. 4, 502. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, vol. 7, 124; Muḥammad b. ʿAbdullah Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīya, 2003, vol. 1, 335; Abū l-Faraj ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr fī ʿIlm al-Tafsīr*, Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī and Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2002, 172; Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī, *Tafsīr al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, ed. ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd and ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwaḍ, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīya, 1993, vol. 2, 366; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīya, *Iʿlām al-Muwaqiʿīn ʿan Rabb al-ʿĀlamīn*, ed. Abū ʿUbayda Mashhūr b. Ḥasan Āl Salmān, al-Dammam: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1423/2002-2003, vol. 3, 417-420.
[9] Karen Bauer, *Gender Hierarchy in the Quran*, 66.

A modern work of *tafsīr* that criticizes the infantilization of women in classical *tafsīr* works is *Tafsīr al-Manār* by the Egyptian reformist scholars Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905 CE) and Rashid Rida (d. 1935 CE).[10]

Laleh Bakhtiar's interpretation of "and strike them" as "leave them" in her *Sublime Quran* is so far-fetched that it is not worth addressing. *Men in Charge?* does not give it a mention and assumes that "strike them/beat them" is the correct interpretation. Despite the book's attacks on traditional *qiwāma*, the question of why the verse mentions striking women at all is strangely not addressed in the book as far as I could find. It is quite far-fetched to claim that a verse that allows the male to strike the female is innocent of patriarchal concepts.

Another line of attack against *qiwāma* has been that of claiming that Quranic verses and principles are *historically localized*; they applied in the Arabia of the 7th century CE, but they do not necessarily apply today. The belief that Quranic principles are historically localized is debatable, it is against the understanding of the vast majority of Islamic thinkers and scholars. We can localize a verse in its historical context to understand its meaning and intent, but once we have extracted these, they should be generalized to all times and places. Historical localization would allow one to nullify almost any Quranic concept they want by arguing that it only applies to a particular time and place and not to another. The common and common-sense understanding of the Quran is that while its context can help us extract its meaning, the *meaning itself is universal*. The default assumption regarding the meaning of any verse should be that it is designed to be applied by all humans for all time. Overwhelming evidence should be needed to prove that the meaning of a particular verse has expired or is irrelevant today. In the case of *qiwāma*, there is no *evidence* at

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[10] Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1367/1947-1948, vol. 3, 124-125.

all that it is irrelevant today. There certainly is overwhelming *desire* among a certain group of intellectuals to throw the concept away, but that does not constitute evidence. Working for women's rights is a good thing, but destroying the foundations of our understanding of the Quran in the process is not.

If the Quran was written by the Prophet, then it would make sense that its meanings would expire and would be limited to the narrow context of 7th century Arabia. He was only a human and could not foresee all eventualities. But we believe the Quran is from God, it is His unchanged Words, which means that we have to treat it like a book written by an infinitely wise person who could foresee the fact that humanity would continue for the next 100,000 years (or however long). If something was supposed to only apply to one circumstance and not to others, then God would have told us so. What we believe is that the Quran was written by the Creator to be applied for all time. Saying that God was so short-sighted that He gave a universal command in His book that does not apply any longer is a great insult against the Creator of the universe. The question then becomes about the nature of God: mainstream Muslims believe that the Quran is from the same Creator who designed the laws of quantum mechanics and who watched the universe age for billions of years before humans started to walk the earth. When such a God tells us men should have a rank above their wives in their households, He is not stuck in the mindset of 7th century Arabia but is speaking from a billion-year perspective. Those who argue for historical localization are saying the opposite; they are saying that God was not intelligent and wise enough to see beyond 7th century Arabia. Therefore a person who argues for historical localization should first prove to us that God is not as intelligent and wise as we tend to think.

At this point, assuming that the classical interpretations of the verse are correct, we will examine how such a gender framework could be justified among civilized and self-respecting humans.

Domestic violence in Islam

Domestic violence, as the phrase is commonly understood, is prohibited in Islam; a woman has the right to not be abused by her husband. This is the general rule; Islam does not tolerate cruelty and injustice toward anyone, whether man, woman, child or even animal. But verse 4:34 establishes an exception in the matter of authority and discipline in a household. The point of this verse is the establishment of a certain type of *order* within an Islamic household.

To explain how 4:34 can be implemented without this leading to domestic violence, the best analogy and the most relevant I have found is that of law enforcement. Throughout the world, the police have the right to strike a person who is about to break the law, for example a person who wants to set fire to a building. The police are required to sternly warn the person to stop their behavior, and if they do not, they have the right to intervene physically and subdue the person to prevent them from doing harm. The right of the police to strike any citizen they want given the appropriate circumstances establishes a certain type of *order* within society. It does not lead to a reign of terror; look at a peaceful and quiet Western town and you will find that that peace and quiet is protected by the existence of a police force that has the right to use violence when necessary.

In the West, law enforcement is the job of the police; they are given the right to use violence when necessary to carry out this job. Islam creates a second law enforcement jurisdiction that is non-existent in the West, that of the family, with the power of policing given to a husband (rather than a

police force) within this internal family jurisdiction (later on I will discuss possible reasons for why this power is given to men rather than women).

Similar to the police, men are not allowed to abuse this authority. Police brutality and husband brutality can both be severely punished by the law. Verse 4:34 gives a man the *authority* to police his household. If his wife is about to do something highly damaging, such as trying to invite a lover into the house, he has the right to sternly warn her to stop and to use force against her if she does not.

Here, it should be stated that under Islamic law a woman should have the right to divorce any time she wants. If her husband is abusive, besides having access to agencies protecting women, she should also be able to threaten to leave him, and the police should be there to protect her rights and prevent her from being kept as a wife against her wishes. Middle Eastern countries have been notoriously bad at protecting women's rights, this is slowly changing, and Islam can actually be used as justification for creating agencies that protect women's rights.

Islamic law creates this situation inside a family:

1. A husband has the right to police his household and to use violence in the extremely rare case where his wife wants to do something completely unacceptable in their culture and society.

2. A woman has the right to leave her husband any time she wants.[11]

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[11] This is essential to making an Islamic marriage a fair and just arrangement. The classical opinion gave men the right to no-fault divorce while women had to persuade arbiters (either people chosen from the couple's families, or government-appointed judges) that she had due cause. According to certain jurists if her dislike for the marriage is likely to cause her to not fulfill her duties as a wife appropriately, she has due cause for a divorce. A modern Islamic legal system can formalize this in a way that gives her practically equal rights to divorce. Another modern Islamic solution is to make it a clause of the marriage

3. A woman has the right to be free from cruel treatment and abuse, and has the right to enjoy the police's protection from abuse.

In the vast majority of marriages (perhaps 99.99%), husbands will never have to use their right to violence, the same way that in a peaceful society the vast majority of people are never beaten by the police—despite the fact that the police have the right to strike *any citizen* when necessary. Islamic law, similar to Western law, creates a certain *social order* that does not do violence to anyone *as long as no one tries to break the law*. A husband's right to act as policeman is irrelevant except in the extremely rare case when a wife, for whatever reason, (1) insults and threatens him by her actions, (2) does not listen to admonishment and (3) does not want a divorce. That is quite a ridiculous situation that very few couples will find themselves in.

A person may ask, if this verse truly applies to only 0.01% of marriages, why would the Quran have a verse about it? For the same reason that Western law has many clauses on the use of violence by the police *despite the fact that perhaps only 0.01% of citizens are ever subject to police violence*. The *right* to use violence is what matters here, not the actual use of violence. When a Western town gives the police the right to use violence, they do not do so because they like to watch the police beat people, but because they know that if the police did not have the right to use violence, they could not deal with the extremely rare cases in which violence is needed.

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contract for the woman to have the right to no-fault divorce. The ambiguous nature of the Quranic verses on the matter of divorce can be used to argue for equal divorce rights. Historically women's access to divorce has been highly restricted in the Islamic world (similar to the rest of the world). The spread of literacy and increased awareness of women's issues are helping challenge the status quo.

You cannot establish social order without giving someone the power to enforce it. A law is useless unless there is someone who can enforce it and the enforcement of law in human society requires the power to use violence (only the *power*, not the actual use of violence). While Western law defines a certain legal code enforced by the police where necessary, Islamic law defines such a code, and in addition to it, defines *internal family law* (non-existent in the West) that husbands can enforce through violence where necessary.

Senseless beatings and cultural mores

When talking about 4:34, people's minds often jump to an imaginary or real wife who is beaten by a cruel husband. *But that has nothing to do with 4:34.* The violence in 4:34 is similar to police violence; if it is cruel, if it is senseless, if it is unnecessary, then that is forbidden and should be punished by law. 4:34 only justifies violence in cases where the couple's culture considers the violence justified. The woman's own relatives should be able to look into the case and agree that the husband's actions were justified.

What situations could possibly justify a husband striking a wife? This is similar to asking what situations could possibly justify the police striking a citizen. If we think of good citizens being beaten by the police, we naturally find that cruel and unjustified. So to correctly answer the question, we have to think of bad citizens, those who *do* deserve violence according to the law worldwide. A bad citizen would be one who is mugging someone, or trying to steal a car, or trying to rape a woman. People will generally agree that police violence is justified in preventing such citizens from carrying out their intentions.

Verse 4:34 deals with the issue of *bad wives*, the way that Western laws allowing police violence are there to deal with the issue of *bad citizens* (I

will address the question of bad husbands later on). In regards to good wives versus bad wives, verse 4:34 has this to say:

> The good women are obedient, guarding what God would have them guard. As for those from whom you fear **mutiny**, admonish them, and abandon them in their beds, then strike them.

The Arabic word that is rendered as "disloyalty" above is *nushūz*, which according to al-Rāzī has a meaning close to "mutiny", it is when a person acts as if they are superior to a figure of authority (as in a soldier acting in disregard of an officer's rank).[12] It literally means "to consider oneself superior", the word can be used to describe a patch of land as being higher than another.[13] Interestingly, it is also used in the Quran in reference to a man's misbehavior toward his wife, which provides an illustration of the fact that a husband is not an absolute authority; he too can be mutinous against the higher authority of the law if he is abusive or negligent toward his wife.[14]

The word *nushūz* is vague and does not clearly define what situations deserve a strong response and which ones do not. I believe this is in order to leave it to each family, culture and society to decide it for itself. All wives probably know what their husbands' "deal-breakers" are, things that he would consider a severe insult and a betrayal, and these things can be different for different people. The most flagrant case of *nushūz* is a wife trying to have an affair. In general, *nushūz* is any case in which a wife acts in disregard and disrespect to the Islamic social order that the Quran wants to establish within the family. Among forms of *nushūz* explained in

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[12] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīh al-Ghayb*, 93-94.

[13] Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1863-1893, 2795-2796 (in book 1, part 8).

[14] The Quran, verse 4:128.

the Islamic legal literature are, many of which sound antique or somewhat irrelevant today:

- A woman refusing to engage in sexual intimacy with her husband without a valid reason.[15] Ibn Rushd al-Jadd (grandfather of the more famous Averroes / Ibn Rushd), in answer to a question, says that a man is not allowed to strike his wife if she refuses sexual intimacy unless she is doing it out of malice and spite and he fears she will continue to become more rebellious.[16]

- Refusing to do housework. The Syrian Ḥanabalī scholar Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīya (d. 751 AH / 1350 CE) considers it a duty, saying that the marriage contract assumes that the woman perform such services,[17] while the Iranian Shāfiʿī jurist Abū Isḥāq al-Shīrazī (d. 476 AH / 1083-1084 CE) does not consider housework one of her duties.[18] According to the Spanish Malikī scholar al-Qurṭubī (d. 671 AH / 1272-1273 CE), whether housework is obligatory depends on her social class; it is not obligatory for upper class women who expect their husbands to hire servants.[19]

- Refusing to join the man in his home after marriage without a valid reason.

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[15] Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmiʿ al-Aḥkām al-Fiqhīya*, ed. Farīd ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Jundī, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīya, 2005, no. 1194 (vol. 1, 258).

[16] Abū l-Walīd Ibn Rushd, *al-Bayān wa-l-Taḥṣīl*, ed. Aḥmad al-Hubābī, Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1988, vol. 6, 75-76.

[17] Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīya, *Zād al-Maʿād*, ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnaʾūṭ and ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Arnaʾūṭ, Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1998, vol. 5, 169-171.

[18] Abū Isḥāq al-Shīrazī, *Al-Muhadhdhab fī Fiqh al-Imām al-Shāfiʿī*, ed. Zakarīyā ʿUmayrāt, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīya, 1995, vol 2, 482.

[19] Al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmiʿ al-Aḥkām al-Fiqhīya*, no. 1194 (vol. 1, 258). This was pointed out in Karen Bauer's study.

- Inviting someone into her marital home against her husband's wishes.

A technical, modern and pluralistic definition of *nushūz* would be:

A woman's acting in flagrant disregard of the terms implied by her marriage contract in her particular culture.

The same also applies to a man's *nushūz*.

Is it acceptable for a husband to use violence against his wife for refusing him sexual intimacy, even if she is doing it maliciously, for example as a form of emotional blackmail? Most, if not all, people today will probably say violence is not justified; they should work out their issue peacefully or get a divorce. And that is the correct general principle today. What constitutes scandalous behavior that deserves a decisive response from a husband can change as humanity develops.

The Quran does not give us a strict definition of *nushūz*, allowing us to make its scope wider or narrower as our reason, conscience and cultural experience demands. Any case of a woman suffering violence in a way that is clearly unjust and unreasonable can automatically be considered outside the bounds of 4:34: In a Muslim society, a woman should *never* have occasion to say that her husband beat her without a valid reason. If that is true, her husband should be punishable by law, as is the opinion of Ibn Ḥazm.[20] Scholars, however, have historically differed greatly on whether and when a man can be held accountable for striking his wife, some going as far as practically prohibiting all violence and others giving a man carte

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[20] See Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī, *al-Muḥallā bi-l-Āthār*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ghaffār Sulaymān al-Bandārī, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīya, 2003, no. 1884 (vol. 10, 175-177): "*fa-in ḍarabahā bi-ghayr^i dhanb^{in} uqīdat minh^u*." ("If he strikes her when she has committed no fault, [legal] retaliation will be carried out against him.")

blanche to beat his wife whenever he wants.[21] But thanks to the vagueness of the concept of *nushūz*, we are under no strict limitation in our ability to give it a reading that fits reason and conscience. In my proposed interpretation of 4:34, if a wife was struck by a husband, it would only be justified in situations like this:

> I tried to cheat on my husband, he found out and sternly warned me to give up the idea. I did not. He told me I should get a divorce if I do not want to be with him anymore, but what I want is to stay married to him and enjoy the benefits that come with it while having a lover on the side. We had a fight and he physically subdued me and took my phone away from me so I would not be able to speak with my lover.

In a Western country a husband in the above situation is required to let his wife do whatever she wants, only having recourse to divorce. The police will probably laugh at him if he was to give them a call and complain that his wife wants to sleep with another man. Under Islamic law, however, a husband is given the authority to be the law-enforcer himself in such a case. This creates a situation in which there is zero tolerance for a wife acting against the terms of her marriage. She is required to either accept to live amicably and faithfully with her husband or to get a divorce. Verse 4:34 ensures that there will be no "in-between" situations where a wife is only half faithful or respectful toward a husband, for example staying with him for the sake of the children while doing whatever she wants in her private life without concern for his interests. She is either fully committed to her life with her husband or she gets a divorce.

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[21] Manuela Marín, "Disciplining Wives: A Historical Reading of Qur'ân 4:34." *Studia Islamica*, no. 97 (2003): 5-40.

While Western law tolerates all shades of commitment from full commitment to zero commitment between a husband and wife, Islamic law allows only full commitment or divorce, and gives the husband the right of violence to ensure that this will be the state of things in his family.

Laws versus real-life

Above, I have explained the theory behind verse 4:34. But that is only half the picture. Verse 4:34 creates a certain social order, a certain type of society, that an outsider may be completely unable to imagine from the wording of the verse. The type of society it creates is one in which it is unthinkable for a woman to flagrantly act in opposition to her husband and his household (the most glaring example being that of infidelity). It is as unthinkable for her to act thus as it is for a Western citizen to think of counterfeiting money. While in the West we do not live under a police reign of terror, we know that if we were to do something that severely threatens social order, such as making counterfeit money, *law-enforcement will have something to say about it*. We do not need the police to strike us to not make counterfeit money. We just know that in our society, in our social order, the making of counterfeit money is totally unacceptable and will bring down violence on the person who tries it.

In the same way, in an Islamic society, a woman knows that within the social order she lives in, she cannot act flagrantly in opposition to her husband; she knows that this is totally unacceptable in her society and can bring down violence on her. If there is a need for her to oppose her husband, she has the right to argue with her husband, to demand the support of her family and his family, to demand the support of women's agencies, to sue him in court and to threaten divorce. These things ensure that her husband cannot abuse his authority and that her rights are not neglected. *What she does not have the right to* is acting in a way that

damages her husband and his household. She is free to get a divorce; but while she chooses to be with him, she has to act in good faith toward him.

The "rule" of husbands

Giving husbands the right of policing does not make them tyrannical rulers, the same way that giving the police the right of policing and striking citizens does not make them rulers in society. Husbands and the police are both subject to higher laws that restrict their powers. In an Islamic society, both the husband and wife are subject to the law and its various restrictions. They are both servants of God who are required to do their best to please Him. One of them, the husband, has the powers of the police delegated to him to deal with the *extremely rare* case of having to enforce internal family law. It is true that *no sensible wife* would act in a way that threatens her husband and his family, similar to the way that *no sensible citizen* would act in a way that threatens society and requires police action. But not all wives or citizens are sensible, therefore the law sees the need to give certain people the right to use violence against those rare wives or citizens that do not act sensibly.

In focusing on the extremely rare situations when violence becomes necessary, discussions of Islam and domestic violence ignore the overwhelming majority of marriages in which a husband striking his wife is considered unthinkable. It is like focusing on police brutality in a peaceful town and ignoring the 99.999% of the citizenry who live in peace and never have any dealings with the police.

A husband who habitually beats his wife is similar to a policeman who habitually beats citizens for no reason. Such a husband or policeman should be severely punished, and if they cannot stop their violence, they should be fired from their jobs (a judge should force the husband and wife to separate, and should fire the policeman).

Why make husbands policemen?

Even if it is admitted that the mere *right* of using violence against a wife does not lead to an epidemic of domestic violence (and my experience of Muslim societies in Iran, Iraq and the United States illustrates this beyond doubt), one may doubt if giving men the authority to act as part-time policemen in their households is the best way to organize society.

The Quran's theory is that society functions best when husbands are recognized as authorities in their households, with the power to act swiftly, decisively and even violently when their interests are seriously threatened.

The feminist (etc.) theory is that society functions best when a husband and wife have equal shares of authority in their households, somewhat similar to a country or company having two presidents.

Which theory is true? A great many scientific studies would be needed to find out beyond reasonable doubt which type of society functions best. Such studies should try to answer these questions:

- Do women in devout Muslim households suffer more or less domestic violence compared to other women?
- Are women in devout Muslim households more or less likely to suffer depression than other women?
- Are women in devout Muslim households happier and more fulfilled or less compared to others?
- Are children brought up in a devout Muslim family more or less likely to suffer trauma compared to children brought up in a non-devout Muslim family, compared to children brought up in non-Muslim families from societies of equal development and prosperity?

- What type of society is more sustainable? Devout Muslim societies are sustainable in that families can produce enough children to replace the parents. Western societies are all failing at this; they are all slowly going extinct.

Note the keyword *devout*. Considering an alcoholic who regularly beats his wife representative of Islam just because he calls himself Muslim is something only a propagandist would do. Any study of the effects of the Quran's teachings, including the teaching in verse 4:34, should focus on people *who actually take the Quran's teachings seriously*.

My contention, and the Quran's, is that a devout Muslim society will function better and will be happier than either a non-devout one or a modern, liberal and irreligious one.

Verse 4:34 explains why God considers men worthy of the authority He has given them in their households:

> Men are *qawwamūn* (keepers, protectors and authorities) over women, as **God has given some of them an advantage over others, and because they spend out of their wealth.** The good women are obedient, guarding what God would have them guard. As for those from whom you fear disloyalty, admonish them, and abandon them in their beds, then strike them. But if they obey you, seek no way against them. God is Sublime, Great.

The Quran gives two reasons:

- Men are inherently (i.e. genetically) suited to the role of being figures of authority in their households
- Men are the financial maintainers of women (by Islamic law)

The Quran's contention, therefore, is that a family functions best when a man is the chief authority, because it is in the nature of human families that they function best when a man is the chief authority. We have no

convincing scientific evidence for this at the moment, but we may have it in ten or twenty years. According to the Quran, humans have evolved in a way that makes males different from females, and this difference justifies different roles within relationships.

This difference does not mean that a man is given the right to do whatever he wants in his family. He is subject to the law and any abuse of his powers can be punished by law.

The question of whether men are really evolutionarily suited to be the chief authorities in their families cannot be settled by argument. It requires hundreds of scientific studies. Simply thinking of the 1% of men who abuse their powers tells us nothing about the 99% who do not. You cannot judge social policy by thinking of a few glaring bad examples. You have to study all of society. You cannot judge verse 4:34 by thinking of the hundred families in a Muslim city in which the husbands are abusive and ignore the 10,000 families in which the husbands are *not* abusive.

Bad husbands

The passage 4:128-130 of the Quran deals with the issue of bad husbands, and refers to them as mutinous as already mentioned:

> If a woman fears mutiny or desertion from her husband, there is no fault in them if they reconcile their differences, for reconciliation is best. Souls are prone to avarice; yet if you do what is good, and practice piety—God is Cognizant of what you do.

> You will not be able to treat women with equal fairness, no matter how much you desire it. But do not be so biased as to leave another suspended. If you make amends, and act righteously—God is Forgiving and Merciful.

> And if they separate, God will enrich each from His abundance. God is Bounteous and Wise.

Verse 4:35 is also relevant:

> If you fear a breach between the two, appoint an arbiter from his family and an arbiter from her family. If they wish to reconcile, God will bring them together. God is Knowledgeable, Expert.

The above verses are taken to mean that in the case of bad husbands, a wife should either have recourse to their families, or to government-appointed judges, who have the right to try to reconcile their differences or to enforce a divorce according to the wife's wishes.

Wives, unlike husbands, are not law enforcers in their households. Due to the genetic differences between the sexes, it makes no sense to ask a wife to use violence against her husband when necessary; men are physically stronger than women in the overwhelming majority of cases and could do dangerous physical harm to a woman. Therefore the woman instead has recourse to a higher authority than her husband when her husband is mutinous. That higher authority is her family, his family, government-appointed judges, and women's agencies if any are available.

A modern, civilized society will ensure that women always have easy access to this higher authority that can swiftly deal with bad husbands when necessary.

Devout Muslims and habitual wife-beaters

It is my contention that the more devoutly Muslim a man is, the *less likely* he is to be a wife-beater. There are hundreds of verses in the Quran that call him to be kind and forgiving. A single verse that allows violence in extremely rare circumstances is not going to be sufficient to wipe out the teachings of these *hundreds* of other verses from his mind. Any person

with sufficient intelligence to understand the Quran will feel *restricted* by it in his ability to be mean and violent toward others, including his own wife and children, rather than feeling encouraged by it.

I have no respect for a man who beats his wife and will never befriend a man who thinks he has the God-given right to beat women when the mood strikes him. I am not unique in this regard. In the devout Muslim society I come from, a man who is known to beat his wife is considered a low-life, a person unworthy of befriending. Yet we are all Muslims who take the Quran seriously, including verse 4:34.

Verse 4:34's main function is a defense of Islam's "patriarchy". It makes it impossible to give the Quran a feminist reading that sees men and women as exactly equal. It gives men higher authority in their households and goes as far as delegating some of the powers of the police to them. This is a completely anti-feminist way of organizing society, and for this reason feminists who wish to "feminize" the Quran will be forced to either ignore 4:34 or to give it far-fetched interpretations (as Laleh Bakhtiar has done).

Those who have occasion to speak of 4:34 are generally middle and upper middle class people for whom domestic violence is unthinkable (and it is that way for me too). But saying that 4:34 is unnecessary because our men and women are mature and sensible enough to act as honorable adults toward one another is like saying the police are unnecessary because we sensible people do not plan to break the law.

The police's main function is not violence; it is the protection of social order. By using violence against the very small minority of citizens who wish to break the law, a certain type of order is created that everyone follows. The same applies to verse 4:34. By giving husbands the right of violence against the extremely small minority of wives who desire infidelity and other ways of damaging their families (as mentioned, each

culture should decide for itself what justifies violence and what does not), a certain type of social order is created where wives and husbands are both required to be 100% committed to their families. 4:34 establishes a social order in which wives are either fully committed or get divorces. 4:35 and 4:128-130 establish a social order in which husbands are either fully committed are get corrected or punished by higher authorities.

The vast majority of wives are *already* fully committed and do not need violence to make them so, the same way that the vast majority of citizens are fully committed to being good citizens and do not need violence to make them so. But it is foolishness to say that social order does not need a policing power to protect it. Without a violent power protecting against threats to order, social order will break down, as seen in cases where the police abandon a town (such as during a police strike), which quickly leads to looting and rioting by irresponsible citizens.

The Islamic social order that requires wives to be fully committed functions peacefully and without violence in the overwhelming majority of cases; 4:34 ensures that there is a policing power that *protects* this social order and can respond to those extremely rare cases where this order is threatened.

People have the right to wonder if this is the best way to create happy families and societies. Without a great number of unbiased scientific studies there can be no conclusive answer. It might seem "obvious" to someone that this is not a good way to create happy families and societies, but this is just a personal bias unless they can provide statistical data to back up their opinion. There are faithful and loyal wives among both Muslims and irreligious people, but if devout Muslim wives are on average 50% more likely to be loyal, and their families are 20% more likely to be happy and to avoid being broken up, then that is all we need to know to

tell us that we should not be too quick to judge the sociological consequences of the Quran's teachings.

As Muslims, we believe that God knows better than anyone else how families and societies should be organized, therefore even if we dislike the idea of violence against women (as perhaps all of us do), we have to believe that God knows best. Even the Prophet Muhammad had reservations about 4:34. Al-Rāzī, in his aforementioned exegesis of verse 4:34, mentions a narration from Ibn ʿAbbās in which he says that a woman came complaining to the Prophet about being struck by her husband. From the passage, it appears that the Prophet would have liked to punish the husband according to the law of *qiṣāṣ*, but verse 4:34 is revealed to him confirming that the husband was within his rights. The Prophet is quoted as saying "We wanted something, but God wanted another thing. And what God wants is best."

To summarize, verse 4:34 creates an informal police force made up of husbands. They are charged with the protection of the integrity of their families and are given the power of violence as a last resort in the carrying out of this duty. Any use of violence by a husband that falls outside of this definition can be punished by the law. The vagueness of "mutiny" enables each culture to decide for itself whether a case of violence was justified or whether it was unjustified and therefore deserving of punishment by the authorities.

From the above discussion, feminist critiques like the following (from *Men in Charge?*, chapter 7) will be seen to be quite beside the point:

> Dina, a lawyer who founded and currently leads an NGO in one of Cairo's poorest areas, added another layer to this new understanding of *qiwamah*. She noted, 'Since women and men today have equal opportunities to pursue knowledge, with women sometimes excelling more, it would be indeed irrational to

expect an illiterate man to have *qiwamah* over a female university professor, in the sense of authority.'

It would be irrational for a female university professor to marry an illiterate man to begin with. Considering the less absurd example of a female university professor married to a male university professor, it will be seen that the man is given the authority to defend his household, an authority that he will likely never have to enforce, since his college-professor wife is likely intelligent and self-respecting enough, like most middle class wives, to not act like the immature and out-of-control person described above as a bad wife. Saying it is irrational for this male professor to have *qiwāma* over his wife because of his wife's qualities is similar to saying that it is irrational for a peaceful town to have a police force. Islam gives him policing power to deal with the extremely rare cases in which it might be needed. If he is blessed with a good wife he will never have recourse to it and will be thankful for that, the way that the police force in a peaceful town never have recourse to violence against the town's citizens. The above excerpt from *Men in Charge?* relies on the paralogism that:

- Good wives do not need *qiwāma* and its enforcement in order to make them behave in constructive ways in their families.
- Therefore *qiwāma*-enforcement is not needed.

Qiwāma-enforcement, as has been discussed, is entirely about *bad* wives, therefore the fact that good wives do not need it is irrelevant. What they say is similar to:

- Good citizens do not need law enforcement in order to make them behave in constructive ways in society.
- Therefore society does not need law enforcement.

If it is admitted that *qiwāma*-enforcement is about dealing with bad wives, a person might argue that this means that in a society of enlightened and educated individuals we can do away with *qiwāma,* living as if verse 4:34

does not apply to us. This is the argument of certain activists; *qiwāma* may have made sense in a certain time and place, but it is certainly quite out of place in modern society. This thinking relies on the assumption that there are no relevant differences between men and women that would justify giving men higher authority. The assumption is that men and women are exactly the same when it comes to everything that matters; therefore there is no sense in treating them differently.

But is that assumption true? 4:34 says that there is something intrinsic about men that justifies God giving them authority over their wives. *There is some genetic/evolutionary reason why giving men authority over their wives leads to better results for everyone involved.* If that is true (and we either have to assume it is true because the Quran says it is, or abandon the Quran for containing a falsehood), then giving men authority over their wives in a modern family is just as relevant as it would be in an ancient family. There are thousands of situations that come up in a modern family's life in which the question of authority is significant. Should the wife accept that particular job? Should the son be allowed to go out with that group of friends? Should the daughter be allowed to wear that particular dress? *Qiwāma* allows for discussion and debate while giving the man the right of having the final word, because of a superiority in rank that God has given to him, and because he spends out his wealth to care for his family (the reasons given in 4:34). But if the husband's opinion is absurd, his wife can appeal to higher authorities to correct him.

A feminist who appreciates everything said above may go on to say that she does not like to live with a husband who thinks he has the right of having the final word. But even in this case she is misunderstanding the purpose of 4:34. If she marries a husband as intelligent and educated as herself, he will probably be the type of person to work out all issues of authority without having to resort to saying that God has granted him the final word. It is only an extremely socially inept man who insults his wife

by telling her he has authority over her. An intelligent and intellectually mature Muslim man will instead treat her like an equal, the way Prophet Muhammad appears to have treated his wife Aisha.

The final remaining feminist criticism would be her saying that she does not want to be subject to a man's authority no matter how good of a man he is. She wants to be free and make her own way in the world without reference to a man. Islam's answer is that she is free to not get married, but the general framework of marriage within Islam will always be the *qiwāma* framework, which is prescribed in the Quran and accepted by the vast majority of the world's Muslim men *and* Muslim women. Rejecting *qiwāma* is similar to rejecting the Ramadan fast. One can come up with various logical reasons for rejecting fasting (it reduces worker productivity, for example), but since it is God who prescribes it, we have no option but to do as He says. Additionally, if 99% of women are quite happy to live under *qiwāma* while 1% of them dislike it, whose opinion is more authoritative? The radical feminist answer would be that any woman who refuses to agree with feminism is foolish and her opinions do not count. The humanist answer would be that as humans, their worth does not derive from how feminist they are, and if the majority of intelligent and educated Muslim women do not have a problem with *qiwāma*, that is very strong evidence in favor of the traditional Islamic family.

Many women can probably be convinced to dislike *qiwāma* in the name of women's rights. This is similar to the way that even today it is easy to convince workers to support communism despite the horrors it led to in the 20th century. Both feminism and communism promise a specific class of people increased rights, powers, and privileges, and few humans have the wisdom to reject such things when offered to them freely. Ask any Muslim woman, especially an unmarried and college-educated one, "Do you want as much authority as your (future) husband or less authority?" and she will probably say she wants as much authority. This is similar to

asking a worker, "Do you wish your boss was legally required to share much of his wealth with his employees?", the answer will almost certainly be a "Yes!" The problem is that we cannot build a civilization based on answering the average person's desires. Legal systems and social order have to be designed by mature people who can foresee the long-term results of their actions. Ending *qiwāma* might make a small minority of women happy, but what will be the long-term costs to the rest of society? If it is said that a woman should not have to sacrifice her freedom and independence for the sake of society, the answer is that actually she does. Islam asks both men and women to sacrifice many of their desires for the sake of the greater good. They are required to limit sexual partners even if this reduces their fulfillment; they are required to pray at inconvenient hours; they are required to not enjoy alcohol even though it is highly pleasurable to drink and many people are capable of enjoying it without becoming alcoholics. Pious Muslim women by and large see no problem with *qiwāma* because it is one of dozens of limitations God places on women supposedly for their own good and the good of those around them. A Muslim woman either has to accept that God is right in His commandments or that He is wrong and she can do better outside of them.

Interfacing with secular law

It should be mentioned that most legal systems do not recognize the validity of the use of violence against a wife in any circumstance except in that of physical self-defense, and even then a man may be considered guilty until proven innocent. For this reason Muslims living under such laws are required to follow those laws. By the fact of accepting to live under a secular legal system and enjoying its protection, one also accepts to abide by its limitations. Upholding the "social contract" inherent in living under a secular legal system takes precedence over applying parts of

Islamic law that conflict with it. In Islam the protection of life, property and dignity are the prime purposes of the law, so a secular legal system that affords these things but prohibits applying certain branches of Islamic law is still largely in accordance with Islam.

Fighting violence against women

While 4:34 teaches us that there are extremely rare cases in which violence against a wife is justified, this should not make us indifferent toward cases of domestic abuse. The Quran is opposed to injustice and cruelty, and needless to say this means that we should be opposed to injustice and cruelty toward women. How can a man carry out the "greater *jihad*" of working to make the world a better place if he has created a cruel and tyrannical kingdom at home? Until recently Muslim societies (and of course non-Muslim ones too) were quite apathetic toward the issue of cruelty toward women. Things seem to be improving.

An intelligent legal theorist should have no trouble seeing that giving someone policing power is bound to lead to abuse if there is no oversight, therefore the creation of agencies protecting women against abuse should be an essential part of any developed Islamic legal system. Women should enjoy all of the protections of a country's constitution and should have recourse to the authorities if they suffer abuse on the hands of their husbands, fathers or others.

Men in charge or God in charge?

Most wives in Islamic societies, like all societies, have a healthy level of skepticism toward their husband's wisdom and authority. For Muslim wives, it is not the husbands themselves who deserve their submission except in cases where the husband is truly admirable according to the wife and the wife is has type of personality that enjoys submission. Rather, it is

their social order that teaches them to respect the authority of their husbands. They do it largely out of respect for their societies and relatives, not out of respect for their husbands' personal virtues. It is respect for the *office* of husband, not the husband himself.

This is a crucial point in understanding Muslim societies. A woman's heart and soul does not have to be submissive toward her husband (it often is not) for her to live within the Islamic framework. Instead, it is her allegiance to her society and its social order that makes her respectful toward her husband's position. She respects both the offices of wife and the husband and acts according to the demands of these offices. The husband can never hope to be the ideal husband who satisfies everything the office demands. But if he is a good husband, he will at least attempt to embody the ideals of that office. And the wife judges him accordingly: if the husband embodies the ideals of his office, she will respect him enough to try to embody the ideals of her office.

What is seen in well-educated, cosmopolitan and devout Muslim societies is not a rule of husbands, but a rule of God. It is a woman's respect for her God-inspired social order that makes her respect her husband's authority.

And if the belief in God declines, so does a woman's respect for her husband's authority. This is very strong proof for the fact that husbands are not "in charge" even in highly conservative, devout Muslim societies. It is God who is in charge. When belief in God declines, so does belief in the authority of husbands. This shows that the authority of husbands is not something the husband creates or enforces himself—most husbands could never do that. It is belief in God and social order that comes from this that creates and enforces that authority for him.

Wives in Islam are not required to be servile and submissive toward their husbands. They are required to be servile and submissive toward God, and that means they respect what the Quran tells them about the authority of

their husbands. But, the more intelligent and educated they are, the more skeptical they are toward their husbands and the more independent of mind they are. This is not un-Islamic even if some scholars and preachers say it is. A woman can remain perfectly skeptical and independent while living with a husband and respecting his authority out of respect for God, not for him. If he deserves respect, then she will give him respect as well.

The same way that a Muslim is not required to give up his or her humanity to be Muslim, a Muslim woman is not required to give up her humanity to be a wife. She can be as independent-minded as any feminist while, out of love and respect for God, enjoying and respecting her position as wife and her husband's position as husband. The husband's own power and authority is quite irrelevant her. And since the husband has higher authorities that can correct and punish him, he is not allowed to abuse the power and authority delegated to him.

Ideally, therefore, a woman remains independent of mind while accepting the office of wife out of respect for God, her family and her society. She will love her husband if he deserves it while taking him to task for any form of demeaning treatment.

It is true that she loses some freedom when she becomes a wife. But what she gains more than makes up for it; a higher social status, increased respect from those around her, access to her husband's wealth and society. To a devout Muslim woman, marrying a reasonably good man provides an increase in her *power* and position in life. It is from this point of view that Islamic marriage should be understood. She goes from being beholden to her parents and siblings to being beholden to one man who often loves her and is ready to do her bidding. It is natural that she should see this as a gain, not a loss. And it is for this reason that Muslim girls, similar to the girls in *Pride and Prejudice*, love the idea of marrying even when they are highly respected and adored in their own families and are

free to get an education and career. Marriage for them means the start of a new stage in life in which they build something beautiful and make their important contribution to society through working on it (a family that is well-integrated into society).

Conclusion

Any treatment of a woman that is culturally inappropriate is also Islamically inappropriate, regardless of the culture we are looking at—Eastern or Western. Islam only permits violence against women in cases where it is culturally and religiously justified. If the culture considers a man's treatment of his wife unacceptable, Islamic law provides for correction and punishment of the man.

But while the West only recognizes self-defense as the only case where violence against women may be justified, Islam extends this concept to marriage-defense. Islam does not define marriage-defense, or defense against *nushūz*, explicitly, enabling each culture to self-define it.

As already stated at the beginning, wife-beating is unacceptable and taboo among middle class Muslims throughout the world, as it should be. But while a naïve view will find in this an abandonment of a part of the Quran, a sophisticated view sees it as Islam applied authentically and in the best way possible. There is no need to abandon 4:34 in order to prohibit violence against women. Islam *already* prohibits violence against women whenever it is unjustified. Verse 4:34 merely extends the concept of self-defense to marriage-defense, allowing a man more room to do what is good for his family.

Whether 4:34 leads to increased violence against women must be studied empirically. I would argue that the more knowledgeable a man is of the Quran and Islamic law, the more he will feel restricted in his ability to do as he likes in his marriage—and that includes the way he treats his wife.

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8. Rationality, Evolution and Islam

This chapter demonstrates the relationship between Islam and science/rationality through my effort to reconcile Darwinian evolution with the Quran. I am as much a "Darwinian" as any evolutionary biologist and as much a believer in the literal meaning of the Quran as any conservative Muslim. By showing how these two seemingly clashing worldviews can be reconciled, I hope to clarify many important matters relating to the relationship of Muslims with the modern world and its scientific and rationalist ideals.

How can any rational person believe in religion when there is no proof for it? To put it another way, does not a believer, by the very fact of believing, prove their credulity and irrationality?

The history of religion, including that of Islam, is often thought of as a struggle between "faith" and "reason"; that a Muslim can be as much a rationalist and empiricist as an irreligious person is inadmissible for many. When it comes to a Muslim rationalist, it is assumed that there must always be a "catch", some laxity of mind or weakness of spirit that makes them inferior rationalists or inferior Muslims. If they are devout, they may wish to be rationalists and empiricists, they may even think they are, but at the end of the day they are merely practicing self-delusion.

To today's proud secular mind, there is always some sickness or feeblemindedness hiding beneath faith.

In this essay I will present a form of faithful rationality—inspired by highly futuristic Islamic theological ideas from over 900 years ago—that reconciles faith and reason without there being any "catch"; the world is as rational as any scientist imagines it to be, and as controlled and maintained by God as any mystic imagines it to be. The "Matrix" of the Iranian philosopher and mystic Al-Ghazali (died 1111 CE)—his conceptualization of the universe as something akin to a computer simulation, provides for intellectually honest rationality that in no way places chains on God's powers, nor does it place chains on science and rationality. One can wholeheartedly believe in the entirety of the Quran in its plainest sense while retaining their independence of mind, skepticism and rationality. This may sound like rather too much for a religious person to claim, but I hope to illustrate it in the first part of this essay.

The essay goes on to use the notion of a "divine template" to reconcile the Quran's views on creation with the theory of evolution. This notion does not come from ancient Islamic learning; it is my own creation arrived at after years of reading and searching. There is no "catch" here either; the proposed reconciliation will make complete sense to any scientist and any lover of the Quran without requiring either to submit to the other's authority—once they understand al-Ghazali's Matrix.

So-called "proofs" of God's existence

I do not believe that a proof for God's existence is possible. Numerous theologians, Muslim, Christian and Jewish, inspired by Aristotle and other philosophers, have proposed theories that they claim prove that God must exist. All such proofs suffer from a fatal weakness recognized by Kant, namely that they assume the logic of this universe extends to what is outside of it. The Christian philosopher Edward Feser, in his proofs of

God's existence, mentions the metaphor of a lamp in a dark place. The lamp illuminates a small area representing the limits of human knowledge, stuck as we are within this universe. He says that even though we only have knowledge of a small area of what is potentially knowable, we can take it for granted that the dark areas also follow the same rules. In our world, something cannot come from nothing; therefore there must be a creator. We do not know what is outside our world, but according to Feser it is completely safe to assume that what applies in our world will also apply outside of it.

And that is the problem. In reality, we do not at all know with certainty whether what applies in our world also applies outside of it. It is quite a leap of faith to assume that the area outside the circle of light follows the same rules as the area inside the circle. For all that we know the unknown dark areas might be abysses full of multi-dimensional knots that no human can ever grasp. Perhaps we are stuck in a false simulation that hides from us the true nature of reality, which may have nothing to do with what the philosophers imagine.

The proofs offered for God's existence strongly suggest that God exists, but the problem is that a strong suggestion is not a proof. A real proof is one that, like Euclid's proofs, can be verified by *any* rational human without requiring any leaps of faith. "Proofs" of God's existence, even if they come infinitely close to a mathematical proof, are not proofs. There is always an unbridgeable gap between them and true proofs, therefore a person who calls them proofs is committing the crime of sophistry; they are trying to bridge a gap in logic through rhetoric.

My conscience recognizes the pull of Feser's "proofs", but my conscience also recognizes their inherent weakness and rebels against calling them "proofs". I agree with Roger Scruton when he says:

and while none of them is wholly believable, they serve the useful purpose of showing the rumours of God's death to be greatly exaggerated.[1]

I believe there can never be hard evidence that compels all rational people to believe in God. There is, however, a preponderance of soft evidence that, once recognized, experienced and accepted by a person, make it unconscionable for them to reject God. Not all humans necessarily get exposed to sufficient soft evidence to make it unconscionable for them to reject God; this is something about which I do not speculate.

In order for me, as a self-respecting human, to be able to continue believing in my religion, I must be able to re-analyze its founding text (the Quran) at any time of my choosing and reach the same conclusion about it—the same way that any re-analysis of one of Euclid's proofs should always lead to the same conclusion; that the proof is correct. This should happen despite my increase in knowledge and experience as I age, despite all the secular books I read, including highly enjoyable books by atheists like Terry Pratchett. At age 15 I read the Quran and found it true. At 40 I should be able to read it again and find it true, despite the fact that I will be very much a different person by then. An atheist may imagine that as a faithful person's intellectual horizons grow wider, it will become increasingly difficult for them to continue believing in their faith. That would be true of a false religion. But if a religion is truly from the Creator and is based on an unadulterated text that transmits His words, then the experience should be quite the opposite. The more one learns about the Creator's handiwork (this universe and everything in it), the more sense His words should make and the more convincing they should become.

So is Islam really that "one true" religion that all of these highly intelligent and admirable non-Muslims failed to get the memo about? It is not my

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[1] Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Philosophy*, New York: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1998, 93.

goal to convince readers of Islam's supposed truth, but this essay should shed some light on certain misconceptions that have prevented such people from taking Islam's most important text, the Quran, seriously. I believe that a religion like Christianity is truly from God and that it provides a sufficiently meaningful worldview for a person to believe in it while also believing in a scientific worldview. I do not claim that Islam possess exclusive rights to being a religion that can meet the latest scientific challenges.

My goal is to show that the Quran and the theory of evolution have no difficulties with one another once we give the Quran a reading that is innocent of preconceived notions about a supposed incompatibility. I let the Quran speak for itself, and I write as someone who has read this book dozens of times in the original Arabic, besides studying translations and interpretations of it in Kurdish, Farsi, Arabic and English.

The most important reason preventing Muslims from appreciating the Quran's compatibility with evolution is that they do not take the Quran very seriously. They treat it as a historical artifact immersed in a vast web of cultural and intellectual assumptions. The book's meaning is dimmed by so many lenses of bias that the book rarely gets a chance to speak for itself.

The religion of Islam is not based solely on the Quran but also on the far greater literature of hadith which transmits sayings and actions from the time of Islam's founder. If it is shown that the Quran is compatible with the theory of evolution, this does not necessarily mean that hadith is. This issue will be dealt with later in the essay.

While anti-intellectualism and anti-empiricism is common among the religious, it is not true to say that this is a doctrine of the Quran. The Quran speaks of observation and proof in numerous places. Discovering this conflict between the irrationalist tendencies of some Muslims and the seemingly rationalist doctrines of the Quran, I am forced to build my own

Islam based on the Quran. It would be a mistake to consider Islam anti-rationality, anti-skepticism, anti-science or anti-evolution merely because many Muslims act as if it is.

The religion of the Quran is founded upon the commandment "Thou shalt question!" The Quran continuously mocks various sections of humanity for not thinking clearly or for believing in superstitions. It also constantly calls its readers to think, to reason, to observe, to analyze, to question. Speaking to those Christians and Jews who claim that only Christians/Jews will enter Paradise, it asks for "proof".[2] Speaking to pagans, it asks them to show a proof for the truth of their deities.[3] The question "Will you then not reason?" is used 13 times in the Quran.

The Quran claims to be reasonable, and claims to contain much to convince the *ulī l-albāb* ("those endowed with intelligence and wisdom", a phrase that is used nine times in the Quran). In verse 39:21, it says:

> Have you not considered how God sends down water from the sky, then He makes it flow into underground wells, then He produces with it plants of various colors, then they wither and you see them yellowing, then He turns them into debris? Surely in this is a reminder for *ulī l-albāb*.

To a skeptic, it will seem especially ironic that the Quran is calling wise and intelligent people to take its claim seriously that perfectly natural phenomena like rain and the growth of plants are God's doing. There is nothing special about a book pretending that it is convincing or that reasonable people will agree with it. Most books make just such a claim.

However, as a skeptic who wants to make an accurate judgment about the Quran's logic, I should find out what I could arrive at if I were to take the book seriously. Let us pretend that the book is what it says it is, that it

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[2] The Quran, verse 2:111.
[3] The Quran, verses 21:24 and 27:64.

really is reasonable, that it is from an invisible but all-knowing God, and that it can be found as such by intelligent and wise people, where does this take us?

The Quran claims to contain the unadulterated words of God, claims to contain no errors, and claims to enjoy divine protection against corruption. It logically follows that the presence of a single error proves the entire book false, because it either means that God uttered a falsehood, or that he was incapable of protecting His book from corruption, both of which are equally fatal flaws in an all-powerful, all-knowing God.

The Rain of God

In the Quran, God takes credit for various natural phenomena that all have scientific explanations, as in the aforementioned verse 39:21. More of these instances are:

> God is He who sends the winds. They stir up clouds. Then He spreads them in the sky as He wills. And He breaks them apart. Then you see rain drops issuing from their midst. Then, when He makes it fall upon whom He wills of His servants, behold, they rejoice.[4]

> It is He who sends the wind ahead of His mercy. Then, when they have gathered up heavy clouds, We drive them to a dead land, where We make water come down, and with it We bring out all kinds of fruits. Thus We bring out the dead—perhaps you will reflect.[5]

> Have you not seen how God propels the clouds, then brings them together, then piles them into a heap, and you see rain drops emerging from its midst? How He brings down loads of hail from

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[4] The Quran, verse 30:48.
[5] The Quran, verse 7:57.

the sky, striking with it whomever He wills, and diverting it from whomever He wills? The flash of its lightning almost snatches the sight away.[6]

We, as rational humans, are supposed to believe that God is responsible for the things described above even though we never see God taking care of these things. Since we never see God's hand in these matters, it would be right to think that perhaps the universe would go on functioning like normal even if there was no God. We can carry out experiments inside sealed chambers where we can make it rain or snow, what does God have to do with any of this?

Imagine a king giving a speech in a newly conquered city, telling the listeners "I bring you food, so be thankful!" A skeptical person may go to the gates of the city early in the morning to see who it is who actually brings food. Since he never sees the king himself carrying sacks of flour into the city, he concludes that the king lied.

His mistake is that he fails to realize that it is by the king's order that people are bringing food to his city, so when the king says he is doing it, he is right. If it was not for the king, it would not be happening.

When God claims to make it rain, the fact that His hand cannot be detected in the process does not necessarily mean he is lying. If we are to really find out whether God's claim is true, we have to investigate further. If the pharaoh of Egypt claims that he makes the sun rise, I would be skeptical and ask him to provide some very convincing evidence before I take him seriously. In all likelihood the sun would rise even if the pharaoh were to die.

So what is so special about a 14-centuries-old book out of the deserts of Arabia[7] that I should take it seriously when it says its writer makes it rain?

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[6] The Quran, verse 24:43.

Hard and soft evidence

Atheists demand hard evidence before they believe in books like the Quran. But such evidence is not forthcoming. The Quran itself promises that it will not be forthcoming:

> Are they waiting for anything but for the angels to come to them, or for your Lord to arrive, or for some of your Lord's signs to come? On the Day when some of your Lord's signs come (i.e. when hard evidence for God's existence is seen), no soul will benefit from its faith unless it had believed previously, or had earned goodness through its faith. Say, "Wait, we too are waiting." [8]

The above concept is repeated in multiple places in the Quran; that once a person has seen irrefutable evidence for God's existence their faith will no longer be of any worth—since faith will no longer be necessary.

Seeing hard evidence for God's existence places a terrible burden on humans. This is expressed in one of the most terrifying verses of the Quran in the story of Jesus and the Apostles:

> And when the disciples said, "O Jesus son of Mary, is your Lord able to bring down for us a feast from heaven?" He said, "Fear God, if you are believers."

> They said, "We wish to eat from it, so that our hearts may be reassured, and know that you have told us the truth, and be among those who witness it."

> Jesus son of Mary said, "O God, our Lord, send down for us a table from heaven, to be a festival for us, for the first of us, and the

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[7] Islam is actually a "city religion", as it spread among the city Arabs first, and as its most devout adherents have continued to be city-dwellers to the present day.

[8] The Quran, verse 6:158.

last of us, and a sign from You; and provide for us; You are the Best of providers."

God said, "I will send it down to you. But whoever among you disbelieves thereafter, I will punish him with a punishment the like of which I never punish any other being."[9]

In the final verse above, the writer of the Quran claims that once the Apostles (and others present) see empirical evidence for God's existence, this changes the very nature of their relationship with Him. They made a request and God physically revealed Himself to them by responding. If they were to deny God's existence after that, they would deserve a singularly terrible punishment.

The purpose of this universe, in the Quranic view, is to host free-willed creatures who have the option of rejecting God's existence–so that an act of will and a submission of the heart is needed for them to become believers in Him, and for this act of will, which they have to repeat every day of their faithful lives, they will be rewarded with Paradise. If God's existence were ever proven, and the world did not end, this would prove the Quran false, since the Quran claims that hard evidence for God's existence will only be shown to humanity when the world ends.

> Are they waiting for God Himself to come to them in the shadows of the clouds, together with the angels, when the matter has been settled? All things are returned to God.[10]

Once God's existence is empirically shown, the "matter" will be "settled", that will be the end of the age-old argument between theism and atheism. Hard evidence would settle the matter; the point of faith is to believe in God without it. This naturally leads to the thinking that religion asks humans to abandon rationality for the sake of faith. But the truth is

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[9] The Quran, verses 5:112-115.
[10] The Quran, verse 2:210.

otherwise, since there is a second category of evidence that is ignored by atheists: soft evidence.

A verse of the Quran is called an *āya* in Arabic, which literally means "sign", something on the road that points toward a direction. As for its figurative meaning, the Indian Islamic scholar Hamiduddin Farahi (1863-1930) says in his definition of *āya*:

> That which is used as evidence toward (proving) some matter. It is not the whole of the proof, but it directs you toward the proof.[11]

Each verse of the Quran acts as a truth-pointer. A skeptic can read many of its verses without reaching any conclusion about the book's truth or falsehood. Open a book of Quran and you will see these verses at its beginning:

> In the name of God, the Gracious, the Merciful.
>
> Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds.
>
> The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.
>
> Master of the Day of Judgment.
>
> It is You we worship, and upon You we call for help.
>
> Guide us to the straight path.
>
> The path of those You have blessed, not of those against whom there is anger, nor of those who are misguided.

These verses do not contain anything to launch a critique on. God is the Lord of the Worlds, he is gracious and merciful, and he is the master of the Day of Judgment. These claims are unassailable, since they do not make any scientifically testable claims. The verses might as well be saying that

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[11] ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd [sic] al-Farāhī, *Mufradāt al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muḥammad Ajmal Ayyūb al-Iṣlāḥī, Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islamī, 2002, 134.

the universe is carried on the back of a giant turtle; we have no way of verifying their claims.

However, if the skeptic goes on to read, one thing they will find striking will be the absence of nonsense. How likely is it that a man out of 7th century Arabia could have written a page of cosmological fiction without it containing anything that insults one's intelligence in the 21st century?

Going on to read page after page, the skeptic's conscience is seriously challenged. Can he in good conscience say this is human-written fiction? Personally when I read the Quran with a skeptical eye, assuming it was written by Muhammad himself, I cannot maintain my skepticism beyond a few pages without feeling like a criminal, like I am acting against my conscience. At page 5, already impressed with the lack of anything that is obviously false or ridiculous, I may admit that there is a 1% chance that this is from God, but my skepticism makes me continue to say that Muhammad may have simply been a genius, therefore I say that it is still 99% likely that a human wrote it. The rational assumption is that any piece of text you see is human-created, extraordinary evidence is needed to prove otherwise.

At page 10, however, I am further impressed with the Quran's quality; its way of thinking, its morality and ethics, its continued lack of nonsense, therefore I may end up saying that there is a 98% chance it is human-written and a 2% it is not. By page 300 my conscience may force me to admit that there is a 30% chance that it is from God. By page 600 (the end of the book), I may conclude that there is a 50% chance that it is from God

I will have many difficulties with the book, such as its taking credit for natural phenomena, but the book, its form and content, make it impossible for me to casually dismiss it. The Quran, for one who reads it with naïve eyes in the original Arabic, is a serious problem that must be addressed if one is to remain honest with himself or herself. If the Quran is true, I must do as it says. I cannot summarily dismiss it, since I have

acknowledged that there is a 50% chance it is from God. Therefore the Quran throws me into serious intellectual turmoil; I can neither dismiss it nor accept it…yet.

There are converts to Islam who reached this stage then remained there for years, unsure whether it would be right to make the jump into faith, yet unable to forget the Quran and go on as before. A Scottish man described his personal journey to Islam thus:

> The Qur'an really shook me. It's quite a scary book to read because it tells you so much about yourself. Some things that I found out about myself I didn't like. So I decided to make some changes.

> And I knew what the end result of this process would be: I would be a Muslim.

> So I kept on reading. I read it three times, looking for the catch. But there was no catch; I was quite comfortable with everything.[12]

"I was quite comfortable with everything" is more than I can say. The article led to over 800 comments in which the writer was severely attacked by his fellow citizens for buying into this barbaric religion. Personally, until recently, I was never been completely comfortable with the Quran, in that there were certain things in it that I could not fully justify to myself. Despite those points of discomfort, the rest of the book was a tremendous, non-dismissible challenge to me.

At some point, the evidence starts to feel overwhelming that the likelihood of the truth of the Quran is greater than the likelihood of its

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[12] Alan Rooney, "I'm a middle-aged, white Scottish man who converted to Islam without ever meeting a Muslim. This is how." *The Independent*, February 9, 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/im-a-middle-aged-white-scottish-man-who-converted-to-islam-without-ever-meeting-a-muslim-this-is-how-a6862936.html (retrieved January 20, 2018).

falsehood. Once that happens, once a person believes that there is more than a 50% chance that the Quran is truly from God, he or she starts to feel that it is something tantamount to a crime against conscience and rationality to reject the book or ignore it. And that is where faith and submission begin.

The reason I believe in the Quran is the same reason so many scientists in the late 19th and early 20th century believed in Darwin's theory of evolution despite never actually observing evolution take place. They both get too many things right, which makes it impossible to casually dismiss them in good conscience.

For the Quran, I can list a few of those things, although each verse of the Quran can be thought of as one of those "things" that makes me believe in it.

- The aesthetic experience of the Quran. It is not without reason that the Quran's literal meaning is "The Recitation". The Quran is meant to be experienced as a recited thing, and for a person who speaks Arabic and experiences a good recitation of it, the Quran compels them to pay attention to it and to take it seriously, like any great work of art. The opening verse of Mary (chapter 19) starts with a set of seemingly meaningless sounds: "Taa haa yaa ain saad." In an English translation these look like a bunch of strange and possibly unnecessary sounds. In a good Arabic recitation, however, they are a very compelling set of tones that tell the listener that a very serious symphony is about to start. They transport the listener into the atmosphere of the Temple in Jerusalem in which the story unfolds. It is not only rational arguments that have a "rightness" to them; aesthetic experiences also have rightness (the architecture of a beautiful church looks "right", while a badly designed one looks "wrong"). There is something deeply "right" about the Quran when experienced.

While the aesthetics of the Quran do not prove that it is from God, they cast very strong doubt on the possibility of a human having composed it. The soul or conscience wishes it to be from God. If it was filled with absurd nonsense, we as rational beings could dismiss the conscience's desire. But there is nothing in it to insult the rational mind; rather, it contains much that satisfies it too.

- The Quran's zero-tolerance policy toward the charging of interest (also the Bible's policy according to a minority of Christians). The evils of usury are long-term and require deep and lengthy analysis to bring them to the surface, so much so that today perhaps one among a thousand economists cannot be found who appreciates how it leads to an unsustainable economic system where an over-class of usurers (lenders, i.e. the banks) slowly take control of the economy, as has happened in the United States and Europe.

- The fact that the Quran bans gambling. Without this ban, usury could be practiced in a different guise.

- The zakat system, which is inverted usury: the poor charge an annual 2.5% interest on the uninvested and speculatively invested wealth of the rich (this system would be useless without banning usury, it takes a genius to plug that loophole, and the Quran does it).

- The fact that in 600 pages written in the 7th century CE, it does not contain a single statement that is provably false, or that contradicts another part of itself. This is a highly unlikely achievement for a human writer, especially one from so far back in the past.

- The moral philosophy of the Quran, where moral integrity and justice are always paramount. Killing a single innocent human is

similar to killing all of humanity, which means that there can never be such a thing as a utilitarian murder. The end never justifies the means. No evil done in the name of the greater good is justified.

- The writer is always superior to me. I have never had a similar experience with any other writer. As I grow intellectually, I am made better capable of critiquing the thinking of others. The Quran has survived this process.

- The Quran's non-Arabian character and the unusual restraint of the writer in not engaging in the typical rhetoric of the time. This is perhaps the greatest clue to its truth. Someone who studies Arabic poetry from that period and the fabricated words of revelation of Musailamah and other "false prophets" will see that while all of the literary speech from that era has a distinctly Arabian character, full of hyperbole, self-aggrandizement, tribalism and bad logic, the Quran does not. The Quran was brought to us by an Arab from the heart of Arabia, yet it does not have an Arabian character.

- The fact that the Quran points out various mistakes of Prophet Muhammad. It severely rebukes him for ignoring a blind man who came to him for guidance (chapter 80), cautions him not to repeat the offense of taking prisoners when he was not supposed to (8:67-68), and criticizes him for accepting the excuses of a certain group of Medinans not to join a certain battle (9:43). While he could have invented these verses as an all-too-clever device to convince skeptics that the Quran came from a higher power, they do lend soft support to the Quran's own theory of itself, that it is a message given to the Prophet, rather than something invented by him. It shows far too much imagination

for that time for a prophet to criticize himself in such a severe manner.

The aesthetic experience of the Quran and its contents both strongly support its own theory of itself (that it is a book from God). A person who rejects the Quran after experiencing it aesthetically and recognizing the unlikelihood of a random man from Arabia composing it is committing something that is both unconscionable and irrational: unconscionable because they are repressing their conscience's response to the aesthetic pull of the book, irrational because they are acting against probability theory. The rational mind, once it experiences the Quran aesthetically and affirms the plausibility of its contents, recognizes that the likelihood of it being from God is greater than the likelihood of it being a man-made work by an uneducated and illiterate Arab. For such a person to dismiss the Quran is as irrational as dismissing the news that a great storm will affect the area they live in in an hour despite dozens of data points all pointing to the likelihood of such a thing taking place.

The above are not the reasons why I believe in God. They are the reasons why I believe that the Quran is from God. As for my belief in God, I consider it extremely likely that all humans already half believe in God, in some sacred and transcendent person whose eyes are on them at all times. The Quran is a vehicle for strengthening my belief in God, but it is not the only vehicle, and it is not necessarily the strongest one. For me, it feels as if to merely exist, to merely be a self-conscious subject who looks out onto the world, is a very compelling force pointing to God's existence, making it nothing short of criminal for me to deny Him.

Describing why I believe in the Quran feels similar to describing why I am in love with someone. I can mention a few obviously good qualities of the beloved, but every reason given for this love cannot help but feel weak and absurd, since it does not capture the real thing.

If the Quran is so compelling, one may wonder how there can be Arabic-speaking atheists who read the Quran and reject it. The reason, I would say, is that due to the lack of hard evidence, there is always room for doubt. Accepting the truth of the Quran feels like a "jump" for those who have not accepted it yet. One cannot easily dismiss the Quran in good conscience, but one is not compelled to accept it either. A person's biases may also strongly affect the amount of charity they give to the text; the Quran mentions that God has beautified the sky with "lamps". A person who is predisposed to think very negatively of the Quran will see in such a statement a proof for the superstitious and unscientific nature of the Quran, while Muslims will see it as a poetic reference to the stars.

We can now discuss the topic of rain. God could claim credit for making it rain for three reasons:

1. Purposeful invention

God designed and built a universe in which rain happens, for the very purpose of having it be a help toward the evolution and sustenance of the creatures that would one day come about on Earth.

2. Operating the universe

Let us imagine that the universe is a simulation sustained by God, what I call al-Ghazali's "Matrix". The word Matrix is a reference to the popular film of the same name, in which the characters famously live inside a simulated universe. The Matrix theory enabled al-Ghazali to free God from the chains that previous philosophers had tried to impose on Him. Islam's earlier philosophical movements, inspired by Greek thought, were stuck within the Aristotelian paradigm of considering the universe all that there is, and thinking that God would have to follow the same rules and logic seen elsewhere within our reality.

Al-Ghazali, who was developing lines of reasoning started centuries before, was able to think "outside the box" of this universe, recognizing

that there was no obvious reason why God should be stuck following the same rules as everyone else if he was truly transcendent and all-powerful. In his view, this universe is like a simulation maintained by God from the outside, who is under no obligation to follow the rules internal to the simulation. When a tree catches fire, it is not because matter decided that catching fire was a good idea at that instance of time, but because God changed the universe. Explaining this concept would have been extremely difficult in the past, but today, thanks to video games, we have a ready-made illustration. Inside a video game, if you see a tree catching fire, it is not because the atoms and molecules of the tree came in contact with a hot object that lit them. We know it is a fake, imaginary tree, and that the reason it caught fire was because the computer that runs the video game knows that when a hot object touches the tree, a fire should start. If you are stuck inside a video game, you "know" that when hot objects touch trees, the trees catch fire, and you may see this as a simple rule of nature that any scientist can verify. But if you come out of the video game, you realize that the whole thing is a set-up; the things you considered rules of nature are actually computer instructions that can be changed by a video game designer. He can change the code so that when a hot object touches a tree, it no longer catches fire.

Al-Ghazali was answering the challenge of the philosophers who, like most atheists, were incapable of thinking in the "fifth" dimension (in and out of the universe), and who could see no way of reconciling the attributes of God as taught by religion with their ideas about nature, so that they were forced to say that God had to follow certain rules dictated by nature. These philosophers could only think in the four dimensions of space and time. Al-Ghazali added a new dimension; the inside and the outside of the universe, and through a few simple examples showed that there is no conflict between nature and God. Nature is to God as the simulated world inside a video game is to the computer that runs it.

According to this theory, this universe would be a blob of inert, unmoving matter if God stopped animating it. If this theory is true (and there is no evidence that it is false), then saying that the universe would continue existing or operating normally even if there was no God would be similar to saying that the world inside a computer video game would continue to be there even if you take away the computer. It is to be so enamored by an illusion as to deny its source.

An atom, according to the Matrix theory, has no power or will to exist or move. It is God who has to sustain the existence of everything in this world and cause them to move when. This means that in the case of rain, God has to cause steam to rise, He has to make it go where it is supposed to go in the sky, He has to bring it together into clouds, and then He has to take it to where it will eventually become rain.

He does all of these things so reliably, that we start to think of them as "natural" phenomena that just happen without needing something to make them happen. But this universe, if God decided to "let it go", would disappear as if it had never existed, similar to turning off a computer: "God upholds the heavens and the earth, lest they cease (to exist). And were they to cease, there is none to uphold them except He. He is Most Clement, Most Forgiving."[13]

3. Intervention.

While the above two points admit for the possibility of God being responsible for the phenomenon of rain in general (the way that a computer is responsible for the rain that happens inside a video game), we need something more. God seems to claim that He purposefully sends rain here and there (especially in verse 24:43 quoted above), in directions He wants, meaning not necessarily directions that only obey the laws of nature (even if the laws nature are of his own making). God seems to claim

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[13] The Quran, verse 35:41.

that his agency goes into deciding when and where rain happens—that it is not mere chance caused by the laws of nature. The way that God could make this happen is by making it happen regardless of the laws of nature, because he has the power to do that.

This, of course, would be impossible to detect, according to his plan, since God does not want the discovery of hard evidence for his existence. Even if we could build a machine that perfectly predicted rain around the world, so that any aberrations caused by God's decisions could be seen, God could change what the machine shows.

Saying that God intentionally makes it rain here and there is to claim a miracle happens, since one is saying this rain is happening due to a supernatural phenomenon (God), not due to a natural, scientifically explicable phenomenon. To prove a miracle, an equally miraculous piece of evidence is needed. For those who have experienced the Quran and accepted it, the Quran is sufficient evidence, although the evidence is not hard, in that there is room for doubt that has to be bridged by the conscience every day. Experiencing doubt is quite natural for a believer. When this happens, they go back to the things that convinced them their beliefs are true, such as the Quran, examine them again until both their rational minds and their conscience are overwhelmed with the recognition of their truth.

The Quran claims that God, who is in charge of this simulation-like universe, is personally responsible for rain. This is similar to saying that the computer that runs the Matrix decides when it should rain and what rain should be like (while someone stuck inside the Matrix might say rain happens due to perfectly "natural" laws of the universe).

In other words, if it is true that this universe is a simulation operated by God, then it logically follows that God could take credit for making it rain.

By being outside the simulation, God, if he really exists, can make it rain while making his own role in the matter undetectable. Therefore the fact that rain can be explained scientifically does not tell us anything about God's role in the matter; what we call "science" is nothing but a description of how God operates the universe.

The above does not prove that religion correct in its claims regarding God's role in nature. It, however, shows that the existence of a conflict between religion and science in this matter is illusory; we can be rational scientists inside the universe, while believing that outside the universe God is operating things, similar to being in the Matrix while acknowledging how it is run from the outside. We fully support scientific explanations, and we will not bother non-believers with supernatural explanations, since that requires that they believe in God in the first place. Since they do not, there is no point in telling them about God's potential role in undetectably making it rain in certain times and places.

A skeptic could rightly say that saying God is undetectably involved in making it rain is like saying invisible magical fairies make it rain. The reply is that yes, it is just like that. But in our case, we have extraordinary evidence to support our thinking; the Quran with its preponderance of soft evidence in its favor, while a person who claims that invisible magical fairies make it rain has no evidence, soft or hard.

A Muslim scientist can study the weather as a purely natural system, while also believing in God's power to direct it as He wills, so that they can thank God when a tornado avoids their neighborhood. This is like thanking the Matrix operator for letting you have an easy time of it inside the Matrix. And when thanking God for getting the job you wanted, you do not claim that your getting the job does not have a scientific explanation—you merely admit that there is sufficient room for undetectable divine action within this universe, so that God could have made the crucial difference in whether you got the job or not while keeping Himself hidden in the matter. From a scientific point of view, this

is an entirely useless point of view; whether it is true or false makes no difference to science. And that is the point; we are merely claiming that thanking God for getting a job is not irrational if one believes in God, since it is just like thanking the Matrix operator for arranging things smoothly for us inside the Matrix. One can thank God for every great and small blessing in their lives while treating the world as a perfectly scientific system; God is ever-present and ever-undetectable at the same time. One never knows if God did not make the crucial difference when something, anything, happened or did not happen.

When I write of the lack of incompatibility between the Quran's theology and science I do not mean that we should bother non-believers with such topics; we should only do so if they bring it up by saying or implying that this or that scientific fact or technical discovery somehow exposes the existence of shaky foundations within religion. What they say is provably false if we imagine the universe as a simulation that operates rationally inside while being divinely operated from the outside. An atheist might say: (1) science explains rain perfectly (2) therefore it is false to claim that God makes it rain.

What we say is: (1) science explains rain perfectly (2) if God exists, He could be in charge of a Matrix in which He makes it rain according to scientific principles (3) therefore the matter at issue here is not rain, but (a) whether God exists or not and (b) whether this universe is like a Matrix or not.

There is no proof that God does not exist, and there is no proof that this universe is not like a Matrix, therefore any claim that scientific explanations contradict God's existence are automatically and always false. An atheist who wants to convince me that God does not exist is completely wasting his time if he talks about scientific explanations, since I too believe in all of that. To stop wasting his time, he will have to do one of these three things:

1. Prove to me that God does not exist.

2. Prove that the soft evidence I rely on for having faith in God (the Quran) is false.

3. Prove to me that this universe could not possibly be a Matrix.

Atheists have so far failed to provide any of the above proofs. They continue to waste their time propounding science as a cure for religion, not realizing that al-Ghazali made that whole line of argument irrelevant nine centuries ago through his discovery of the "fifth dimension".

Another phenomenon for which God claims direct agency is the formulation of the genetic makeup of humans during conception:

> It is He who forms you in the wombs as He wills. There is no god except He, the Almighty, the Wise.[14]

When a father and a mother's genes recombine, there are 64 trillion different possible combinations that could be created.[15] God claims to have a hand in choosing which combination ends up actually taking place. Again, God can claim responsibility for forming our genes in the womb through the three methods mentioned earlier: Purposeful invention, operating the universe and intervening when he wants. Similar to weather events, the process of genetic recombination is so immensely complex and chaotic that God does not need to do anything to hide his hand in the matter; his interventions would be easily explainable as mere randomness, which is as it should be.

In verse 67:3 of the Quran, the writer appears to take pride in the lack of "glitches" in this Matrix:

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[14] The Quran, verse 3:6.

[15] Bruce D. Olsen, *Understanding Biology Through Evolution*, Raleigh: Lulu Press, 2009, 81.

He who created seven heavens in layers. You see no discrepancy in the creation of the Compassionate. Look again. Can you see any cracks?

In effect, the Quran tells us that God exists, but that we should be scientists in our dealings with nature: any glitches in the simulation (any supernatural phenomena pointing to him) would be hard evidence of his existence, but he says there will never be hard evidence for his existence until the end times, therefore if we detect anything provably supernatural and the world does not end, that in itself could be considered a refutation of the Quran.

The doctrine of considering the universe a simulation-like thing controlled by God is known as occasionalism. It has been unjustly criticized for promoting an anti-science and irrationalist attitude, since it teaches that things only appear to be following scientific rules when in reality they are following God's commands. But this criticism focuses on a small area of Islamic thought and ignores its wider context. The Quran teaches that the universe is a simulation-like thing so that the laws of nature are merely byproducts of God's choices, it also teaches that we should act rationally and expect the universe to act rationally too: for example, it tells us that if we give away too much in charity we will get poor, which as any materialist will tell you, is a true fact of nature. Occasionalism only promotes irrationality if it is surgically removed from the rest of the Quran's teachings. The historian and Islamic scholar Ibn al-Jawzi (died 1200 CE), although not a very original thinker, uses the Quran's rationalist advice (such as that of the necessity of preparing provision for long journeys) to criticize certain lines of Sufi thought that taught that God would save and take care of His true believers without regard for the material reality around them.[16] Some of them, for example,

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[16] Abū l-Faraj ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣayd al-Khāṭir,* ed. Ḥasan al-Samāḥī Suwaydān, Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 2012, 482-483.

desisted from work thinking that God would provide for them regardless of the laws of economics. That is irrationalist because it expects God to materially intervene in this universe to take care of certain humans, which is opposed to what the Quran teaches. The Quran teaches us not to waste money (17:26), not to do physical harm to ourselves (2:195), to break our fasts if we are ill (2:184), and to perform the Hajj pilgrimage only if we have the material means to perform it (3:97) rather than setting out come what may. The Quran does not teach its believers to march into fires for the greater glory of God. It teaches them to view this world as a Matrix controlled by God, a Matrix that has rational rules that must be respected.

There is, of course, historical evidence of some Muslims acting irrationally (although the Western imagination often greatly exaggerates this as any good Western historian of Islam can tell you), but what Muslims do within their limited historical and cultural perspectives does not necessarily have a one-to-one relationship with the Quran's teachings, therefore we should look at the Quran itself to see what it says.

Like any scientist, I never expect to detect anything supernatural in this world. Like any mystic, I believe my life and the rest of this universe is entirely under God's control and command. My attitude is that of the mystic-scientist; not the crackpot who thinks quantum theory proves the healing power of crystals, but the scientist who considers science, hard, rational science, to be merely a way of looking at God and His works. From this standpoint I have no desire to deny science—this would be denying an aspect of God's handiwork. And I am not ashamed to pray to God and ask Him for His help and support because I know that He can do anything He wants (as the Quran teaches), that He answers prayers (as the Quran teaches), while also expecting this world to continue operating under clearly-defined rational rules (as the Quran teaches).

In short, the Quran teaches that God is present but hidden. It does not tell me to expect nature to work one way today and a different way tomorrow; it teaches me to expect nature to act rationally, and it teaches

me that if God intervenes in my life, it will be done undetectably, through means that always have rational explanations. I will never argue with an atheist about whether it was God or the surgeon who saved my life after an accident, because both views are true at the same time, and there is no point in bothering the unspiritual about God's role in this world. From this side of the wall that separates us from the Unseen, it was the surgeon, from the other side, it was God. This is not to discount the surgeon's role; maybe it was their years of determination and hard work that enabled them to accomplish their task. This simulation is a system controlled by God, but humans—who have free will—are plugged into it and make changes to it, again, similar to the Matrix film. We can be credited with our choices since we have free will, but we have no power to make the Matrix behave one way or another. We choose, God changes the Matrix in response and does it so reliably that we get the illusion that we are really in charge of our bodies and can make changes to the universe. This is similar to being stuck inside a video game and thinking you can fly because the video game allows you to. In reality, it is the video game that gives you all the powers you enjoy.

Yet another place where God claims direct responsibility for physical phenomena is in his providing sustenance to humans:

> Or, who originates the creation and then repeats it, and who gives you livelihood from the sky and the earth? Is there another god with God? Say, "Produce your evidence, if you are truthful."[17]

> And whosoever fears God, He will create for him a way out. And He will provide him with sustenance from where he does not expect.[18]

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[17] The Quran, verse 27:64.
[18] The Quran, from the verses 65:2-3.

The second verse above implies that God has a direct hand in providing sustenance, because he says that if we fear him, then he will provide. This is a central concept of the God-human relationship, repeated often in the Bible and the Quran. For example, in the Old Testament Book of Isaiah, God informs us:

> 10 If you extend your soul to the hungry And satisfy the afflicted soul, Then your light shall dawn in the darkness, And your darkness shall be as the noonday. 11 The Lord will guide you continually, And satisfy your soul in drought, And strengthen your bones; You shall be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.[19]

In the Quran, Moses says:

> "And [remember] when your Lord proclaimed: 'If you give thanks, I will grant you increase; but if you are ungrateful, My punishment is severe.'"[20]

If God did not intervene directly in the affairs of humans, there would be no way for this contractual relationship to be maintained. If we fear God, God will provide for us. We act, God reacts by arranging the events inside the Matrix favorably for us. For God to react, He has to intervene directly, but undetectably, in our universe. Once we think of the universe as a divine simulation, then intervention will be nothing out of the ordinary. Every movement of an atom is itself a divine decision; it would not happen without God making it happen. An intervention is merely a different decision where God, instead of operating the universe according to the laws of nature that he has laid down, he operates the universe in a certain time and place according to different laws that operate on a higher

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[19] Isaiah, 58:10-11, *New King James Version.*
[20] The Quran, verse 14:7.

plane and override the laws of nature, such as the divine law of rewarding thankfulness.

A family may live in a house that is in danger of collapsing. If nature were to take its course, the house would suddenly collapse without warning. But God can intervene, causing unsettling creaking noises to come from the house's structure for a few days before the collapse—giving the family ample warning and preparation time for responding to the problem. It would be foolish for a believer to expect God to warn them of every threat, and I have never met an intelligent Muslim who thinks thus. But as a spiritual person, I thank God daily for all the problems he has helped me avoid or solved for me.[21]

Topology: God's Template

The theory of evolution seems to claim that the creatures on Earth could have come about regardless of God. The religious think it is a God versus nature problem. This mistake is also made by atheist scientists who think that finding a scientific explanation for natural phenomena disproves God's role. As the previous discussion showed, according to the Quranic worldview, scientific explanations are merely man-made descriptions of the way God operates the universe. Therefore the existence of scientific explanations is not merely a non-problem for religion, it is *required* by it.

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[21] Certain Islamic theological theories posit that everything that happens in this universe is "already written", so that nothing new can take place. The Quran, however, lends itself far more to the common sense view that our lives are a conversation between us and God, in which we act and he reacts. If I sin constantly, this will cause my life to have a different trajectory than if I were to remain pious. The idea we get from the Quran is that this universe is operated and controlled by God, so that we have no power over it. But decisions are delegated to us, as if we were sitting outside the universe controlling bodies inside it using a remote control. There are various theological problems that this discussion leads to, but it is sufficient for the purposes of our discussion to take the Quran's words for it when it says that we are responsible for our actions and that God answers prayers.

The Quran teaches that God will keep Himself hidden, therefore all that we see around us should be so natural and rational that atheists should always have the choice of remaining atheists. Humans must forever maintain the choice between faith and disbelief. The universe provides many signs that point toward God, and the various "proofs" of God's existence strongly suggest the need for the type of God they describe, but there is always a place for doubt.

Topology refers to the physical configuration of the universe; the physical constants that govern the universe (such as the speed of light), the placement and chemical composition of the galaxies, stars and planets, and the placement of the continents, mountains, rivers and oceans on Earth.

You are probably familiar with the concept of a topographical map. This is a type of map that shows which areas have high elevation and which areas have low elevation. A country's topography refers to those features of the country's land that show up on a topographical map. We can say a country has a "rugged topography" if it has many hilly and mountainous areas and few areas of flat planes.

Topology, on the other hand, in the specific usage of this essay, goes beyond topography to account for the entirety of the physical configuration of an area of space. We can say this galaxy has a different topology from that one, which could mean that the arrangement of their respective stars and planets are very different. We can also say that this universe has a different topology from another universe, meaning that this universe has different physical constants, chemical compositions, and/or galactic arrangements compared to the other universe.

Topography is 3-dimensional; a topographical map extends a 2-dimensional map by adding elevation, making it 3-dimensional. On the other hand, topology is n-dimensional; it has as many or as few dimensions as one cares to name. A topological map of a galaxy could account for its 3-d appearance like a topographical map while adding

temperature, the strength of gravity, the velocity of its spirals, and so on and so forth, adding as many additional factors into it as one wants. Each additional factor we add is a new "dimension".

Topology is critical to evolution. No evolution can take place unless the topology of the universe and the relevant planet is just right for it. Very minor differences in the universe's topology would have made life impossible to exist (if the gravitational constant had been just a tiny bit larger or smaller, for example). Very minor differences in the topology of the earth would have led to the evolution of extremely different creatures than the ones we have now, and could have made the existence of humans impossible.

Imagine if the earth was entirely an ocean planet. On such a planet, there would be no way for land animals to evolve, and therefore there would be no humans. The number of all species that would evolve on such a planet would likely be far fewer than the 8.7 million species we have on the earth today.

The design of a planet is crucial to the types of creatures that evolve on it. And it follows that if you can design a planet with the right topology, you could create any type of creature you want. And perhaps it is for this reason that God says:

> Certainly the creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of humanity, but most people do not know.[22]
>
> 27. Are you more difficult to create, or the sky? He constructed it. 28. He raised its masses, and proportioned it. 29. And He dimmed its night, and brought out its daylight. 30. And the earth after that He spread. 31. And from it, He produced its water and its pasture.

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[22] The Quran, verse 40:57.

> 32. And the mountains, He anchored. 33. A provision for you and for your animals.[23]

God might be saying that the fact that he designed our universe's topology is a greater accomplishment than the fact that he created humans. This would make a lot of sense if the existence of humanity was nothing more than a *byproduct* of the universe's design. When God created the universe, he did not merely create a lifeless system of stars and planets. He created a universe in whose design was embedded the program that would ultimately lead to the existence of 8.7 million species, including humans.

Topology–the way the universe is configured–is a template that God uses for creating creatures.

Imagine if Earth lacked mountains and rivers. Could humans or human-like creatures evolve on such a planet? It is unlikely, perhaps impossible. The design of the planet and the universe in which it exists decides what types of creatures can evolve on that planet, meaning that the designer of the universe can be fully credited with the creation of all the creatures that exist inside that universe if the designer had the creation of those creatures in mind to begin with.

To create apes, God can either create apes from a puff of smoke, or he can create a universe in which apes can evolve after billions of years. From his perspective, the two things are equally easy. It is just that the second choice enables him to ultimately create humans who have the choice of denying his existence. It allows him to retain his plausible deniability. The issue of human evolution is more complicated than the issue of the evolution of other creatures and will be dealt with specifically later on.

Through the Quran's consistent references to mountains, rivers, seas and the design of the earth and the "sky", God explains the topological design of the universe in detail and says that this is of greater importance than the

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[23] The Quran, verses 79:27-33.

creation of humans, because he is in effect describing the template or the intelligently designed factory that led to the existence of humans.

By considering the universe's topology a template created by God, we can credit him with creating all of the creatures on the earth without having to deny evolution. At the Big Bang, God created the universe with the exact conditions required to create life on one of the planets inside it billions of years later.

Dynamic-Kinetic Equilibrium

How can non-living matter lead to the complex biological machines that exist in all kinds of creatures? Does this not go against the idea of entropy—that the universe continues to break down and become simpler over time?

It is possible if we provide (1) energy sources and (2) complexity-inducing topologies, leading to what can be called a dynamic-kinetic equilibrium, in which matter stays in a state of heightened complexity as long as certain conditions around it continue to apply.[24]

Both of these conditions come true on Earth, where energy is available in the form of sunlight, geothermal energy and tides, and where the topology of the earth and the universe in which it is contained create an environment in which life can not only originate, but diversify by finding niche after niche in which it can survive.

The origination of life requires that dead matter somehow join together and increase in complexity. This is somewhat like expecting a pile of rocks to join together and walk up a hill. The difference is that in the world of atoms and molecules, things join together and increase in complexity all

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[24] This term is from Addy Pross; see his *What is Life? How Chemistry Becomes Biology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

the time, as can be seen in the highly complex organic compounds found inside meteors.[25]

All that's needed is the right mixture, and usually a source of energy, and from this, extremely complex molecules can evolve. This is a fact of chemistry.

The question is: just how complex can these natural structures become? Someone who denies abiogenesis (the origination of life from non-living matter) would say that there is no way that the complexity of these randomly formed molecules could increase to the degree seen in living things. This would mean that life could never evolve from non-living matter.

But someone with sufficient imagination would see that it might be possible given a large enough test chamber, ample building blocks of life, water, energy and hundreds of millions of years, and most importantly, a *designer* who put all of these together in just the right way to create life.

The chances of life happening by random are so small that they tend to zero. But if there is a designer who created the right universe for life to come into existence in it, then the origination of life would no longer be random, it would very much be planned. Therefore believers can acknowledge the possibility of abiogenesis without supporting the idea that life came about randomly. We instead can say that life came about because the designer got all the conditions right at the beginning of the universe.

Physicists say that if the Big Bang had taken place the merest fraction of a second slower or faster, the galaxies could not have formed, and humanity

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[25] Ehrenfreund et al., "Extraterrestrial amino acids in Orgueil and Ivuna: Tracing the parent body of CI type carbonaceous chondrites." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 98, no. 5 (2001): 2138-2141.

would not have existed.[26] To create humanity, what God had to do was get the conditions of the Big Bang exactly right, and 13.8 billion years later human-like creatures came into existence on one of the planets inside the universe created by the Big Bang.

The timescales involved in this, and the amount of intelligent design necessary, make it very difficult for people to imagine this actually taking place; that is, imagining God creating humans in such a complex and roundabout way.

But if you imagine the whole process taking just one second, it becomes easier to believe. Imagine a god who is holding a blob of matter in his hands. He parts his hands, the blob expands with it, and in just that second, you see a planet inside that blob of matter on which certain creatures live. Should a god not have such power? And can such a god not claim responsibility for the existence of those creatures if the nature of the blob of matter and the way he expanded it is all that lead to the existence of those creatures, and if the way he did this was intentional, with the aim of creating those creatures?

> Do the disbelievers not see that the heavens and the earth were one mass, and We tore them apart? And We made from water every living thing. Will they not believe?[27]

> We constructed the universe with [our] capability, and We are expanding it.[28]

The Islamic version of intelligent design (the phrase Christians use to refer to God designing humans and other creatures) can be called topological programming. When you want to create a creature or group of creatures,

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[26] See Stephen Hawking, *A Briefer History of Time*, New York: Bantam Books, 2005, ch. 9.

[27] The Quran, verse 21:30.

[28] The Quran, verse 51:47.

all that you need to do is design a universe with the right topology. In this topology would be programmed the existence of those creatures, and after millions or billions of years, which, if you are God, could be no length of time at all, those creatures would evolve on the planet or planets of your choice.

To wrap your head around this idea, think of a computer program that lets you design living creatures, but instead of letting you design the creatures directly by choosing their shape, color and anatomy, it asks you to design a universe that would lead to the type of creature you want. This computer program shows you a box where a picture of the creature would be, but currently it is blank. And it gives you various boxes where you can input various numbers. It asks you for the size of the universe, the speed of its expansion, the external shape of it, and the various physical constants that go into that universe, such as the speed of light and the gravitational constant. By making the tiniest changes to any of these variables, the creatures it shows you on the screen change immensely. Get the numbers just right, and you will get humans, among the trillions upon trillions of other possible creatures you could create. Increase the number for the gravitational constant and your humans may get smaller. Increase it beyond a point and the human disappears; the universe you are designing will no longer be able to support humans.

This is what topological programming means; designing universes with the specific aim of seeing creatures originate and evolve inside them after billions of years. A topological programmer is a designer of universes, and that is what the Creator is.

There is no difference between God creating all the creatures on the earth by a single command that turns a large puff of smoke into all of them, which is the way our ancestors used to think how creation should work, and creating them by designing and sustaining a universe that would lead to their existence after billions of years. The end result is exactly the same,

it is just that the second method is harder for the human brain to understand and appreciate, and it helps hide God's role in the matter.

There is no clash between Darwin's theory of evolution and intelligent design (except when it comes to the evolution of humans, which will be dealt with below). The theory of evolution is merely telling us about God's means of designing creatures, which is far cleverer than anything one tends to imagine. To design an elephant, God does not need to create an elephant from a puff of smoke. He instead brings a blob of matter and expands it, and billions of years later elephants will exist on a planet or many planets inside that expanding blob. God has the power to create a new universe full of millions of planets all of which are inhabited by elephants, merely by designing a universe with the right topology to lead to such planets and creatures.

Evolution is only a challenge to God if we cannot think outside the box of this universe. But once we see the universe as a mere simulation designed by God, evolution becomes a God-made design feature of the universe. From this view, evolution is a testament to God's incredible power and ingenuity; he can create creatures as intelligent as humans in such a round-about way that they would be able to deny the need for a Creator, and despite their very best efforts at detecting Him, they are never able to do so.

Topological programming does not only explain evolution; it also explains the origin of life. The same way that God can program evolution into the universe's topology, He can also program the origination of life into it and take credit for it.

There is no clear statement in the Quran saying artificial life cannot be created, and humans creating artificial life does not take away from God's greatness. If we were to create it, we would be merely copying him, from inside a universe that he designed and that he sustains.

The following verse seems to suggest that humans cannot create artificial life:

> O people! A parable is presented, so listen to it: Those you invoke besides God will never create a fly, even if they banded together for that purpose. And if the fly steals anything from them, they cannot recover it from it. Weak are the pursuer and the pursued.[29]

But this verse can actually be used as an argument for the possibility of humans creating artificial life. The second part of the verse says, "And if the fly steals anything from them, they cannot recover it from it."

Is it impossible to recover things stolen by flies? As a general rule, it is not impossible to catch flies and take back whatever they have stolen. What the verse might actually be saying–which is a point repeated many times throughout the Quran–is that we have no inherent power of our own; we have zero power over this universe: it is ultimately God who operates it. This means that we have no power to recover something a fly stole except when God enables us by moving the relevant atoms, photons and energy fields for us so that we can carry out our intention of recovering something the fly stole. God is telling us that it is he who is letting us have a remote control that enables us to control our bodies or avatars in this universe, a connection that can be severed by God at any moment.

By the same reasoning, we have no power to create artificial life, except when God enables us, by maintaining and operating the universe. Both of these things might be possible for us to do, if God makes them possible, and both would be impossible, if God makes them impossible. By the logic of the verse, creating artificial life might be as possible as recovering something stolen by a fly.

Still, it is possible that humans will never be able to manufacture life, as predicted by the great science fiction writer Frank Herbert in his *Dune*

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[29] The Quran, verse 22:73.

series, novels set thousands of years in the future. Perhaps there really is something special about life and perhaps at some point God had to breathe life into Earth to jump start the process of evolution that would eventually lead to the rest of all of the creatures we see on Earth. We do not know, and it is best that we do not issue definitive statements on matters we know little about.

I believe God is great enough to program the origination of life into the universe's topology, meaning that he can create a universe that leads to the origination of life without him having to intervene afterwards to plant life on it. Questioning the possibility of this happening is actually questioning God's greatness and creativity; it is saying that God is incapable of creating life using topological programming.

Why would God create life in such a roundabout way instead of creating it directly? This is not just some absurd mental gymnastics; there is a very strong reason for it. Creating life in such a way allows for the creation of the rarest species of all. No, not humans.

Atheists.

The God of the Quran wants His existence to be impossible to prove. He wants there to be the possibility of disbelieving in him, and that requires that his own hand should be invisible from direct measurement. God wants it to be possible for humans to think that they are alone in a universe without a creator. It should be possible for humans to deny him, ignore him and go about their entire lives acting as if he did not exist. And that requires that nature should appear supreme and unchallenged. Evolution is just the right way of achieving this goal of maintaining God's plausible deniability.[30]

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[30] We might all wish to exist in a universe where the choices between good and evil were easy, where we knew we are the good guys and where the bad guys all lived in Mordor. There is a reason, according to Islam, why it is not so, why we live in such a seemingly

Human Evolution

The Quran describes the creation of humans in detail, which causes some Muslims to reject evolution, thinking that evolution goes against the Quran:

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absurd arrangement where there is a creator who asks us to believe in him while exerting his best efforts to hide himself. The way the universe is causes us to be plagued with doubts and temptations, which makes it possible for our best and worst natures to come out. A simple, cartoonish world would have allowed humans to stroll into Paradise without one good person being very distinguishable from another. The immense complexity of this universe and God's hidden nature allows the universe to act as an incredibly efficient growing and sorting machine for humans. It helps raise and distinguish God's closest friends from His worst enemies. The universe is a playground for humans, a proving ground where humans show whether they deserve to be among God's friends once the game is over. The game's complexity helps provide ample opportunities and pitfalls, so that the game is not too easy and not too difficult, but at the right difficulty to be an authentic criterion to distinguish between worthy and unworthy humans. God is asking, "Who will choose to be My faithful servant without seeing Me and despite the temptation to deny Me?" The rational mind recognizes that there is a great deal of evidence pointing to God, while also recognizing that the evidence is not conclusive. The conscience, which is a separate faculty different from the rational mind according to religion, once exposed to the day-to-day reality of existence and to the evidence of scripture, feels a connection with God. The human can then make the choice of believing in God and acting according to his commandments. The choice is authentically theirs because the universe is designed in such a way as to make choice possible rather than compelling one to choose one way or another. And once the choice is made, God can put the human through tests where they will show just how dedicated they are to God. There are those who believe in God but do the very minimum of what He asks, while others try to do as much as possible. This scenario does not necessarily explain every human's experience. If God really exists and the Quran is really from him, then if we look at the universe from his point of view, we will see that the universe is an ideal set up for producing people he can truly consider his friends. The question can be asked how God can consider something that he created a "friend". Humans are his creation, so how could their choices be creditable to them and not to the person who designed them? We cannot say, because we do not know what kind of technology goes into the creation of what we call free will.

> We created the human being from clay, from molded mud.
>
> And the jinn We created before, from piercing fire.
>
> Your Lord said to the angels, "I am creating a human being from clay, from molded mud."
>
> "When I have formed him, and breathed into him of My spirit, fall down prostrating before him."
>
> So the angels prostrated themselves, all together.[31]

We know that humans share many of their genes with chimpanzees, rats, yeast and even some viruses. Are the above verses false, or is evolution false?

The answer might be in the Quran itself, in this verse:

> The likeness of Jesus in God's sight is that of Adam: He created him from dust, then said to him, "Be," and he was.[32]

We know from the Quran that Jesus was a human.[33] Yet the Quran says his creation was similar to that of Adam. There is an important clue in here.

How did God create Jesus? He used some clay to create a human whose genetic code was like any other human, and at a time when other humans were around. In the same way, God could have created Adam at a time when humans or human-like creatures already existed on Earth (and existing, of course, by God's design, who designed the topology that lead to the existence of such creatures).

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[31] The Quran, verses 15:26-30.

[32] The Quran, verse 3:59.

[33] See the Quran, verse 5:75: "The Messiah son of Mary was only a messenger, before whom other Messengers had passed away, and his mother was a woman of truth. They both used to eat food. Note how We make clear the revelations to them; then note how deluded they are."

God already had the genetic code for humans before the creation of the universe. He embedded that code into the universe's topology. For example, a minimum number of continents of a certain shape may be necessary on a planet for humans to exist on it. For humans to evolve on a particular planet, their genetic code has to be translated into topological features of that planet and the universe in which it is contained.

The evolution of humans or human-like creatures on the earth, and the creation of Adam from scratch (rather than from another human), are not mutually exclusive. God created Adam from dust, and he created Jesus from dust, and in the first instance, humanoids may have already existed on earth, similar to the second instance.

Adam had free will, while the human-like creatures that had evolved on the earth lacked it. The fact of God breathing "His spirit" into Adam may have been the critical differentiator that turned Adam into something more than yet another animal. Before Adam, the earth lacked any creature that could be held responsible for its actions. Adam's introduction into the earth was the start of the existence of responsibility. It is likely for this reason that the angels complained when God mentioned placing Adam on Earth:

> "Will You place in it (i.e. on the earth) someone who will cause corruption in it and shed blood, while we declare Your praises and sanctify You?"[34]
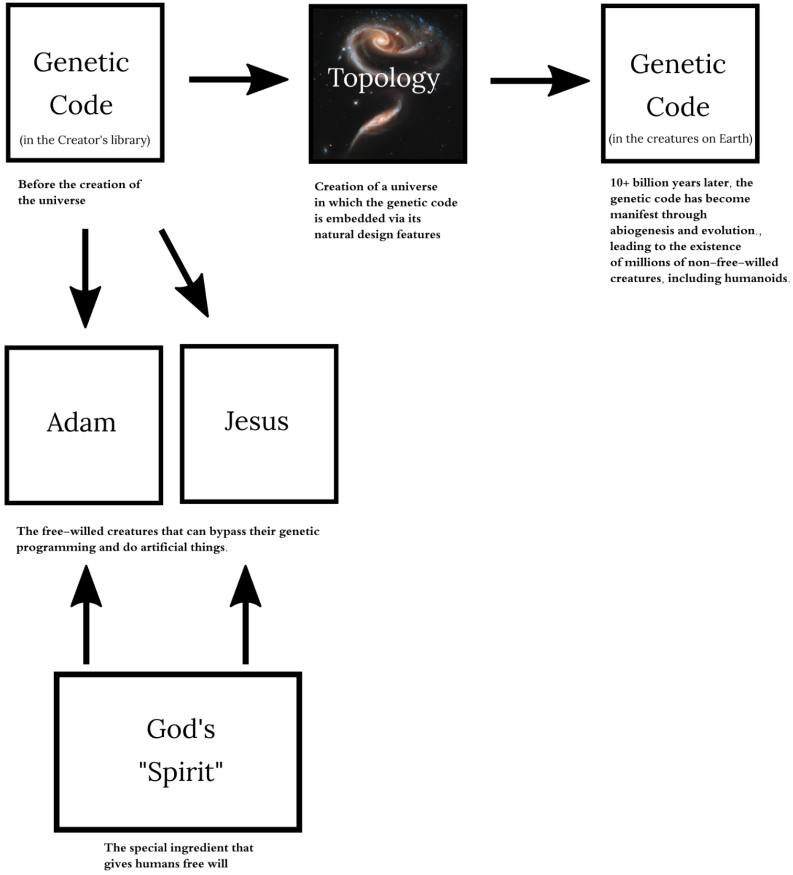
The angels do not like the idea of ruining the earth's pristine freedom from evil, since everything on it (including the humanoids) acted according to instincts placed inside them by God's topological programming, meaning that everything on it perfectly obeyed God's design as accurately as the planets do in following their orbits.

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[34] From verse 2:30 of the Quran.

Before Adam, the universe was a piece of clockwork that functioned according to God's design and in this way celebrated His greatness. Bears still ate deer, but that was according to God's design, so that was not an evil thing. They shed blood, but they did not commit bloodshed. Placing Adam on the earth, on the other hand, meant that there would be a creature on it that could defy God's design, in this way creating evil. Adam would be a loose cannon on the planet, capable of interfering with the functioning of God's clockwork.

The reason humans could do evil on the planet, when no other creature could do it, is that by having free will, they could do "artificial" things, things that did not directly follow from the rules and the wisdom that went into the creation of the universe. They could defy the program embedded in the universe's topology, in this way bringing about corruption. Everything in the universe followed from God's authority. But Adam was an independent authority in his own right, capable of challenging God's authority.

God, Evolution and Abiogenesis

Genetic Code

(in the Creator's library)

Before the creation of the universe

Topology

Creation of a universe in which the genetic code is embedded via its natural design features

Genetic Code

(in the creatures on Earth)

10+ billion years later, the genetic code has become manifest through abiogenesis and evolution., leading to the existence of millions of non–free–willed creatures, including humanoids.

Adam

Jesus

The free–willed creatures that can bypass their genetic programming and do artificial things.

God's "Spirit"

The special ingredient that gives humans free will

Ikram Hawramani / Hawramani.com / 2017

Some atheist writers mention the simple line of reasoning–famously propounded by the French Encyclopédistes of the 18th century–that if the universe is entirely ruled by physical laws, then there is no place for free will and responsibility because every action on it would be a derivation of the system itself.[35] They usually neglect the big "if" at the beginning of that train of thought.[36] The Quran says that humans have responsibility and thus freedom of choice and the capacity to do evil, therefore there is some special ingredient in humans that makes them an exception to the physical laws. The question is whether we accept the Quran's evidence or reject it. If we accept it, then we believe human actions are free-willed. There is no scientific opposition to this, since there is no scientific proof that free will does not exist. Whether free will exists or not is an issue outside science and will likely remain so, making it a matter of personal belief. For a Muslim, the soft evidence of the Quran and quotidian experience both strongly support the existence of free will.

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[35] In a sealed chamber, if an atom moves faster than another, we do not say it decided to move faster. It moved faster because of the way it interacted with the rest of the atoms (and other forces) present in the sealed chamber. If we think of the whole universe as one big sealed chamber, then naturally, there would be no responsibility or free will, every action and reaction on it would be nothing more than particles and forces interacting. When someone decides to steal something, it is because all the different factors in the universe led them to make that decision at that time, similar to the different factors inside a sealed chamber causing a particular atom to move faster.

[36] Or if they mention it, they say that since there is no hard evidence for the existence of free will, the rational thing is to assume it does not exist. But what exists is soft evidence; the Quran. Millions of intelligent, rational and well-educated humans have read it and accepted it. It is irrational to say that all of these people are suffering from a delusion or belong to a worldwide conspiracy. The rational conclusion is that there is something, whatever that is, in the Quran, that provides *sufficient evidence* (even if it is not hard evidence) for faith in God and the existence of free will. The same applies to those who read the Bible and attain faith in it. Despite the corruptions introduced into it (as Muslims believe), its depth and beauty (and the lack of any better alternatives in the West for those who do not consider the Quran a potential alternative) is sufficient to convince some highly intelligent people that it is not a human-made work—that there is something divine about it.
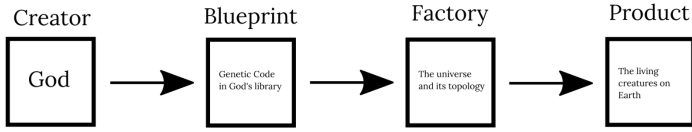
We do not know the exact moment in the history of Earth when Adam was placed on it. It is possible that it was in the past 10,000 years, or it could have been 100,000 years ago. We do not know how Adam interacted with the existing humanoids, whether there was any interbreeding.[37]

Even if Adam and his children (humanity) share genes with various humanoid creatures that have existed, this does not mean we are directly descended from them, just that God used some of their genetic code to create Adam, the same way he used the genetic code of existing humans to create Jesus from dust.

We can assume that God already had the full genetic code of humans before the creation of the universe as mentioned, and it is for this reason that he can take full credit for the creation of humans (and all the other creatures) despite the fact that they evolved naturally. This universe is simply a seemingly automated factory that follows a program placed inside it (embedded in its topological features) by God that is designed to lead to the origination of life and ultimately humanoids. Therefore it is not that God "took" genetic code from other humanoids to place them in Adam during his creation. He already had all of the genetic code to begin with, even before the universe was created. He placed some of the code in those humanoids indirectly (using evolution driven by topology), and some in Adam directly. The code in both cases comes from God's "library", so to speak, one travels indirectly, hiding in the universe's topology until, after billions of years, it is brought to life through evolution, and one travels directly, with God creating Adam from dust

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[37] The Islamic simulation theory also helps solve Christianity's difficulty with the age of the earth. Inside a video game, one is able to build a 1,000-year-old castle merely by issuing a command. God, who is in charge of the "simulation", is capable of creating a multi-billion-year-old universe in a second; there is no need for the time inside the simulation to accord with the time outside of it. The Quran provides certain mysterious hints toward this, such as by saying that a single day in "God's reckoning" is similar to a thousand of our years (the Quran, verse 22:47).

based on that same code. At the time of Adam's creation, God may have already had a library full of genetic code used in previous universes for all that we know.

Creator | Blueprint | Factory | Product

God → Genetic Code in God's library → The universe and its topology → The living creatures on Earth

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It is a case of starting with the recipe and building a massive universe in which the recipe can come into existence, without leaving any trace of one's direct involvement in the process. God did not have to come look on the earth 10,000 or however many years ago to find genetic code to use for Adam. The code was already in His library.

To repeat what has already been said a number of times, none of the above is evidence for the truth of religion. It is, rather, evidence for the falsehood of the idea that there is a conflict between the religion of the Quran and the science of the origination and evolution of life. The Quran's theories are compatible with what the latest science tells us, and that is all that we need to know as Muslims. Therefore Muslims should stop denying evolution, and non-Muslims should stop using it in their critiques of Islam. They can of course continue using the hundreds of other critiques available.

The problem of hadith

As mentioned in the introduction, Islam is based on both the Quran and hadith (historical reports about the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad). While it has been shown above that the Quran and evolution are compatible, there is still the issue of whether evolution is compatible with hadith. The Quran is far more authoritative than hadith in Islam due to the fact that it supposedly transmits God's unadulterated words directly (while hadith texts are human interpretations of what was

heard or took place), and due to the fact that orders of magnitude more effort went into the preservation and transmission of the Quran compared to hadith.

If it is shown that the Quran and evolution are compatible, the discovery of hadith narrations that go against evolution do not in any way prove that Islam was meant to be an anti-evolution religion. It could simply mean that a hadith fabricated or misunderstood by someone made its way into the hadith literature.

The issue of judging the authenticity of hadith is extremely complicated and cannot be carried out by amateurs. However, we now know that Islam's great hadith collectors rejected hadith narrations that they considered patently absurd despite the fact that these hadith narrations were transmitted by supposedly trustworthy people.[38] It is up to us to decide whether a rejection of evolution, once shown to be compatible with the Quran, is patently absurd. If we decide it is, then we can actually use evolution to critique hadith: any hadith text that unequivocally contradicts the theory of evolution can be thought to be unauthentic. This is not a modern fiction designed to drag Islam kicking and screaming into the 21st century. The reliability of hadith narrations is always a matter of statistical probability rather than certainty, therefore anything in the hadith literature that clearly contradicts objective reality can be discarded without being intellectually dishonest. The same does not apply to the Quran; even a single false statement in the Quran is sufficient to prove the entire book false. Hadith narrations, however, were transmitted piecemeal by thousands of people, therefore even if most are authentic, we can never know with complete certainty, except when it comes to a small minority of narrations, whether some narration truly transmits from the Prophet,

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[38] See Jonathan Brown, "The Rules of Matn Criticism: There Are No Rules." *Islamic Law and Society* 19, no. 4 (2012): 356-96.

transmits a highly distorted interpretation of something the Prophet said or did, or is entirely fabricated.

I write the above as something of a hadith traditionalist; I believe that it is safe to assume that any hadith judged authentic by hadith scholars is really authentic unless there is a very strong reason to doubt it. Mid-20th century Western scholarship cast doubts on the reliability of the hadith literature, with scholars such as Schacht and Crone recommending that the entire literature be considered fabricated unless proven otherwise. More recent scholarship, such as the works of Motzki and Lucas, has uncovered empirical evidence that strongly supports the traditional Islamic views on hadith.

Unlike hadith traditionalists, rather than considering the issue of authenticity a black and white issue, I support an empirical view that works according to probabilities. One authentic narration may be 99.99% likely to be true (such as one of those known as *mutawātir*), another one might be 95%, and another 90% likely to be authentic. I believe Islam can greatly benefit from explicitly adopting probability theory within the science of hadith. A Muslim who discovers an "authentic" narration that is ranked 90% likely to be authentic and which supports a certain view, and another that is ranked only 70% likely to be authentic and which supports a different view will be better able to know which view to prefer. With the present system, both narrations will simply be called "authentic", making it nearly impossible for a non-expert to judge between them.

Beyond guided evolution

There is a theory that tries to reconcile creationism with evolution by arguing that evolution may be real, but that it is God who guides it behind the scenes. The theory offered in this essay has no need for that type of divine guidance that assumes God has to interfere in the world. In order

to create the creatures He wants, all that God needs to do is get the starting conditions right at the Big Bang, and from there everything else is taken care of. All that God needs to do is get the production system working properly. As has already been mentioned, the universe can be thought of as a factory for creating life forms. The universe's topology acts as a template that shapes or sculpts the course of evolution, the same way that the various robots in a car factory assembly line shape and sculpt the final product.

Through designing a universe with exactly the right qualities needed for the origination and evolution of life, God can create whatever He wants without necessarily having to interfere with the process afterwards. Only a defective factory would require that God tinker with the production process after launching it. If His factory is perfect, there would be no need for further tinkering later on.

A believer who questions whether God can really and intentionally, in a single step (the Big Bang), launch a factory that billions of years later leads to various forms of life is actually questioning God's power. If God's power and knowledge are infinite, there is no reason to doubt that He can do this.

As for an atheist who questions whether things could be this way, their right to skepticism is not denied. The point that this essay is making is that there is a theory that can explain how God and evolution can co-exist without canceling each other out, so that atheists may stop using evolution as an argument against God, and so that the religious may start loving evolution and working on it rather than considering it a challenge to their faith.

Since God desires plausibly deniability, God's existence must be impossible to prove, therefore there must always be scientific reasons that explain things without a need for God.

The reason that religious people feel a need for guided evolution is that they are stuck in the God-versus-nature paradigm. Al-Ghazali's Matrix helps us escape this paradigm; this universe is no more real than an image projected on a screen, therefore it is silly to consider this mirage a challenge to the God who invented it and upholds it moment-by-moment lest it should cease to exist. Those who consider nature (and its study, meaning science) a challenge to God have not really appreciated His greatness.

The world of the Unseen, the supernatural, is by God's design beyond human knowledge and measurement. Everything we see around us must have a logical explanation, or seem to, or there should be the hope of finding a logical explanation for it one day. There should never be anything provably supernatural. God must always maintain his own plausible deniability until the end of the world.

> Do they mean to wait until the angels come to them, or for your Lord to arrive, or for some of your Lord's signs to come? On the Day when some of your Lord's signs come, no soul will benefit from its faith unless it had believed previously, or had earned goodness through its faith. Say, 'Wait, we too are waiting.'[39]

Atheists say they want to wait for hard evidence for God's existence before they believe in the fairy tales present in scripture. The Quran tells religious people to *say the same thing*; that we too are waiting. The above verse can be considered a pointer to the proper religious mindset toward science. We too acknowledge, with atheists, that there is no hard evidence for God's existence. They say they will wait for hard evidence before believing, we say we believe in the soft evidence of scripture and wait for hard evidence, and for this we will be rewarded.

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[39] The Quran, verse 6:158.

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9. Islamic Pluralism

Pluralism was already discussed in earlier chapters. This chapter is included as a supplement for readers who wish for more details on this aspect of Islam. It is based on an essay in which I attempted to use Islamic discourse to defend having a pluralistic and humanistic attitude. I chose to include it in this book due to its great utility in understanding Islam, both the religion and the sociological phenomenon. If Islamic teachings can be used to defend pluralism, that tells us something very important about the future of Islam. My views are not unique; they are similar to those of the great twentieth century Egyptian scholar Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh Drāz (1894 – 1958 CE), who defended a similar vision in many of his articles and books.[1] The essay's speech is directed at fellow Muslims. I believe this will not significantly affect its utility for non-Muslims and may have the utility of revealing the dynamics of Islamic discourse meant for Muslim consumption.

It is sometimes the case that the idea of pluralism is used by liberals and secularists to feign an attitude of open-mindedness that in reality hides their contempt for those who disagree with them. In the name of respecting the other side, they demand respect while reserving the right to

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[1] See Faḍlīya, *Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh Drāz.*

give no respect in return where it matters. Conservatives are required to respect liberals in the name of pluralism, but the liberals often are quite incapable of realizing that this means they too should be respectful toward the conservatives.

Liberals, in the name of pluralism and diversity, often belittle and demonize the "outdated mullahs" and misogynists who supposedly represent the counterpart to liberalism. There is nothing wrong with pointing out the shortcomings in the views of conservative scholars. But when this comes from someone who has no empathy for them, who considers them an enemy to belittle and defeat, then what we are really seeing is a narrow-minded bigot who in the name of liberalism attacks his or her enemies. He or she demands respect but gives back respect only with the utmost reluctance. The Middle East is full of intellectuals who speak of democracy, freedom and pluralism all the time while, at one and the same time, having the most militant and authoritarian attitude toward conservatives. In the name of liberal ideals, they claim to possess the moral superiority, to enforce their views on everyone who disagrees with them. That brand of secularism, the brand of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Gamal Abdel Nasser and Michel Aflaq is familiar to most conservative Middle Easterners and is recognized for what it is; totalitarian, dehumanizing ideologies that think they possess the whole of the truth and are prepared to murder innocent men, women and children to get what they want.

But that narrow-mindedness of the secularists should not make us dehumanize them the way they dehumanize us. This is where many Muslim intellectuals seem to be stuck, or at least were stuck in the 20th century. Conservative intellectuals belittled liberals for watering down the religion. Liberals belittled conservatives for being living fossils. And what neither side is capable of seeing is that there is one and the same attitude underlying the thinking of both sides. Saying this would shock both sides since they think they could not be more different from one another, and

each thinks it will or should one day defeat or wipe out the other. That attitude is the *anti-humanist attitude*, and sadly this is where many are stuck.

It is the attitude that thinks it has the right to dehumanize and belittle the inner experience of other humans. Conservative intellectuals have no respect for the fact that a lifetime of experiences, learning and suffering may have led a liberal Muslim to where they are today. And liberal intellectuals have no respect for the fact that a lifetime of experiences, learning and suffering may have led a conservative Muslim or an outdated mullah to be where they are today. *Neither side is willing to really, truly acknowledge the humanity of the other side.* Listen to a conservative and it soon comes out in his speech that he does not see liberals and secularists as really human; they are "liberals" and "secularists", a different, non-human species that is accorded no sympathy. And listen to liberal and the exact same thing comes out; they do not see that conservatives and mullahs are really humans: they are "conservatives" and "mullahs", different, non-human species that deserve neither respect nor sympathy.

The two sides are unable to see that both of them are part of the problem and that there is a better way. It is to see the other side as made up of people just like yourself, it is to treat them according to the Golden Rule: treat your neighbor the way you like to be treated yourself. Rather than discounting the inner experience of our fellow humans—the validity of their thinking and their right to independence of mind and conscience—we should respect these things that they possess as much as we respect them in ourselves.

What stops many from having such an attitude is that to them the very reason they disagree with the other side is their own superiority of intellect and upbringing, which supposedly enables them to see truths the other, due to their stupidity, ignorance or corruption, cannot see. If they were to relent and give up this sense of superiority, this would be an admission of equality with other side; an admission that the other side's truths are just
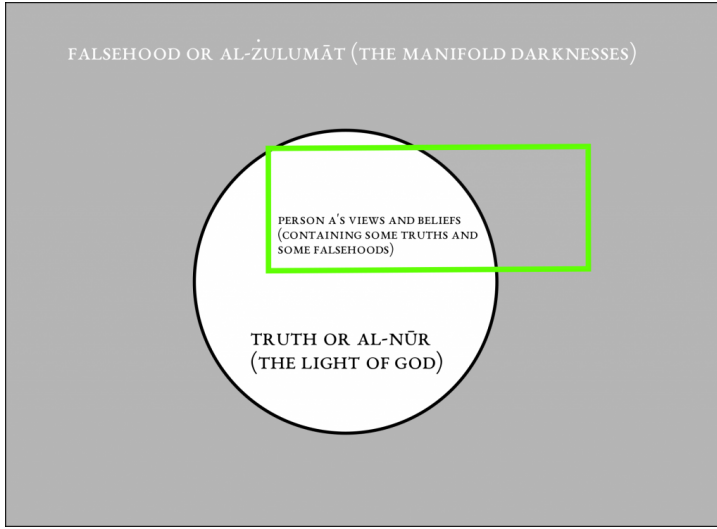
as good as their own truths. But to them history is a battle to be win. Admitting that there could be any validity in the thinking of the other side is an admission that the other side has some good things about them. When you are trying to win a battle, the last thing you want to do is admit the humanity of the other side. You want to reduce them to pests and cockroaches that have to be wiped out. You want to keep the morale of your soldiers high by telling them how infinitely superior in every conceivable way your side is compared to the other side, and how it is destiny, history, God Himself who will ensure that your side will wipe out the other.

This battle mentality prevents both sides from seeing that there is a new, unexplored territory that is far superior to the grounds they fight for.

Pluralism without relativism

The problem with real pluralism, that is, the humanist attitude, is that it seems to acknowledge that there are multiple truths; the other side can reach conclusions different from ours and yet be somehow "right". How can that be when we believe there is only one truth that we all aim for?

All of us humans work toward discovering the truth. But due to our differences in talents, knowledge, circumstances and experiences, we often differ from one another in the things we observe and the conclusions we draw from them. Even though we all seek the truth, none of us can ever acquire the whole of the truth, unless we delude ourselves into thinking that we can somehow miraculously avoid all of the pitfalls and limitations of human understanding. Even though the truth is one, I might know only a small amount of it. And among the truths that I think I know, 80% might actually be really true and 20% might be false for all that I know. Below is a diagram to clarify this:

FALSEHOOD OR AL-ẒULUMĀT (THE MANIFOLD DARKNESSES)

PERSON A'S VIEWS AND BELIEFS
(CONTAINING SOME TRUTHS AND
SOME FALSEHOODS)

TRUTH OR AL-NŪR
(THE LIGHT OF GOD)

There is only one truth, represented by the circle, surrounded by falsehood, a sea of darkness, on all sides. The circle does not represent all of truth but important truths that we tend to disagree with others about. The green rectangle represents a human's efforts at discovering these truths. They end up discovering some of them, but along the way they also pickup countless biases, prejudices and false beliefs and ideas that they *think* are true. That is the part of the rectangle that is in the gray area.

This person can have two attitudes about themselves: they can delude themselves into thinking that their viewpoint is entirely true, that their green rectangle is miraculously wholly within the light, or they can humbly acknowledge their limitations and say that they may be wrong about some things. Political authoritarians, whether conservative or liberal, think that their viewpoint entirely captures truth and avoids falsehood, or that through proper submission to their authority this can be achieved sooner or later.

Now we can add a second person's views to the diagram, this time represented by the yellow rectangle:
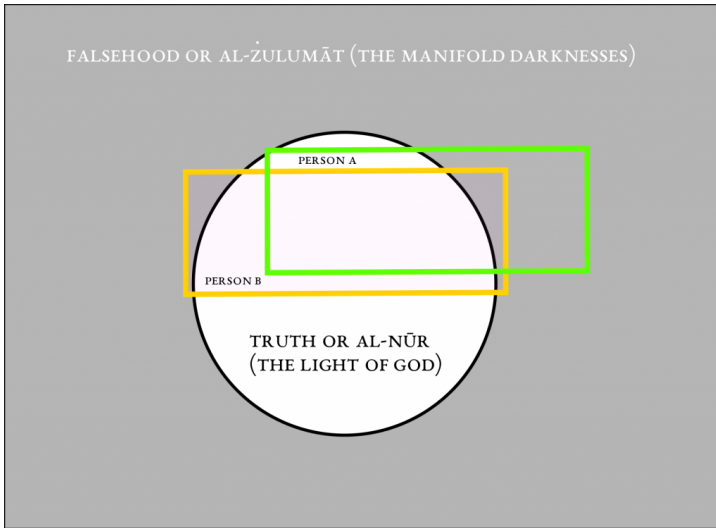
Person B knows many of the real truths that Person A knows. This is represented by the area that is shared between the two rectangles inside the circle. Person B also shares some of the prejudices and false beliefs as Person A, represented by the gray area on the right, outside the circle, that is shared between the two of them. He or she also has some prejudices and false beliefs that Person A does not have, represented by the gray areas that are only in the yellow rectangle and not in the green rectangle.

But most importantly, Person B also knows much more of the truth than Person A, represented by the new light areas covered by the yellow rectangle. Person B is closer to the truth on many things than Person A is. If Person B continues on this path, if they continue studying and discovering, their rectangle may expand downwards as follows so that it captures more of the light:
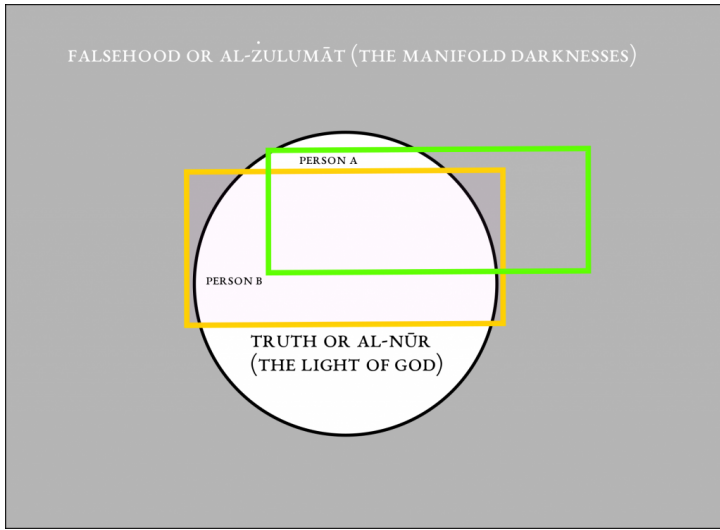
In the meantime, Person A may, though reading bad sources and reaching bad conclusions from their experiences, may actually expand their rectangle into the darkness rather than into the light:
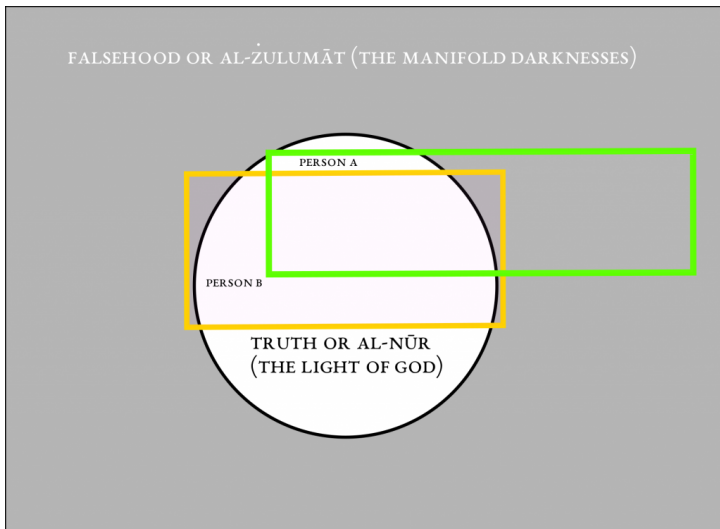

What that means is that Person A is now sure of many new "facts" that are actually falsehoods.

The horror of recognizing our inherently limited and biased viewpoints causes some people to recoil into the delusion that by defining a narrow set of criteria, they can miraculously acquire the whole of the truth, be safe from falsehood and be the possessors of a light that gives them the right to rule over all who disagree with them. This is the myth behind both Marxism and militant Wahhabism. They both imagine that they possess all the important truths, believe that they are so safe from falsehood that *it is only those who disagree with them who have prejudices and false beliefs.* Wahhabis distort reality into this:


NOT WAHHABISM

WAHHABISM
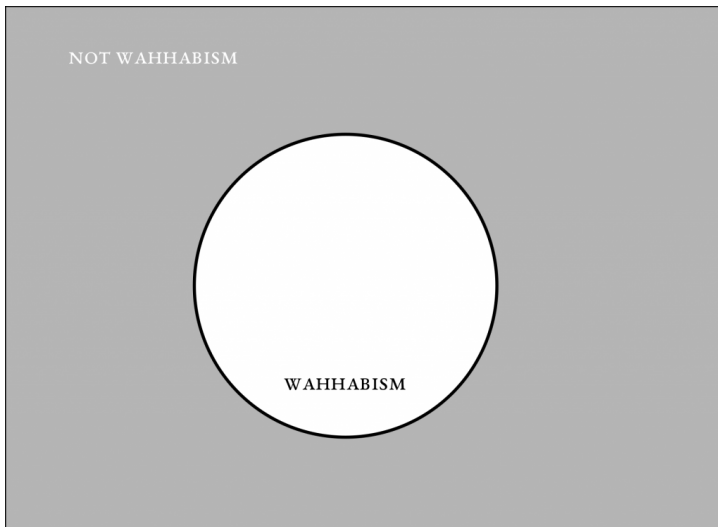
Marxists often do the same:
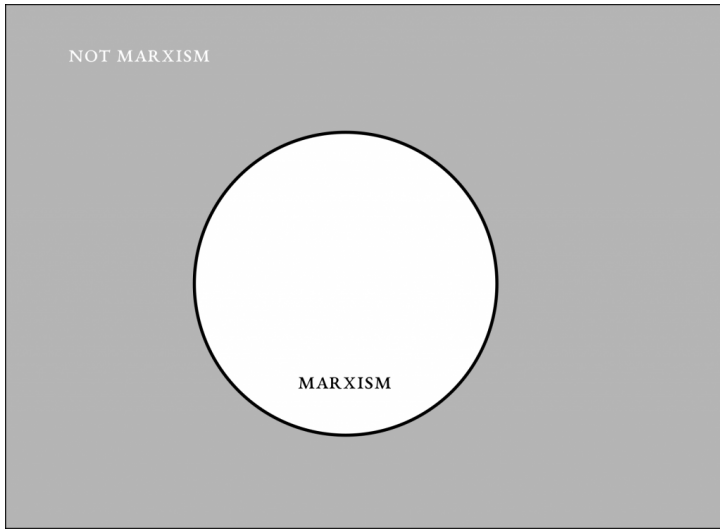
In both ideologies, all that is outside the ideology is by definition false, evil, prejudiced, misguided. All that is inside is good, wholesome, light. Both believe that their ideology captures the whole of the truth and is free from error. No disagreement or difference with the ideology is allowed, because any disagreement is automatically considered to be in the sea of falsehood.

A pluralistic vision

Below is a diagram that represents the reality of life; it represents many people all trying to discover the truth:
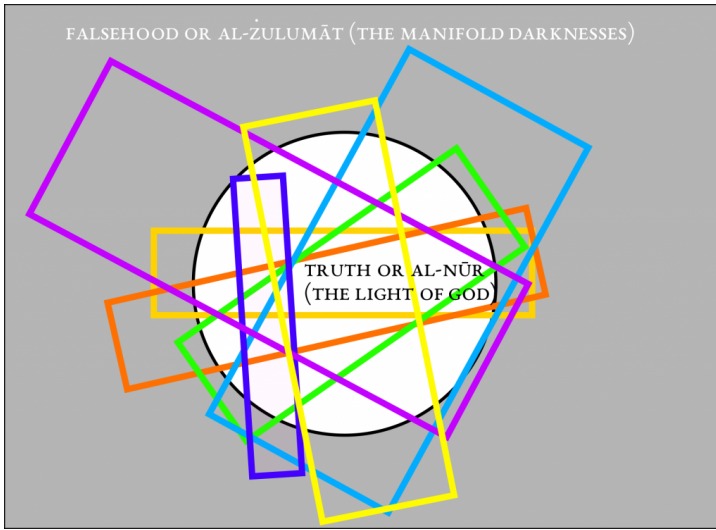
It is this picture that horrifies Wahhabis and Marxists into wanting to chop off all the bits that do not fit. How can we have any form of community or progress in a world so complex and diverse? The Wahhabi and Marxist answer is that we cannot, therefore we have to force one view on everyone. Some conservative Muslims also suffer from a similar attitude. They believe that a very strong promotion of conformity is the only way to protect the integrity of the Muslim community. Disagreement is strongly discouraged and even attacked because when an intellectual disagrees with the rest, he is weakening the embattled *umma*. In support of the *umma*, we are supposed to keep silent when our intellects and consciences would have us speak. Cowardice becomes virtue; the cowardly who do not speak the truth fit in perfectly, while the brave who speak against falsehoods are shunned and attacked for being troublemakers and threats to the *umma*.

The conformist assumption is that since "we" (the conformists) have the right ideas about religion and "they" do not, it is only right and just that "our" ideas should be forced on "them". The question about *who* these people are who decide the truth for everyone else is not treated in detail, but it includes "me, my friends and everyone else who agrees with me."

We can call this the "top-down" approach to Islam; the idea that a minority should hold the reigns over the majority. They will be the benevolent dictators who tell everyone else what Islam should be. This is, of course, a self-elected priesthood, and it is what Wahhabism and Marxism share in common.

The numerous Islamist disasters of the past century should have been sufficient to convince most Muslims that the top-down, priesthood model is dysfunctional and impracticable, and perhaps most Muslims *have* been convinced. The alternative to the priesthood model is the *ground-up (or grassroots) model*, which is the model followed by the majority of Muslims worldwide (even though they do not talk about it), and it is also the model followed by Prophet Muhammad and his Companions. The ground-up model, rather than involving a minority that seeks to force its ideas on everyone else, is a model that *seeks consensus with others*. The Prophet did not say "I miraculously possess the truth, so do as I say or else!" *The only person in Islamic history who could have claimed divine guidance for forcing his views on others refused to do so*.

The Prophetic model was to seek to build a community through persuading other humans, while respecting their right to disagree with him, even to leave his community. His community was a consensual community in which everyone was persuaded of the truth of his message. In other words, his community functioned on the basis that humans *can* be persuaded of the truth *without* the necessity for authoritarian methods.

The experience of Muslim communities living in the West today lends the greatest support to the ground-up model. We do not have a religious authority enforcing its views on us. We do not have a morality police forcing our women to wear hijab. We listen to scholars coming from various schools of thought. People happily pray the noon prayer at one mosque and the evening prayer at another without caring much about whether the imam of the mosque follows one school or another. Most

people could not care less whether the imam believes in the theological views of al-Ash'arī, al-Maturidī or ibn Ḥanbal.

We have a *community of democratic consensus* in which we agree on the most important things without anyone having any authority to force his or her views on us. Any one of us could leave Islam at any time without facing any repercussions from a religious or political authority. The only way to make a member of this community do something or behave in a certain way is through persuading them. Our sheikhs do not have the power to whip men who fail to show up for the Friday prayers like the Wahhabi chief of the Shammar tribe used to do in 1840's Arabia, yet our mosques are packed during those prayers.

Our community as a whole only acts communally on things upon which there is consensus (such as the obligatory nature of the Friday prayer), while leaving it to each person to act upon those things upon which there is no consensus. This freedom and lack of authority has not led to "disintegration", "corruption" or "decay" of our religion as conformists and authoritarians predict. Rather, it has led to a peaceful religious community that focuses on the most important things (worship and charity) while being largely free of religious strife. People eagerly read the works of classical scholars and attend lectures in which hadith narrations are explained. In an atmosphere that is free from authority, people, rather than abandoning Islam and forgetting about it, continue to hold on tightly to it.

The disagreements among the various Muslim schools of thought leads certain people to dream of the unity and political power that could be achieved if everyone agreed with everyone else. And a certain type of pathological personality takes this thinking to its extreme: unity and political power are the sole guidelines for Muslim existence; it is perfectly fine to oppress, restrict and terrorize every Muslim who disagrees with the version of Islam that Mr. Authoritarian and his friends cook up, and in this way a "unity" is achieved (that is in reality filled with hatred, fear and

discontent) where no one dares to criticize the self-elected Muslim priesthood.

Communities of consensus

Authoritarians think Islam needs political authority to keep its integrity. The experience of the Prophet and of Muslim communities throughout history shows that it does not. A community of consensus is not one where the same views are forced on everyone. It is where the Islamic and legal practices we follow are all derived from our *shared agreement* on them. Everyone follows Islam in their own way and according to their own conscience, but *since Islam is derived from the Quran and the Sunna* (the Prophet's tradition)*,* their practice of Islam ends up being very similar in most regards to other people's practice of Islam. In this way a community organically comes into being where, by the mere fact of everyone doing their best to follow Islam, they form a strong but peaceful community. There is no authority forcing its views on anyone. Everyone is treated as a respected and honored human who is doing his or her best to make sense of Islam and life.

Authoritarians might predict that this free atmosphere will lead to a situation where the community divides into many groups each of which has its own misguided interpretation of Islam, so that only a tiny minority remains who continue to hold onto the true religion.

But the question is whether that authoritarian prediction is factually accurate. Does it reflect reality? It is certainly true that there have been periods in which what are considered by most to have been misguided sects flourished, but to say that that happened because authoritarians were not there to save the day is to give preferential treatment to one explanation out of a dozen possible ones. It seems far more likely that the flourishing of misguided sects, similar to the flourishing of Marxism, came about *because* of authoritarianism not despite it; a small minority of

authoritarians forced their corrupt views on everyone else and punished disagreement.

The ground-up model of Prophet Muhammad, the prophets before him, and mainstream Muslim communities shows the authoritarian prediction (that Islam will decay without authority) to be a fairy tale. Mosque after mosque after mosque in the West operates just like the mosques found in the East, despite our far greater freedom to change things and do whatever we like.

The reason is simple: humans are not animals. They are not sheep that need to be led by priesthood as authoritarians imagine. Humans, honored by God to the point that the angels bowed down to them, prefer to be on the side of the truth rather than falsehood once educated.

Prophet Muhammad's attitude toward the people around him was the humanist attitude. It was to treat the people around him, Muslim and non-Muslim, as *intrinsically worthy*. When a person disagreed with him or even made fun of him, he did not attack and demonize them. He instead wished what is best for them. Why? An authoritarian will say the Prophet was acting like a politician, being nice, polite and forgiving not because he thought humans deserve such a treatment, but because *this was the best way to manipulate them into becoming Muslim*.

Authoritarians like many Wahhabis do not believe in the intrinsic worth of human life, therefore that is the only way they can explain the Prophet's behavior and the behavior of the prophets before him; political manipulation. That is what they have reduced Islam's beautiful moral and ethical teachings to. That is Islam according to these supposedly morally superior authoritarians who think they have the right to decide what Islam should be for everyone else.

Were the prophets nothing more than political manipulators when they were being kind to the disbelieving folk around them? Were the desperate efforts of Prophet Nūḥ (Noah) to save his people from the flood by trying

to persuade them to believe in God just him doing his job? Is it not more accurate to say that as a human, he had love and sympathy for these fellow humans and did not wish bad things to happen to them?

Was Prophet Ibrāhīm (Abraham) merely doing his job as a political manipulator when *he argued with God's angels in order to protect a group of homosexual rapists* from God's punishment? Is it not far more likely that as a kindly and loving human he did not like the thought of these people suffering punishment, that he saw intrinsic worship in them despite being considered some of the worst sinners in existence? And even more importantly, *God does not criticize him for arguing with His command, He praises him*:

> When Abraham's fear subsided, and the good news had reached him, he started pleading with Us concerning the people of Lot.
>
> Abraham was gentle, kind, penitent.
>
> "O Abraham, refrain from this. The command of your Lord has come; they have incurred an irreversible punishment." [2]

The picture we have here is of a human who loves his fellow humans, who wishes what is best for them, and wishes to avert harm from them *even when God has declared that harm should come to them*. And God does not blame him for this. He praises him for having sympathy for these sinners. He dedicates an entire verse of the Quran to praising him for his sympathy.

This is the example of our Prophet Ibrāhīm, the father of our *umma* as we call him during every prayer. Rather than being an authoritarian who gloated in destroying those who disagreed with him, he tried to protect the worst sinners from God's punishment, going so far as to make a scene arguing with God's angels.

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[2] The Quran, verses 11:74-76.

If that is not one of the strongest affirmations of the humanist attitude then I do not know what can be.

Since people are intrinsically worthy, since they are honored by God, since they are sacred, since God praises our desire to protect sinners, then it logically follows that persuasion rather than force should be our method in our dealings with them. Since force is prohibited, *the only way to build a Muslim community is through persuasion. Each member of the Muslim community is treated as intrinsically worthy regardless of their opinions*. If that was Ibrāhīm's attitude toward the worst sinners, it is far more imperative upon us to have a similar attitude toward those who believe in God and His Prophet.

My theory of the formation of Islamic communities is the complete opposite of the Islamist and authoritarian theories. When a group of people believe in God and His Messenger, they are *naturally and organically* inclined to form a moderate community that reflects the best teachings of Islam, *without* needing the services of authoritarians.

Authoritarians have an extremely low opinion of humanity, seeing most humans as something more akin to animals than humans who deserved the angels' prostration. And their highness of their opinion of themselves is often in equal proportion to the lowness of their opinion of others. Such people exist everywhere, in all communities and religions. It is human nature to like to think highly of ourselves and lowly of those who disagree with us. Authoritarians are people immature and unscrupulous enough to take this to the extreme of turning themselves into demigods who miraculously possess the truth and who also possess the right to force this supposed truth on others.

My theory is that humans, *by the mere virtue of being human*, after accepting God and His Prophet, possess the right to read the Quran and hadith and other works and come to their own conclusions about them. This, rather than leading to disintegration in the community, leads to the

formation of moderate communities, because all humans, once given the Quran and the Sunna, all slowly incline toward the same truth. *Their humanity and their belief in God and the Prophet are what bind them into a community*, not some authority that forces conformity on them.

This community has *inertia* of its own. An ultra-liberal Muslim who comes into the community and speaks of how gay marriage should be legalized, and a militant Wahhabi Muslim who comes into the community and speaks of how Muslims should be obsessing about political power night and day, get shunned by the community, the way an extended family shuns that annoying vegan relative who keeps lecturing everyone about his or her moral superiority. The community's inertia is the product of human nature, the Quran, the Sunna and the opinions of respected classical and modern scholars. All of these things merge together and form a vague set of beliefs, manners and practices that most of the community shares.

Such a community has a natural inclination toward conformity, balanced by the fact that there is no authority forcing any single view on the members, so that each person differs in some ways in their views from those around them. The natural human desire to belong and fit within a community pulls the members toward conformity, while the natural human desire to have independence of mind and conscience pulls the members toward individualism. And the result is a *balance* between these two forces. We try to fit in as much as we can, doing our best to avoid offending others and trying to stay out of the line of sight of the community members who have a tendency to get ticked off easily. But in our private lives each person has his own favorite scholars and intellectuals. The Syrians and Egyptians at the mosque love Mohammed al-Ghazali and follow his style of Islam. The Turks love Said Nursi. The Pakistanis and Indians have their own scholars, often unknown outside of their cultures. The converts have their own style of Islam, often based in

part on the thinking and ideas of high-profile converts who came before them.

Publicly, people try to fit in out of good manners. They do not voice their private religious opinions to avoid useless arguments. Privately, they enjoy freedom of intellect and conscience. And out of these two things a moderate and peaceful community is created.

Authoritarians think they can do better than the above through the use of force and manipulation tactics. In the West, since they cannot use force, their favorite tactic is appealing to authority. They attack Muslims who do not follow their versions of Islam by acting as if their opinions are the only possibly valid ones. They often speak of how there is *ijmāʿ* ("consensus") that everyone should do what they say. This is often a downright lie, since there is often no consensus on even the simplest and most essential things within Islam, such as how to perform the ablution. Whenever they claim consensus on something, all it takes is a cursory look through the classical sources to find highly respected scholars who disagree with their view. Mention that to them and they will come up with some underhanded argument for why that scholar's opinion does not count, even if they were quoting their opinion yesterday in support of a different supposed "consensus".

There is also another consensus that I have already referred to, the organic consensus of the community. There is consensus among the members of every mainstream Muslim community on a great number of things. We believe that there is only one God and that the Quran transmits His uncorrupted words, that Muhammad was His last Messenger, that murder, stealing and adultery are wrong. A person who goes against these things can rightly be said to be outside the consensus of the community.

The delusion of the authoritarian utopia

Authoritarians think that the community described is not good enough. They think that it would be so much better, people would be so much more united, if they were given free rein to dictate Islam to everyone else and manufacture consensus out of thin air on every big and small issue.

But let us say we do as they want. Let us give them free rein. What happens next? Does our love for Islam increase? Does our sense of unity increase? Do we start to love and appreciate one another more now that we have the One True version of Islam forced on all of us?

Of course not. In fact, quite the opposite happens. The culture of conformity that authoritarians promote means that *the most dishonest and cowardly raise to the top.* They have no firm principles of their own, so they are perfectly happy to fit in with the authoritarians to get privileges in return.

And as for the rest of the community, they continue to hold on to their own individual beliefs in private, but now they will be more careful in keeping their beliefs to themselves to avoid the attention of the authoritarians.

Rather than increasing unity, the authoritarians increase division. Some people, out of ignorance or self-interest, end up siding with the authoritarians, while others, out of conscientious difficulty with authoritarian beliefs and tactics, end up staying away from them as much as possible. The community is divided into two: the "career Muslims" who side with the authorities and derive power and privilege from this (as in Saudi's Wahhabi ideologues and Iran's Revolutionary Guards), and the ordinary Muslims who look on with dismay, keep quiet and keep following Islam in their own way in private as much as they can.

The issue of Islamic law (the Sharia)

Authoritarians often act as if there is an inherent conflict between living in a democratic and pluralistic society and the application of the Sharia, the implication being that (1) anyone who feels proud to be a citizen of a liberal democratic society is betraying the *umma* and (2) we should submit to whatever half-baked plan they have for implementing the Sharia (which often starts with the application of the punishments prescribed in it). The truth is that there is no conflict between democracy and the Sharia unless one is an authoritarian, whether a secularist authoritarian who wishes to force secularism on everyone, or an Islamist authoritarian who wishes to force Islam on everyone.

We do not have to submit to the views of either of these two immature sides. Rather, Muslims and non-Muslims can together create a constitution that applies to everyone in the country, Muslim and non-Muslim. Then, each city or state in the country should have the right to choose its own laws beyond the constitution, as is the case in the United States and many other countries. If there is a particular city or state that *democratically chooses to implement the Sharia on its Muslim population*, then I do not think most fair-minded and educated person would have a problem with that. And if there is a liberal city or state that does not want Sharia law, then the democratic process means that it will not get Sharia law.

Muslims, non-Muslims, conservatives and liberals can all sit down like mature humans and have an intelligent discussion on the best way to run their country that ensures the rights of everyone as much as possible. If most people's basic assumption is that all humans are sacred and deserve protection and sympathy, then a fair and just system can be created that does not do injury to any group.

Respecting Muslims who disagree with us

We can now go back to the question that this essay started with. What should be an educated and open-minded Muslim's stance toward Muslims who disagree with them significantly?

Our stance should be the humanist, or Abrahamic, stance. They should be treated with respect and consideration regardless of their beliefs. They should not be insulted or demonized. But that does not mean that we should treat them as if their beliefs are just as valid as ours. We can point out why we disagree with them. We can politely debate them. We can politely but firmly prevent them from doing violence to our practice of Islam as discovered through the process of organic consensus. To give a dramatic example, a man who thinks he should have the right to pray naked at the mosque should be prevented from doing so. He has the right to make of Islam what he wants, and he has the right to defend his idea that prayer should be performed in nudity at the mosque, but he does not have the right to intrude upon the public manners and etiquette surrounding religion as developed through the process of organic consensus. He can start his own mosque and do that in it and see where that takes him. He does not have the right to force his religious views on others by claiming that his version of Islam is as valid as that which has been organically and democratically developed by the community over the years.

We can have a pluralistic Islamic society without becoming secularists. As long as secularism is not *forced* on us, our communities will *naturally* tend toward moderate, conservative Islam as is followed by the majority of Muslims worldwide. Human nature itself, with the help of the Quran and the Sunna, gravitates toward such an Islam.

It is not only secularists who should enjoy polite and respectful treatment. The same should apply to Muslims that we consider outdated, ignorant, or somewhat extremist and authoritarian. Whatever is wrong with them,

they still deserve the same kindly attitude that Prophet Ibrāhīm had toward the People of Lūṭ (Lot). Whatever their mistakes, sins or deficiencies, they are still humans honored in the sight of God. It is not through insults and snarky attitudes that we can bring such people back to the path of moderation, it is through love, through making them feel appreciated and valued.

Authoritarians are afraid of the loss of power and authority that comes with letting every Muslim come to their own conclusions about Islam in complete freedom and independence. They want to control history so that things may go the way they want. They want, in short, to play God and determine humanity's fate. But the burden of proof is on them to show that their thinking leads to a better and more pious Muslim community. It seems to me that it does not; it rather promotes *dislike and hatred* for Islam through their abuses of people's rights and dignities.

Our attitude toward Muslims belonging to other sects can be the same as our attitude toward Muslims that do not perfectly fit in within our community (see above) and Christians (see below). They possess many of the truths we possess, and the fact of their humanity demands sympathy and respect.

Respecting non-Muslims

The same pluralist framework can be extended to non-Muslims. They too are sacred, even if they are engaged in what Islam considers the worst of sins; they are at least as sacred as Prophet Ibrāhīm considered the People of Lūṭ to be. Some Muslims are so distant from the Quran that they think it almost a betrayal of the *umma* to have respect and sympathy for non-Muslims when Islam's great Patriarch, Ibrāhīm, had just such an attitude.

Non-Muslims too are truth-seekers. They have the right to examine the evidence that life presents to them and come to their own conclusions. This is why the Quran is adamant that religion should not be forced on

people. Rather than treating non-Muslims as misguided and twisted people, we should treat them as fellow humans, sacred and deserving of protection and sympathy. They too have some view of the truth even if we assume it is a narrower vision than ours, and there should be nothing too surprising in some non-Muslims knowing some truths that some Muslims do not know.
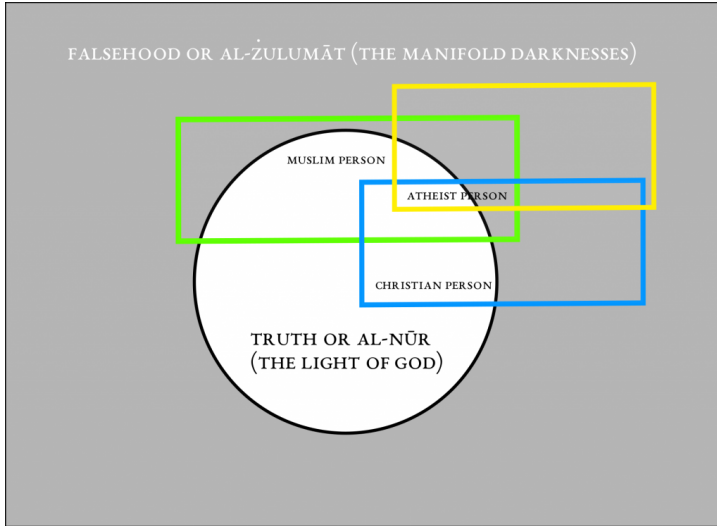
The above diagram represents the efforts of a Muslim (green), Christian (blue) and atheist (yellow) at discovering the truth (of course, as viewed from an *Islamic* perspective). They all appreciate and agree on certain truths (for example, perhaps the fact that humans are sacred and should not be murdered without due cause and process). They also share some of the same false beliefs. In the diagram, the Muslim person has a better view of the truth than either. The atheist has only a small view. That is not to say that *every* Muslim has a superior view of the truth compared to *every* Christian, or that every Christian is superior to every atheist in this regard. And as already mentioned these truths are the important things in life that we sometimes disagree on. An atheist may know many facts about a field of science; that is not our concern here.

The atheist novelist Terry Pratchett (died in 2015) made many fair and occasionally unfair criticisms of religious people in his novels. But he believed in the sanctity of human life, saying that the objectification of humans is one of the greatest evils (or the root of all evil). This is a very important truth, defended in the Quran in this way:

> Because of that We ordained for the Children of Israel: that whoever kills a person—unless it is for murder or corruption on earth—it is as if he killed the whole of mankind; and whoever saves it, it is as if he saved the whole of mankind. Our messengers came to them with clarifications, but even after that, many of them continue to commit excesses in the land. [3]

The above verse, as has been realized by interpreters, is telling us that human life has infinite worth. Regardless of how large the humanity's population becomes, *killing a single human is as evil as killing all of humanity*. This means that there is something special, sacred, about humans. Terry Pratchett, in recognizing this essential truth and defending it, is morally superior in this regard to any Muslim who does not believe in the sanctity of human life and justifies murder in the name of Islam.

Despite our differences with non-Muslims, they are still our brothers and sisters, since we are all Children of Adam as the Quran constantly reminds us. Our attitude toward them should be the same as the attitude of the Prophets toward humanity; and attitude of respect and sympathy, not out of a desire to manipulate them, but because this is the right and just way to treat humans.

Conclusion

Muslim unity will not come about through force, but through love and sympathy. Muslims, by the virtue of being humans, have a natural

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[3] The Quran, verse 5:32.

tendency toward creating communities of consensus that practice moderate, conservative Islam without the need for authority.

Authoritarians are mistaken in their belief that their services are needed to guide Islam. Empirical reality proves their views false; the world is full of highly faithful and devout Muslim communities that have no authority forcing any version of Islam on them.

Our appreciation for the sanctity of human life, our sympathy for our fellow humans, and the guidance of the Prophets should form the basis of how we relate to everyone around us. People are to be respected regardless of their beliefs, unless they try to force their beliefs on others, in which case they are to be stopped. Our communities should be tolerant toward both ultra-liberal and ultra-conservative Muslims who do not fit in very well within the moderate Islam of the community as long as they do not try to do violence to the community.

Our attitude toward non-Muslims should be one of respect and sympathy, not one of belligerence. It is true that not all non-Muslims are nice and respectful people. I do not call for naive trust in non-Muslims or for being desperate to live up to their expectations. We treat them according to what we know to be right and just, and part of that is respect and sympathy toward those who mean us no harm.

> As for those who have not fought against you for your religion, nor expelled you from your homes, God does not prohibit you from dealing with them kindly and equitably. God loves the equitable.

> But God prohibits you from befriending those who fought against you over your religion, and expelled you from your homes,

and aided in your expulsion. Whoever takes them for friends—these are the wrongdoers.[4]

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[4] The Quran, verses 60:8-9.

Summary and Conclusion

Muslim children grow up with an "Islam" that is given to them; it forms part of the background of the world they observe, similar to the observed constellations in the sky. Islam is given to them as part of a cultural mosaic that is always in flux. If their community contains learned men and women who engage with Islamic literature, this engagement ensures that the culture's Islam maintains its integrity, although interpretation is always performed through the lens of culture. There is no neat isolation between Islamic concepts and cultural concepts; they all form the same mosaic and influence the appearance, feel and meaning of each other.

The religious and cultural concepts given to a person must pass through their internal filters before they are encoded in their brains and acted out in the world. Even once encoded, a person retains the capacity to act against their received concepts. A person, for example, may know exactly the right thing to do in a certain circumstance but act otherwise.

Variant versions of Islam come about due to differing cultural backgrounds and historical circumstances. West Africa maintained a Maliki tradition that was largely absent in the Middle East thanks to the flourishing of a Maliki scholarly culture in Qairawan, Tunisia and elsewhere. These historical accidents and cultural settings lead to the development of new Islamic concepts (new ways of interpreting Islam and

embodying it) that may significantly differ from the Islam practiced elsewhere. The talents, pleasures and propensities of different populations lead to different emphases. A Sufi poem that is felt to be so meaningful that it causes shivers in a Persian may be difficult to relate to for a Muslim from a different culture, although many forms of religious expression are nearly universally meaningful to all Muslims.

When the process of hermeneutic engagement with the Islamic literature breaks down, such as due to a lack of knowledge of Arabic, syncretism results, causing the religious set of concepts to mutate along with the culture. In this way it loses its integrity and becomes something that increasingly differs from the mainstream of Islam and increasing resembles the local culture. Certain Islamic concepts are abandoned in favor of new ones that sound "better" from the lens of culture. Culture overtakes the parts of the mosaic that were previously occupied by Islam, blurring their edges and at times completely replacing them.

Islam is not a total programming for life except in the views of certain minority sects. Islam provides points of definition within the cultural mosaic while leaving most of the mosaic as blank space that is filled by the population's culture. This enables Muslim societies to develop culturally while retaining their religious integrity. Islam provides the skeletal framework for a creature that is developed and fleshed out by humans themselves.

Muslims, as intelligent humans, are capable of partaking in democracies, since Islam is largely silent on governance, and there is no strong evidence that Islam's early system of governance is *the* only system that Muslims may rightly follow. Muslims throughout the world partake in democracies and do not sense any urgent need for alternative systems. There is no need for Islam to teach the separation between church and state; Muslims are able to appreciative of this principle in the management of the smallest villages to the largest countries. Religious scholars are treated as references rather than political authorities.

All societies contain radicals, and Muslim societies are no different. In Muslim societies as in elsewhere, radicals form a minority that is shunned by the majority. Most humans are comfortable with existence within the present system of law and custom and do not wish for radical change, being skeptical of the utopian promises of radicals.

It is possible for Muslims to respect Muslims from other sects by respecting other humans as sovereign meaning-makers, entitled to reaching their own conclusions. This is the observed behavior of cosmopolitan Muslims throughout the world.

Muslims are not a threat to Western civilization, they, in fact, might very well be its saviors. Low fertility rates and the depopulation that comes with it threaten the very existence of European villages and towns. European Muslims, thanks to a conceptual framework that grants them above-replacement fertility, can help keep dying European villages and towns and their institutions alive.

Muslim migrants can bring with them the problems of their home countries, but these problems should not be blamed on Islam. Any problem seen in a Muslim population will also be seen in neighboring non-Muslim populations.

There is no conflict between Islam and rationality, or Islam and science. The Quran is compatible with the theory of evolution, which has been the most important challenge to the Abrahamic faiths in the past two centuries. As for the rest of the Islamic literature (hadith, *sīra*, etc.), anything within this literature that provably contradicts science can be discarded without harming the rest of Islam.

The relationship between Islam and sexuality is not a naively prudish one that has to be unveiled for its own good. Islam provides various mechanisms for reducing obscenity so that humans may always inhabit the human world. The limitations and restrictions placed on sexual behavior and expression help make erotic love possible, in which both

individuals see one another as infinitely worthy and as irreplaceable. Sexual freedom leads to the opposite situation, where cynicism toward love is the rule rather than the exception.

While the issue of women's rights has not been thoroughly addressed in this book, the concepts developed in this book help provide a powerful answer to this ongoing issue. The Quran is extremely vague on women's position in society, the rest of the Islamic literature are epistemologically below the Quran and suffer from reliability issues. In effect, the real-world situation that develops is one of offloading the issue of women's rights to culture. Each culture comes up with its own practices, and as the culture develops, so does women's position in that culture, as has been observed throughout the world.

The issue of wife-beating in the Quran is a case of the delegation of law enforcement to the husbands. Husbands hold no absolute authority; they occupy an office that is beholden to their societies and limited by higher authorities. In an ideally civilized Muslim society, women will have easy access to agencies protecting their rights and easy access to divorce, ensuring that husbands treat women humanely. Giving a husband the power of law enforcement is not meant to create a reign of terror. It is meant to defend a peaceful social order where husbands and wives are fully committed to their marriages. Islam creates material inequality in marriage for the benefit of the family while stressing the spiritual equality of all humans and the importance of mercy and compassion. *The most devout Muslims will be the best toward their wives* because to them spiritual equality will be paramount. A sufficiently civilized and spiritual Muslim man will *demand* an equal as his wife—finding it unacceptable to be in a relationship with an inferior. Islam provides the architecture for his marriage; he is free how he acts within that architecture. His higher authority in the marriage will be similar to an army in times of peace; it will be out of sight since it is not needed. But in the extremely rare cases where it is needed, he is allowed to defend the marriage by force if

necessary while remaining subservient to authorities that will severely punish him for any abuse of force.

Women in Muslim societies do not consider themselves men's playthings. They respect the offices of husband and wife and try to live up to their society's cultural expectations. But they instinctively appreciate the difference between the office of husband and their own husbands—demanding that the husband fulfill his office's duties in order for them to find it justified to fulfill their wifely duties. The office of wife enjoys numerous protections provided by her family, her husband's family, her society, women's agencies and the legal system. Husbands are required, whether willingly or unwillingly, to view their wives as social persons rather than mere bodies, a dynamic seen best in Victorian novels. She is inviolable in her human dignity and cannot be treat as an object. She is a subject, a soul that looks out into the world, and in this aspect she is her husband's complete equal. In a well-functioning Islamic marriage there is no dynamic of force or oppression; both husband and wife fulfill their different duties while seeing one another as spiritual equals.

Muslim societies are suffering no worse crises than the rest of humanity. The Muslims of Egypt and Iran are outdoing nations of higher development when it comes to scientific output. And when it comes to violent crime and suicide, Muslim societies are often an order of magnitude better off compared to non-Muslim societies of equal development.

There is no one-to-one concurrence between what clerics say and believe and what actual Muslims enact in their lives. The relationship between Muslim societies and their clerics is one of the clerics continually demanding more Islamization while their societies do the minimum they wish to do, in this way reaching an equilibrium where Islamic concepts are strongly balanced and contextualized within custom and culture.

The immense amount of change and progress that has taken place over the past 200 years, and especially in the past 100 years, is strong evidence that it was historical circumstances, rather than Islamic beliefs, that caused the decline of Islamic civilization. Muslims have shown themselves capable of being modern scientists and intellectuals while remaining devout Muslims, therefore the supposed narrow-mindedness promoted by Islam is nothing but a secularist fantasy that does not accord with reality.

In discussions of Islam, the embodied Islam of Muslim populations should be studied as normative, rather than what religious scholars say Islam is or should be. It is quite absurd to blame the problems within Muslim societies on Islamic ideas that almost no Muslim knows about or takes seriously. Any negative influence that Islam might have on people should be discovered through controlled studies; do British citizens who convert to Islam become worse or better citizens through their conversion? Do British women who convert to Islam become more self-confident and independent-minded or less? Does wearing the hijab make them enjoy life less or more? Studying social issues related to religion in a vacuum, without referring to control populations of similar genetic and cultural backgrounds, is useful for propaganda purposes, but it is not science.

A primary cause for many of the misconceptions about Islam covered in this book is the Western misunderstandings of the position of the clerics within Islam. Clerics are generally taken seriously when they say Islam is this or that, without regard for the fact that perhaps the overwhelming majority of their population decidedly do not agree with them—even if they do not care enough to disagree.

Clerics enjoy no executive power, and their position in Muslim societies is perhaps best likened to the position of the philosophers of ancient Athens. The philosophers were respected for their learning, they had a close circle of dedicated friends, and sometimes they had an academy in which they taught their ideas. But taking a cleric's ideas about government

seriously is very much like thinking that the ideas in Plato's *Republic* somehow had the power to force itself on Greek governance. Plato's *Republic* was merely intellectual theorizing about an ideal state, and that is what the ideas of the clerics often are. They may wish for more power and influence. But since they enjoying no formal authority to influence society, their only outlet is through persuasion.

No cleric is capable of making his society do something that goes against its cultural beliefs. A cleric who calls for violent attacks on government will be considered a deranged radical and shunned. Clerics enjoy great influence only in cases where they have gained the deep trust of their societies through fitting in within their culture. In such cases they are like any other public intellectual. Their religious authority is subsidiary—it is not the source of their power.

An intellectual system that has no enforcing power behind it is merely a reference that one can either use or discard. A Muslim ruler, thinker, merchant or farmer had access to the opinions of generations of religious scholars stretching back centuries that they could pick and choose from. The vast amount of definition that the religious scholars provided for life was similar to a group of Greek philosophers coming up with an ideal system of living. To the wider public, they were merely hints and suggestions that one qualified using their cultural values and their common sense. Just because Plato said something was in no way complete justification for implementing that thing in one's own life.

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