Roger Scruton

The Political Problem of Islam

Islam is a world religion with adherents far beyond the lands of the Arabs. Moreover, between five and ten percent of Arabs are Christians, and in recent times Christian Arabs have played a disproportionate role in the revival of Arabic literature.It would therefore be a gross mistake to identify Islam with Arabic culture, or to believe that a full understanding of Islamic thought and politics can be obtained merely from a study of the Middle East. At the same time, the faith, law, and worldview of the Muslim diaspora directly derives from a text whose meaning and emotional weight is contained within its language, and that language is Arabic. Although there arose in the wake of the Koran an extraordinary civilization, and a literary and artistic culture which matched those of contemporary Europe, the principal source of Islamic cultural achievements is the single book from which the faith began.[1]

A student of Muslim thought is immediately struck by how narrowly the classical thinkers pondered the problems of political order, and how sparse and theological are their theories of institutions. Apart from the caliphate—the office of "successor to" or "substitute for" the Prophet—no human institution occupies such thinkers as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiya, or Saif Ibn 'Umar al-Asadi for long. Discussions of sovereignty—*sultan, mulk*—tend to be exhortatory, instructions for the ruler that will help him to guide his people in the ways of the faith.[2] The *Filasafa* (i.e., thinkers influenced by Greek philosophy) composed their intellectual agenda by synthesizing the Koran with what they knew of Aristotle and Plato. But the result is a peculiarly frozen vision of the art of politics as the Greeks had expounded it.

Al-Farabi, for example, describes the philosopher-king of Plato as the prophet, lawgiver, and *imam* to his community, arguing that "the meaning of *imam*, philosopher, and lawgiver is one and the same."[3] He emphasizes the distinction between reason and revelation, as pondered by the contemporary Mu'tazili school of theologians, who held that reason could supplement the revelations provided by the Prophet. And he acknowledges the possibility of a political system based purely on reason and directed to the earthly needs of the citizens. But the true system, he insists, is founded in revelation, and directed towards happiness in the world to come. Ibn Sina (Avicenna) likewise gives precedence to revelation, and his ideal state is founded on prophecy and guided by the immutable *shari'a.* The constitution of such a state is

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prophetically revealed, and is "our Sunna which was sent down from heaven."[4]

Law is fundamental to Islam, since the religion grew from Muhammad's attempt to give an abiding code of conduct to his followers. Hence arose the four surviving schools (known as *madhahib,* or sects) of jurisprudence, with their subtle devices (*hila*) for discovering creative solutions within the letter (though not always the spirit) of the law.[5] These four schools (*Hanafi, Hanbali, Shafi* and *Maliki*) are accepted by each other as legitimate, but may produce conflicting judgments in particular cases. As a result, the body of Islamic jurisprudence (the *fiqh*) is now enormous. Such legal knowledge notwithstanding, discussions of the *nature* of law, the grounds of its legitimacy, and the distinguishing marks of legal, as opposed to coercive, social structures are minimal. Classical Islamic jurisprudence, like classical Islamic philosophy, assumes that law originates in divine command, as revealed through the Koran and the Sunna, and as deduced by analogy (*qiyas*) or consensus (*ijma'*). Apart from these four sources (*usul*) of law, no other source is recognized. Law, in other words, is the will of God, and sovereignty is legitimate only insofar as it reflects God's will.

There is nevertheless one great classical thinker who addressed the realities of social order, and the nature of the power exerted through it, in secular rather than theological terms: the fourteenth-century Tunisian polymath Ibn Khaldun. His *Muqaddimah* is a kind of prolegomenon to the study of history and offers a general perspective on the rise and decline of human societies. Ibn Khaldun's primary subject of study had been the Bedouin societies of North Africa; but he generalized also from his knowledge of Muslim history. Societies, he argued, are held together by a cohesive force, which he called *'asabiya* (*'asaba*, to bind, *'asab*, a nerve, ligament, or sinew—cf. the Latin *religio*). In tribal communities *'asabiya* is strong, and creates resistance to outside control, to taxation, and to government. In cities, *'asabiya* is weak or non-existent, and society is held together by force exerted by the ruling dynasty. But dynasties too need *'asabiya* if they are to maintain their power. Hence, they inevitably decline, softened by the luxury of city life, and within four generations will be conquered by outsiders who enjoy the dynamic cohesion of the tribe.

That part of Ibn Khaldun's theory is still influential: Malise Ruthven, for example, believes that it casts light on the contemporary Muslim world, in which *'asabiya* rather than institutions remains the principal cohesive force.[6] But Ibn Khaldun's secular theory of society dwells on *pre*-political unity rather than political order. His actual political theory is far more Islamic in tone. He introduces a distinction between two kinds of government—that founded on religion (*siyasa diniya*) and that founded on reason (*siyasa 'aqliya*).[7] The second form of government is more political and less theocratic, since its laws do not rest on divine authority but on rational principles that can be understood and accepted without the benefit of faith. But Ibn Khaldun finds himself unable to approve of this form of politics. Secular law, he argues, leads to a decline of *'asabiya*. Moreover the impediment (*wazi'*) that constrains us to abide by the law is, in the rational state, merely external. In the state founded on the *shari'a* this impediment is internal, operating directly on the will of the subject. In short, the emergence of secular politics from the prophetic community is a sign not of civilized progress but of moral decline.

In fact, Ibn Khaldun is rare among Muslim philosophers in seeing the political as a separate form of human life, with its own laws (*qawanin siyasiya*), aspirations, and procedures. His bleak view of political or-

der is due to his bleak view of the city generally. Without the pre-political *'asabiya*, cities inevitably decay. Ibn Khaldun's underlying purpose was to distinguish the caliphate (*khilafa*), which had persisted during the reign of the four "righteous" caliphs, from the worldly sovereignty (*mulk*) that had gradually replaced it. Only the caliphate had either the right or the power to survive the collapse of earthly dynasties, and Muslims must work constantly to restore it as the rule of God on earth.

For all his subtlety, therefore, Ibn Khaldun ends by endorsing the traditional, static idea of government according to the *shari'a*. In short, the Muslim conception of law as holy law, pointing the unique way to salvation, and applying to every area of human life, involves a *confiscation of the political*. Those matters which, in Western societies, are resolved by negotiation, compromise, and the laborious work of offices and committees, are the object of eternal decrees, either laid down explicitly in the holy book, or discerned there by some religious leader—whose authority, however, can always be questioned by a rival *imam* or jurist, since the *shari'a* recognizes no office or institution as endowed with any independent lawmaking power.

Three features of the original message embodied in the Koran have proved decisive for Muslim political thought. First, the Messenger of God was presented with the problem of organizing and leading an autonomous community of followers. Unlike Jesus, he was not a religious visionary operating under an all-embracing imperial law, but a political leader, inspired by a revelation of God's purpose and determined to assert that purpose against the surrounding world of tribal government and pagan superstition.

Second, the Suras of the Koran make no distinction between the public and the private spheres: what is commanded to the believers is commanded in response to the many problems, great and small, that emerged during the course of Muhammad's political mission. Laws governing marriage, property, usury, and commerce occur side-by-side with rules of domestic ritual, good manners, and personal hygiene. The conduct of war and the treatment of criminals are dealt with in the same tone of voice as diet and defecation. The whole life of the community is set out in a disordered, but ultimately consistent, set of absolutes. And it is impossible to judge from the text itself whether any of these laws is more important, more threatening, or more dear to God's heart than the others. The opportunity never arises, for the student of the Koran, to distinguish those matters which are open to political negotiation from those which are absolute duties to God. In effect, everything is owed to God, with the consequence that nothing is owed to Caesar.

Third, the social vision of the Koran is shaped through and through by the tribal order and commercial dealings of Muhammad's Arabia. It is a vision of people bound to each other by family ties and tribal loyalties, but answerable for their actions to God alone. No mention is made of institutions, corporations, societies, or procedures with any independent authority. Life, as portrayed in the Koran, is a stark, unmediated confrontation between the individual and his God, in which the threat of punishment and the hope of reward are never far from the thoughts of either party.

Therefore, although the Koran is the record of a political project, it lays no foundations for an impersonal political order, but vests all power and authority in the Messenger of God. There are no provisions for the Messenger's successor, or even for a

priesthood. The office of *imam*—the one who "stands in front," i.e., who leads the community in prayer—was assumed by Muhammad until the day when illness prevented him from performing it and he asked his father-in-law Abu Bakr to perform the office in his stead.

It is still true that an *imam* has no institutional authority in the Sunni tradition and is merely a man whose personal qualities and religious knowledge fit him for the role. The title of Imam is reserved by the Shi'ites for Muhammad's first cousin 'Ali and his descendants, who are regarded as the true successors of the Prophet. But even in the Shi'ite tradition, there is no conception of a priestly office that confers authority on the one who holds it: authority is bestowed directly by the power of God. This point is made further evident by the fact that, according to the Shi'ites, the line of *imams* ceased after the twelfth, who is the still living "hidden" imam, destined to reappear in the last days as the *mahdi* or "Director," and who, according to the Koran, will announce the Day of Judgment. Hence, no living cleric can act with any greater authority than that conferred by his own personal qualities in the eyes of God—unless he can show himself actually to *be* the hidden *imam*, revealed at last after centuries of divine displeasure, a feat which the Ayatollah Khomeini set out to accomplish, but with only transient success.

The office of caliph began as an attempt to recapture a vanished personal authority. Hence, caliphs repeatedly failed to give proof of their legitimacy, and the first three of them began a lengthy tradition of dying at the hands of assassins. Those who rule in the Prophet's name seldom satisfy their subjects that they are entitled to do so, since the authority that is looked for in an Islamic ruler is—to use Weber's idiom—a charismatic rather than a legal-rational form. Islamic revivals almost always begin from a sense of the corruption and godlessness of the ruling power, and a desire to rediscover the holy leader who will restore the pure way of life laid down by the Prophet. There seems to be no room in Islamic thinking for the idea—vital to the history of Western constitutional government—of an office that works for the benefit of the community, regardless of the virtues and vices of the one who fills it.

The reader of the Koran will be struck by the radical change of tone that the revelations exhibit after the Prophet has been forced into exile at Medina. The early Meccan Suras are short, intensely lyrical, and written in a free rhyming prose that echoes the style of the pagan poets of Muhammad's Arabia. They invoke the natural world and the wonderful signs of its Creator, being hymns of praise to the single omnipotent God who speaks directly to his worshippers. They are the great dawn-vision of an impassioned monotheist, from whose soul oppressive shadows are being chased away.

The Medina Suras are much longer and often cantankerous. They deal with the trials and tribulations of leadership, and the revelations are often granted as concrete responses to the problems of communal life. Muhammad's project is revealed at every step, and it is a remarkable one: to replace the tribal society and its pagan gods with a new, universal order—the Islamic *umma*—founded on belief in the one true God and on the acceptance of his commands. To achieve this result Muhammad had to persuade his followers that he was God's messenger; he had also to give proof of God's favor by success in war.

Although the community at Medina had escaped from its persecutors, it retained a powerful sense of belonging elsewhere. They were *al-muhajiroun*, the ones in emigration or exile (*hijrah*), and the experience of

exile is invoked again and again in the Islamic revivals of our times. The absolute tone of command of the Medina Suras therefore goes hand-in-hand with an intense nostalgia, and it is not surprising that the idea of pilgrimage to the distant home should have rooted itself in Muhammad's mind to become one "pillar" (*rukn*) among the five that constitute the core duties of the Muslim.

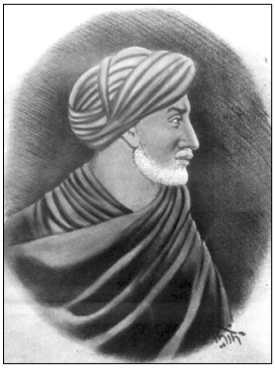
I mention this point because it helps to explain how alien the Koranic vision of society is to any idea of territorial jurisdiction or national loyalty. In the eyes of the Koran, the place where we are is not the place where we belong, since the place where we belong is in the wrong hands. Our law therefore does not issue from our present place of abode, and gives special privileges only to the other place, which may one day be reconquered. This attitude greatly favors the notion of law as a relation between each person and God, with no special reference to territory, sovereignty, or worldly obedience. Although localities are of enormous importance in the Muslim worldview it is not because they are the *sources* of law but because they are the *object* of law, declared holy by God in his dealings with mankind. A holy place is precisely one subsumed into the divine order of things, rather than the seat, like Rome or Paris, of a territorial jurisdiction. This is of great significance in the current conflict over Jerusalem, which for the Muslim is a place set apart from its earthly surroundings just as Mecca is set apart, scarcely belonging to the geography of the actual world but existing in the numinous region of divine imperatives.

After the initial turmoils—in which the conflict between two of the righteous caliphs, 'Uthman and 'Ali, led to the split between Sunni and Shi'ite—the Muslim dynasties gained territory by conquest. The caliphate emerged as a genuine institution, though one increasingly deprived of political power. Nevertheless, the experience of settled government led to serious attempts by learned men to adapt the faith to the needs of government. This was the great period of the hadiths—traditions, authenticated by pious examination, which recorded such words and deeds of the Prophet as might offer guidance to a settled community. These hadiths are markedly more peaceful and conciliatory than the Medina Suras, and have clearly been shaped by the experience of a society in which charismatic leadership is no longer the norm. They are an attempt to read back into the prophetic source of Islam the real achievements of Islamic forms of government. At the same time there arose the four schools of *fiqh,* which bring together the reflections of jurists over generations, and show the attempt by *ijtihad* to establish a genuine rule of law in places where law is nevertheless seen as issuing placelessly and timelessly from the will of God.

Even in that great period of jurisprudence, however, the *shari'a* remained defective in the crucial matter of legal personality. As Ruthven has pointed out, there is no provision in Islamic law for the corporation as a legal person, with rights and duties of its own.[8] The city, the committee, the mosque itself, do not occur as independent subjects of the law, and although Muslim countries abound in charitable foundations—the *awqaf* (singular *waqf*)—they are conceived not as property in the hands of a corporate person, but as property that has been simply "removed" from circulation or which has "ceased" (*waqafa*). In Ruthven's words, there was no "juridical definition of the public sphere" in classical Islamic jurisprudence,[9] a fact which greatly impeded the formation of a genuine political order. Hence "stealing from the public treasury was not held subject to the *hadd*

[i.e., the divinely ordained punishment for theft], because the illegal act was not committed against a juristic agent independent of the thief who was, along with every other Muslim, considered part-owner of the *mal Allah*, and thus part-owner of what he had stolen."[10]

Two momentous consequences follow from the adoption of the *shari'a*. First, because it is a law governing only Muslims, the *shari'a* leaves the status of other communities undefined. These other communities remain strictly "outside the law," and must either convert or accept the status of *dhimma*—which means protected by treaty or covenant. Only "people of the book"—i.e., Jews, Christians, and (in Persia) Zoroastrians—have traditionally been accorded this status. *Dhimma* is offered in return for the payment of taxes, and grants no clear and justiciable rights apart from a general right of protection.[11] Although free communities of Christians and Jews often thrived under Islamic law, there was no formal or legal acceptance of their right to worship in their own manner, and their property was subject to confiscation on more or less arbitrary grounds. The Turkish *millet* system rectified this, but depended for its authority on the secular rule of the sultan and had no authority in the *shari'a*.



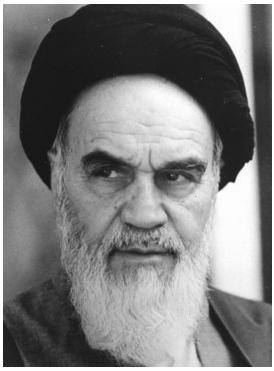
Ibn Khaldun

Second, the way of life that grows under the aegis of the *shari'a* is profoundly domestic, without any public or ceremonial character except in the matter of communal worship. The mosque and its school or *madrasah*, together with the *souq* or bazaar, are the only genuine public spaces in traditional Muslim towns. The street is a lane among private houses, which lie along it and across it in a disorderly jumble of inward-turning courtyards. The Muslim city is a creation of the *shari'a*—a hive of private spaces, built cell on cell. Above its rooftops the minarets point to God like outstretched fingers, resounding with the voice of the muezzin as he calls the faithful to prayer.

I mention these two features because they are often overlooked, despite their enormous importance in the psychology and the politics of the Islamic world. The Muslim city is explicitly a city for Muslims, a place of congregation in which individuals and their families live side-by-side in obedience to God, and where non-Muslims exist only on sufferance. The mosque is the link to God, and the pious believe that no building should overtop the minarets. Many a Muslim carries this image in his heart, and when he encounters the Western city, with its open spaces, its wide streets, its visible interiors, its skyscrapers dwarfing the few religious buildings, he is apt to feel both wonder and rage at the God-defying arrogance that has so completely eclipsed the life of piety and prayer. It is not merely of anecdotal significance that, when the terrorist leader Mohammed Atta left his native Egypt for Hamburg to continue his studies in architecture, it was not to learn about the modernist buildings that disfigure German cities, but to write a thesis on the restoration of the ancient city of Aleppo.[12] When he led the attack against the World Trade Center, Atta was assaulting a symbol of economic, aesthetic, and spiritual paganism.

Those who see religion simply as a set of doctrines concerning the origin of the world, the laws that govern it, and the destiny of mankind will think of faith merely as a substitute for rational argument, des-

tined to crumble before the advance of science or to persist, if at all, as a jumble of tattered superstitions in the midst of a world that refutes them. But doctrine is the least important part of religion, as Muhammad came quickly to see. Communities are not formed by doctrine, but by obedience, and the two great instruments for securing obedience are ritual and law. The Muslim faith involves constant rehearsal of the believer's submission to God. The repetition of sacred words and formulae, the exact performance of gestures whose only explanation is that they have been commanded, the obligatory times of prayer, the annual fast and all the duties required by it, the dietary laws, the pilgrimage to Mecca with its myriad obligatory actions—all this, which is meaningless to the skeptical outsider, is the stuff of consolation.[13] Ritual places individuals on a plane of absolute equality; it overcomes distance, extinguishes the self in the flow of collective emotion, and refreshes the worshipper with a sense that he has regained favor in God's sight and hence his place in the community of believers. Ritual is a discipline of the body that conveys and reinforces a discipline of the soul. It is the outward manifestation of the collective act of submission (*islam*) that unites the community of believers. And it is one undeniable source of the peace and gentleness of the old Muslim city.



Ayatollah Khomeini

In short, Islam offers an unparalleled form of *membership*, and one whose appeal is all the greater in that it transcends time and place, joining the believer to a universal *umma* whose only sovereign is God. Even if it may appear, to the skeptical modernist, as a medieval fossil, Islam has an unrivalled ability to compensate for what is lacking in modern experience. It rationalizes and validates the condition of exile: the condition in which we all find ourselves, severed by the hectic motion of mechanized life from the archaic need for membership. Nothing evokes this more clearly than the collective rite in which the faithful turn to Mecca with their prayers—projecting their submission and their longing away from the place where they are to that other and holy place where they are not, and whose contours are defined not by geography but by religious need.

Islam, in other words, is less a theological doctrine than a system of *piety*. To submit to it is to discover the rules for an untroubled life and an easy conscience. Moreover, rooted in the ritual and taking constant nourishment from it is a system of morality that clarifies those matters which must be clarified if people are to live with each other in peace. It is a system that safeguards the family as the primary object of loyalty and trust; that clarifies and disciplines sexual conduct; that sanctifies ordinary obligations of friendship and kinship; and that lays down rules for business which have a power to exonerate as well as to blame. Even if this morality, like the rituals that feed it, threatens those freedoms which Westerners take for granted and which the rising generation of Muslim immigrants wish to exploit, it has the singular advantage of clarity. It tells the faithful what they must do in order to be on good terms with God; and what they must do is entirely a matter of private life, ritual, and worship. The public sphere can be left to look after itself.[14]

In the context of Western *anomie* and self-indulgence, therefore, Muslim immigrants cling to their faith, seeing it as something superior to the surrounding moral

chaos, and therefore more worthy of obedience than the secular law which permits so much sin. Their children may rebel for a while against the strict sexual codes and patriarchal absolutes of the Muslim family; but they too, in any crisis, are drawn to their ancestral faith, which offers a vision of moral security they find nowhere in the public space that Western political systems have devoted themselves to generating.

The writ of holy law runs through all things, but this does not mean that Islamic societies have been governed solely by the *shari'a*. On the contrary, in almost all respects relevant to the government of a large society, the *shari'a* is radically deficient. It has therefore been necessary in every epoch for the ruler to lay down laws of his own which will guarantee his power, facilitate administration, and permit the collection of taxes. But these laws have no independent legitimacy in the eyes of those compelled to obey them. They do not create a space outside religion in which freedom is the norm. On the contrary, they merely add to the constraints of the holy law the rules of a political order which is backed by no *de jure* authority, only by *de facto* power. In any upheaval they are rejected entirely as the arbitrary edicts of a usurper. Hence, there is no scope in a traditional Islamic society for the kinds of purely political development, through the patient building of institutions and secular laws, that we know in the West. Change, when it comes, takes the form of a crisis, as power is challenged from below in the name of the one true Power above.

If the only way in which a law can be legitimated is by deriving it from a command of God, then clearly all secular laws are seen as mere expedients adopted by the ruler. In such circumstances it is unlikely that any kind of constitutional, representative, or democratic government will emerge. Although the Ottoman Empire attempted reforms that would give legitimacy to its centralized administration, these reforms—which led first to the destruction of the Empire, and then to the emergence of the modern Turkish state under Mustafah Kemal Atatürk—were explicitly "Westernizing," involving both a deliberate move away from Islamic ideas of legitimacy, and a ruthless secularization of society, with the *'ulama'* losing whatever power they had once possessed in the educational, legal, and administrative process.

The Westernizing of Turkey was made possible by its imperial history, which had imposed the obligation to govern distant provinces and recalcitrant tribes by a system of law which could only here and there be justified by some divine genealogy, and which was therefore constantly seeking legitimacy of another kind. By remaking Turkey as a territorial rather than an imperial power, and by simultaneously secularizing and Turkifying the Ottoman culture, Atatürk created a national loyalty, a territorial jurisdiction, and a form of constitutional government. As a consequence, Turkey has been the only durable democracy in the Muslim world—although a democracy maintained as such by frequent interventions by an army loyal to the Kemalist project. This transition has not been without cost, however. Modern Turkey has been effectively severed from its past. In the ensuing search for a modern identity, young people are repeatedly attracted to radical and destabilizing ideologies, both Islamist and utopian.

This search for identity takes another but related form in the Arabic-speaking countries, and the al-Qa'eda organization should be understood as one significant result of it.[15] Of course, terrorism of the al-Qa'eda kind is an abnormality, repudiated by the majority of Muslims. It would be the greatest injustice to confuse Islam, as a pi-

ous way of life, with contemporary Islamism, which is an example of what Burke, writing of the French Revolutionaries, called an "armed doctrine"—a belligerent ideology bent on eradicating all opposition to its claims. Nevertheless, Islamism is not an accidental product of the crisis that Islam is currently undergoing, and the fundamental tenets of the faith must be borne in mind by those who wish to understand the terrorist movements.[16]

Al-Qa'eda is the personal creation of Osama bin Laden, but it derives from three pre-existing sociopolitical forces: the Wahhabite movement in Saudi Arabia; the Muslim Brotherhood that emerged in modern Egypt; and, finally, the technological education now available to disaffected Muslims throughout the Middle East.

The Wahhabite movement has its roots in the sect (*madhhab*) founded by Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855), whose collection of 30,000 hadiths formed the basis of the Hanbali *fiqh*. The leading principle of Hanbali jurisprudence is that law should not be formalized in rules or maxims but constantly derived afresh from the original sources by an effort of *ijtihad* that renews both the faith and the understanding of the judge. Hence, Muslims must be constantly returned to the Koran and the words of the Prophet, the authority of which cannot be overridden by political decrees or formal legal systems. Although Hanbalism has always been recognized as a legitimate school of *fiqh*, its uncompromising emphasis on the origins of the Muslim faith has made it a permanent source of opposition to the established powers in Muslim countries.

Hence, when Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1691–1765), a native of central Arabia, sought to restore the true faith to the Prophet's sacred territory, he expressed himself in Hanbali terms. The aim was to return from the corrupt practices that flourished under the Ottoman Empire and its factititous rules and offices to the original teachings of the Prophet and his Companions. Compelled to seek asylum in Deraiah, al-Wahhab attracted the local chieftain, Muhammad ibn Sa'ud, to his cause. And it was Ibn Sa'ud's grandson who, with a fanatical and puritanical following, "liberated" Mecca from the idolatrous practices that had rooted themselves there, establishing at the same time a short-lived kingdom in Arabia, and thereafter paying for his presumption with his life.

Despite this political failure, Wahhabism took root in the Arabian peninsula. The Wahhabis preached purity of lifestyle and absolute obedience to the Koran, free from all compromise with the *dar al-harb*. They rejected the official schools of *fiqh*, including the Hanbali *madhhab* that had inspired their founder, and argued that whoever can read the Koran can judge for himself in matters of doctrine. After the death of the Companions, therefore, no new consensus (*ijma'*) could be admitted.

In the early twentieth century a group of Wahhabis gathered around a descendent of the original Ibn Sa'ud to form a brotherhood (*ikhwan*) dedicated to the re-establishment of a purified faith by *jihad*. Starting out with a handful of followers in 1902, ibn Sa'ud, as the world now knows him, gradually drove the Turkish clients from their paper thrones in the Arabian peninsula. By the time that the Ottoman Empire collapsed, ibn Sa'ud was able to declare a kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the peninsula, and for a brief while the *ikhwan* exerted their influence over the holy places, causing widespread alarm in the region. However Ibn Sa'ud, now a player on the stage of international politics, came to see that he must negotiate with the British for the secure possession of his kingdom, and that the suppression of his following would be a

necessary price.

Although the *ikhwan* were brought to heel, many of them through absorption into the Saudi National Guard, they did not forget their original intention, which was to engage in a *jihad* against the infidel. Nor did they forget that this aim had been diverted in the interests of a secular power. Instead of returning the sacred places to God, they had handed them over to an earthly sovereign, and one who had the impertinence, moreover, to name this holy territory for himself. It has never been forgotten by the puritan *'ulama'* of Saudi Arabia, therefore, that the spiritual legacy of Wahhabism has been betrayed by the family that purported to fight for it.

The other important Islamic movement in the formation of al-Qa'eda was also an *ikhwan.* The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, then a twenty-two-year-old elementary school teacher in Ismailia, a featureless new town controlled by the Franco-British Suez Canal Company. Surrounded on all sides by the signs and symbols of the infidel way of life, living under a jurisdiction that had lost authority in Muslim eyes and which stood idly by as the Muslim way of life decayed, al-Banna, who had received a rigorous Islamic education and had already acquired a reputation for piety, responded to the appeals of his contemporaries to found a movement that would bring faith, hope, and charity to the rural migrants who were crowding into the shanty towns around the cities. For al-Banna, however, charity was an insufficient proof of faith: a *jihad* was also needed, which would expel the infidel from Muslim soil. Islamic clubs and discussion groups abounded in the Egypt of the time, but the Brotherhood was to be different—a return to the militant Islam of the Prophet, the goal of which would be to re-establish the reign of purity and piety that the Prophet had created in Medina.

Hassan al-Banna was profoundly influenced by the Wahhabite movement. The conquest of the Holy Places was a triumphant proof of what could be achieved by faith, *'asabiya,* and violence. Within a decade the Brotherhood had become the best organized indigenous political force in Egypt. Its anti-British sentiment caused it to look to the Axis powers in World War II, hoping for the liberation of Egypt and its own seizure of power thereafter. After the Allied victory, it confined itself to a campaign of terrorism, through which to "bear witness" to Islamic truth against the infidel.

This campaign was to provide the model for future Islamist movements in Iran and Lebanon. Cinemas were blown up, along with the haunts of the "infidels and heretics," while women wearing "inadequate dress" were attacked with knives. Prominent public figures were tried by the Brotherhood *in absentia* and found guilty of "causing corruption on earth": their deaths followed as a matter of course. Two prime ministers and many other officials were murdered in this way. Young Muslims from elsewhere in the Middle East were recruited to the Brotherhood, which operated in secret, al-Banna denying all involvement in terrorism until his arrest and execution in 1949. By this time the Brotherhood had trained over a hundred terrorists from other Islamic countries, who traveled to their homelands to initiate the same kind of destabilizing mayhem that had brought chaos to Egypt. This unrest facilitated the army coup which led to the destruction of Egypt's fragile monarchy and the assumption of power by Gamal Abdul-Nasir (or Nasser, as he is generally known in the West).

The Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed and savagely repressed by Nasser. But it lived on as a secret society, proliferating through cells formed to study the letters

sent from prison by its new leading personality, Sayyed Qutb (1906–66), who had lived in the United States from 1949 until 1951, and who preached the impossibility of compromise between Islam and the world of ignorance (*jahiliyya*). Qutb was a self-conscious intellectual in the Western sense, who attempted to give Islam a decidedly modernist, even "existentialist" character. The faith of the true Muslim was, for Qutb, an expression of his innermost being against the inauthentic otherness of the surrounding world.[17] Islam was therefore the answer to the rootlessness and comfortlessness of modernity, and Qutb did not stop short of endorsing both suicide and terrorism as instruments in the self-affirmation of the believer against the *jahiliyya.* In place of the *credo quia absurdum* of Tertullian he preached the *facio quia absurdum* (I do it because it is absurd) of the existentialist, believing that this absurdity would also be a triumph of the spirit over the surrounding pagan culture.

Qutb and hundreds of his followers were executed by Nasser in 1966, but not before their message had spread through a younger generation that was enjoying for the first time a Western-style university education and the excitement of global communications. Although Sadat and his successor, Hosni-Mubarak, have tried to accommodate the Brotherhood by permitting it to reorganize as a political party, with a share in power accorded to its official leaders, the real movement continued independently, not as a form of politics, but as a form of *membership,* whose "brothers" would one day be martyrs.

Many of the ideological leaders of the Egyptian Islamist movement have been, like Mohammed Atta, graduates in technical or scientific subjects. Some have had the benefit of postgraduate study in the West. Their scientific training opens to them the secrets of Western technology while at the same time revealing the emptiness of a civilization in which only technology seems to matter. Although Osama bin Laden is a Saudi by birth, his most active followers are Egyptians, shaped by Western technology and Qutbist Islamism to become weapons in the fight to the death against technology. Al-Qa'eda offers them a new way of life which is also a way of death—an Islamist equivalent of the "being-towards-death" extolled by Heidegger, in which all external loyalties are dissolved in an act of self-sacrificial commitment.

Al-Qa'eda appeals to North African Muslims partly because it is an Arabist organization, expressing itself in the language and imagery of the Koran and pursuing a conflict that has its roots in the land of the Prophet. It has given to the Sunni and Arab branch of Islamism the same sense of identity that the Shi'ite and Persian branch received from the Islamic Republic of Ayatollah Khomeini. Indeed, its vision is virtually indistinguishable from that of Khomeini, who once described the killing of Western corrupters as a "surgical operation" commanded by God himself.

Khomeini's sentiments do not merely reflect his reading of the Koran. They are the fruit of a long exile in the West, where he was protected by the infidels whose destruction he conjures. They are a vivid testimony to the fact that the virtues of Western political systems are, to a certain kind of Islamic mind, imperceptible—or perceptible, as they were to Qutb and Atta, only as hideous moral failings. Even while enjoying the peace and freedom that issue from a secular rule of law, a person who regards the *shari'a* as the unique path to salvation may see these things only as the signs of a spiritual emptiness or corruption. For someone like Khomeini—a figure of great historic importance—human rights and

secular government display the decadence of Western civilization, which has failed to arm itself against those who intend to destroy it. The message is that there can be no compromise, and systems that make compromise and conciliation into their ruling principles are merely aspects of the Devil's work.

Islam originally spread through the world on the wings of military success. Conquest, victory, and triumph over enemies are a continual refrain of the Koran, offered as proof that God is on the side of the believers. The Shi'ites are remarkable among Muslims, however, in commemorating, as the central episode in their cult, a military defeat. To some extent they share the Christian vision of divinity as proved not through worldly triumph but through the willing acceptance of failure. Like Christians, Shi'ites take comfort in an eschatology of redemption, looking forward to the return of the Hidden Imam in the way that many Christians anticipate the Second Coming of Christ.

Hussein Ibn 'Ali, whom the Shi'ites recognize as their third Imam, was killed, together with his followers, by the armies of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid at the battle of Karbala in 680. Hussein was, for his followers, a symbol of all that is pure, innocent, and good in the Islamic way of life, and Yazid a proof that the community formed by the Prophet had fallen into the hands of corrupt and evil usurpers. By each year lamenting the defeat of Hussein, in rituals that may extend to excesses of self-inflicted injury, the Shi'ites rehearse their conviction that Islam must be constantly returned to its original purity, and that the powers that prevail in the world will always seek to corrupt it. At the same time Shi'ites internalize the goal of self-sacrificial death as the final proof of merit. This last feature became immensely important in the war against Iraq, which succeeded the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Following in the tradition of the assassins, Khomeini issued a new call to martyrdom, which was taken up by children and teenagers who expended their lives in clearing minefields.

The example set by the followers of Khomeini was soon projected around the world. Sunni Muslims, who believe on the authority of the Koran that suicide is categorically forbidden, have nevertheless been sucked into the Shi'ite maelstrom to become martyrs in the war against Satan. The cult of death seems to make sense of a world in which evil prevails; moreover it gives unprecedented power to the martyr, who no longer has anything to fear. The cult is both a protest against modern nihilism and a form of it—a last-ditch attempt to rescue Islam from the abyss of nothingness by showing that it can still demand the ultimate proof of devotion.

And the attempt seems to have succeeded. It is not too great an exaggeration to say that this new confluence of Sunni orthodoxy and Shi'ite extremism has laid the foundations for a worldwide Islamic revival. For the first time in centuries Islam appears, both in the eyes of its followers and in the eyes of the infidel, to be a single religious movement united around a single goal. Nor is it an exaggeration to suggest that one major factor in producing this unwonted unity is Western civilization and the process of globalization which it has set in motion. In the days when East was East and West was West it was possible for Muslims to devote their lives to pious observances and to ignore the evil that prevailed in the *dar al-harb*. But when that evil spreads around the globe, cheerfully offering freedoms and permissions in place of the austere requirements of a religious code, so that the *dar al-islam* is invaded by it, old antagonisms are awakened. This is what the West now faces.

1. See, for example, the outstanding study by Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World* (Harmondsworth, 1984, 2000); the review of modern Islamic politics by Edward Mortimer, *Faith and Power* (London, 1982); and the scholarly account by Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago, 1988).

2. The most accessible survey of the classical sources remains that of Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline* (Cambridge, 1958).

3. Quoted in Rosenthal, 131.

4. *Ibid.*, 155

5. See, for example, Nabil Saleh, *Unlawful Gain and Legitimate Profit in Islamic Law:* Riba, gharar *and Islamic Banking* (Cambridge, 1986).

6. Ruthven, *op. cit.,* 99.

7. See the summary in Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, 94-102.

8. Ruthven, *op. cit.,* 178.

9. *Ibid.*

10. G. von Grunebaum, quoted in Ruthven, 178; *mal* means horde or store, and the *mal Allah* is the traditional name for the public purse.

11. See Antoine Fattal, *Le Statut légal des non-Musulmans en pays d'Islam* (Beirut: Impr. Catholique, 1958).

12. See Michael Mehaffy and Nikos Salingaros, "The End of the Modern World," www.openDemocracy.net for January 2002. Aleppo, whose Arabic name, Halab, means "milk," is still one of the most vital and best preserved of Middle Eastern cities—although the city sustained considerable damage during Hafiz el-Asad's exterminatory attack on the indigenous cadre of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982.

13. On the rituals and the prayers of orthodox Sunni Islam, see Maurice Gaudefroy-Demombeynes's classic account in *Muslim Institutions*, tr. John P. MacGregor (London, 1950).

14. Since law derives from God and not the ruler, there is in any case a complex problem, for the Muslim, posed by enforcement. See Michael Cook's exemplary work of scholarship, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge 2001).

15. See the thorough account by Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War Inc: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (London, 2001).

16. See Daniel Pipes, "Islam and Islamism: Faith and Ideology," *The National Interest* No. 59, Spring 2000.

17. See Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies* (Chicago, 1988).