Why I Am Not a Muslim

Ibn Warraq

What am I? Musselman, Hindu, Jain, or Buddhist? That is a hard nut. Thou art beyond question an unbeliever, and therefore thou wilt be damned.

—Rudyard Kipling, in *Kim* (Chapter VIII)

Papa: This damn country has done us in. That's why I am like this. We should be there. Home.

Nasser: But that country has been sodomized by religion. It is beginning to interfere with the making of money. Compared with everywhere else, it is a little heaven here.

—Hanif Kureishi, in *My Beautiful Laundrette*

To explain why I am not a Muslim is a complicated story. I was born into a Muslim family in India but, from the age of ten, grew up in Europe, away from parents and relatives. Thus, for me there was no crisis of faith, no Pauline road to Damascus, but rather a crisis of identity—cultural, social, and intellectual. Was I Oriental or Occidental? English? Indian or Pakistani? Muslim or atheist? In the end I was able to look at Islam in a critical and detached manner without feeling I was betraying my own culture.

I do not believe in God and hence no longer consider myself a Muslim. Yet it's rare for someone born into a Muslim family to be an atheist, just as rare as is agnosticism or atheism in the whole history of Islam. It's rare for a Muslim to confess his atheism in print, and, since the Rushdie affair, it will get rarer still. Indeed, a confession of atheism is punishable by death in Islamic states.

My family belongs to a distinct group of Indian Muslims who first appeared as a Hindu subcaste in the fifteenth century and eventually came to settle in West India. They were merchants and traders. One year after my birth my family moved to Karachi, the capital of the newly formed Pakistan created in 1947 after the overhasty departure of the British as a homeland for the Muslims of British India, where they had been a minority. Our move was surprising because my father was not at all religious. Most of his friends were Hindus, and he moved in liberal and intellectual milieus where alcohol and the freethought viewpoint were evident. He was actively anti-religion, blaming it for the catastrophe of the partition of India in which thousands were killed.

My mother died when I was young, and I was brought up by my grandmother—a devoted Muslim woman much given to praying and reciting the Quran, which she had learnt by heart. One day she hung a locket round my brother's and my necks. The locket contained a miniature Quran, which was supposed to protect us. I don't remember when my father discovered them, but as soon as he did he removed the two lockets, saying he did not want his children brought up on religious mumbo-jumbo. He upset my grandmother enormously—she wept and wept and then went into a frenzy of praying and invoking Allah's mercy, understanding, and forgiveness for my father's impiety.

My father was, if not learned, certainly well read for his generation. Again, paradoxically, despite his hostility to religion in general—he once destroyed a letter opener that was in the form of a cross—he took great pride in the achievements of Islamic civilization.

He was an easy-going man who bowed down to social pressures on occasion. For example, once a year at the end of the month of fasting (Ramadan), he took my brother and me to a public garden not far from our flat for a service attended by thousands of believers. We were delighted to be with the adults, and we knew that at the end of the day the *Eid* presents (*Eid el Fitr, the Muslim equivalent of Christmas*) would come from uncles, cousins, and family friends. We also looked forward to the special sweet meats that were prepared for the occasion. I have vague memories of being sent briefly to a Quranic school. Soon we were attending a proper private primary school, where we had no religious education.

I have vivid memories of the various Muslim festivals of whose religious significance, as children, we had no idea. There was *Bakra Id*, held in memory of Abraham's offering of Isaac. Mainly goats and sheep are sacrificed, ritually slaughtered in the Muslim manner to render them *halal* (or Kosher). Our servants carried out all these gruesome duties in our backyard, which was littered for months with the festering and stinking stomachs of the slaughtered beasts.

Even more fearsome and in some ways more gruesome were the Shia Muslims' processions of *Muharram* (“The Sacred”). *Muharram* is a period of mourning for Shias in remembrance of the death of Husain, the son of Ali by Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. Hasan, eldest son
of Ali, was poisoned at the instigation of the future Khalif Yezid and Husain was murdered at Karbala (680 C.E.). Shias fast for ten days, and on the seventh night, an image of Burak, the steed on which Muhammad putatively ascended heaven, is carried in procession, as on the tenth night are biers representing the tomb of Ali at Karbala. These were cast into the sea or any nearby water. The mourners beat their own breasts or backs with whips, all the while crying "Ya Hasan! Ya Husain!" or "Ya Ali!" Certain zealous mourners even mutilated themselves with razor blades, knives, and pins—often it was their tongues and mouths that suffered.

Otherwise, my father did not fill us with any religious indoctrination. He replied as rationally as possible to those fundamental questions that children are wont to ask. There was no heaven and certainly no hell. At the age of ten I was sent to a private boarding school in England. Little did I realize that I would not return to Pakistan for thirty years, then as a transit passenger on the way to Bangkok. Ironically this boarding school was run by Presbyterians, and all boys (other than my brother and I) had to attend long prayer services in the school church every morning and evening and extra long church services on Sundays.

I had been brought up to think that it was unclean (rather than a grievous sin) to eat pork. But it really was not very long before I was eating pork sausages, though not openly. By the time I reached secondary school I had no such feelings of shame, guilt, or revulsion. I took to hamburgers with zest. My love of wine came much later.

I arrived hardly speaking English, but within a year I grew to love English folk songs and the English countryside, especially its bird life. School holidays were spent in East Anglia and the region's literary and artistic heritage had a special significance for me—from the Norwich school of painters and watercolorists to Norwich Cathedral and, of course, Constable.

Anglicization continued and deepened at my secondary school, and at the age of nineteen I considered myself English (but certainly neither Christian nor Muslim). Not speaking any other language, this seemed natural enough—I had forgotten all the languages I had spoken as a child. But it was more than that. I was deeply immersed in the English culture. I adored Samuel Palmer, Crome, Gainsborough, London with its Georgian squares, and so on. While abroad, I found myself defending all things English. Feeling homesick, I sought the words of such parochially English writers as Gilbert White and William Cobbett. Hence the great shock when I realized I would never be accepted as English.

Before going to university I won a scholarship to live and work on a kibbutz in Israel for six months. I was politically naive—I knew nothing of Israel's turbulent history or anything of the history of the Middle East. I didn't know that it caused a sensation when the trustees realized that a "Muslim" had applied to go to Israel. I still had a Pakistani passport. Pakistan had no diplomatic relations with Israel, and I needed a special visa.

While in Israel, I was summoned by the Minister of Religious Affairs, who lectured on how well the Muslims of Israel were being treated. I decided to find out for myself by talking to as many Muslims as possible. Some were hostile to Israel, others were either prudent or had simply come to terms with political reality. Many invited me to go to a mosque for prayers. I had forgotten all the rituals and the Arabic prayers, but on one occasion, nonetheless, I accepted, simply going through the motions by following my guests' gestures and postures.

I adored Israel, much to the embarrassment of my father. Finally, during the 1967 Six-Day War, while I was studying at Edinburgh University, I volunteered as a noncombatant on the Israeli side. My former kibbutzniks (of Kfar Hanassi in the north of Israel, opposite the Golan Heights) said they would hoist a special flag when I arrived to show that they had been host to the first and only "Muslim" volunteer to come to Israel.

I volunteered to serve Israel precisely because I didn't think of myself as Muslim. In the end, I was turned down because the government had been overwhelmed and was only accepting Jewish volunteers.

I then turned to Islamic studies to see where my intellectual and cultural roots lay. I felt I would never be accepted as an Englishman, though the product of an English education. Like Kim, the eponymous hero of Kipling's masterpiece, I kept asking "Who am I?" Like Kim and Kipling, I spoke, thought, and dreamt in Hindustani until the age of ten. Kipling unconvincingly resolved Kim's identity crisis by turning him into a British Secret Service agent. Had he left the tension unresolved Kim would have more accurately represented my situation.

Maybe I was Oriental. I was delighted every time I discovered some contribution of Oriental civilization to the making of the modern world; or the way Oriental philosophy and thought had influenced Western philosophy and science.

And then, slowly and painfully, I was to learn yet again that this was equally a fantasy. I no longer spoke any Indian language, I had been less than successful with Arabic at university, and what is more fundamental and important, I had discovered my deep skepticism—skepticism in its finest sense of a profound respect for reason, critical thought, evidence, tolerance since there were no absolutes, compromise, and humility. My heroes were agnostics (like J. S. Mill, T. H. Huxley, Leslie Stephen, Karl Popper, Hazlitt, Byron); atheists (Mill's godless godson Bertrand Russell, Bradlaugh, William Empson, Leopardi, Carneades, Omar Khayyam, Kemal Ataturk); and deists (Tom Paine, Jefferson, Martin Gardner).

Hence, maybe I was more Occidental, since in Islam there was no tradition of dissent, doubt, or atheism. Ironically, now I was pained when I heard of any Oriental influence on my beloved Greek civilization. Rationalism and science were, for me, the supreme gifts of the Greeks. Why had Muhammad not found his Ernest Renan? Only Omar Khayyam, Ataturk,
Ibn al Rawandi, Ibn Warraq spring to mind. In the words of P. J. Vatikiotis, the Muslims had paid dearly for their “rejection of Greek rationalism in favor of the superior truth of revelation” (Islam and the State, 1988). Charles Martel was no longer a villain in my personal mythology. The defeat of the Moors in 732 C.E. was the most significant event in European history.

I saw resurgent fundamentalist Islam as the greatest threat to the kind of civilization to which I gave my allegiance. To counter charges that I was not “racially” British and hence not Occidental, and being rather sensitive, I armed myself with the following arguments:

We are all what Nabokov calls a salad of racial genes. The Tory fear of racial dilution is misplaced and, according to Gibbon, even dangerous: “The narrow policy of preserving without any foreign mixture of the pure blood of the ancient citizens had checked the fortune and hastened the ruin of Athens and Sparta.”

The need to establish a personal identity is as basic a need as the need to belong to some group—a nation, a party, a class. But as Isaiah Berlin showed in his brilliant essay on Disraeli and Marx, the way to establish one’s identity is not to invent one’s ancestry, make a fetish of it, or to deny one’s origins and the historical past of the group to which one belongs by the accident of birth.

Last year, I wrote a letter to Salman Rushdie giving him my full moral support. I can only repeat what Milan Kundera said: “If Europe betrays Salman Rushdie—by half-heartedness, by ignorance, by indifference, by forgetting—it will betray itself.”

Rushdie’s fearless stand has given, I am sure, courage to that most neglected of minorities—the atheists, agnostics, and skeptics in Islamic lands. One would further hope that his book will one day enable us to rediscover the historical Muhammad and permit us to look at Islam in a scientific manner, and so repossess it for all humanity.

I myself was forced into a difficult situation when teaching in East London. My progressive headmaster wished to introduce Muslim acts of worship in assembly at least once a week. Many of the teachers (all white English) were active in the school. Yet, I knew the importance for the Asian children of seeing their culture treated positively and not something to be ashamed of and hidden away behind locked doors.

In the end I got the teachers to agree to attend a series of talks, to be given by me, on the contributions to civilization of Islam and India. They learned, for the first time, of the influence of Islamic art on European art. Thanks to Arabic work in astronomy, we still use Arabic names for many stars. Original Arabic contributions were made in optics and perspective by Alhazen (965–1039). He discussed, for example, spherical and parabolic mirrors, the camera obscura, lenses, and vision.

I talked of the glories of Islamic Spain, when Islamic civilization was at its height, and when the rest of Europe was plunged in the Dark Ages. Arabic scholars kept Greek culture alive and transmitted it back to Europe.
punishments (amputations, stoning to death, whipping); its intolerance; its mind-numbing acceptance of the idea of the Quran as an immutable divine product; its lack of critical spirit; its dogmatism; its lack of separation of state and religion; its historical mistreatment of Jews and Christians.

It does not do for well-intentioned liberals to sidestep criticism of Islam by saying, “Well, the problem is not Islam, which is a great religion, but fanatics who…” I, on the other hand, wish to go further and say the problem is Islam itself, i.e., the Quran, the Hadith (the tradition), and the Sharia (Islamic law). Khomeini was right—what he applied in Iran was Islam.

The distinction between the secular and the religious is totally alien to Islamic thought and practice. There is no personal, private space in Islam. It controls and intrudes in every nook and cranny of an individual’s life. There is no modesty and no discretion. In the entire Islamic world, it is only Turkey that has a constitution that separates church and state. Indonesia counts a belief in God as one of the fundamental principles of its constitution without making Islam the official state religion. All the others have Islam as the state religion. This in practice means that many non-Muslims living in Islamic republics have their rights denied. Sometimes citizenship is defined by religion alone. Often the testimony of non-Muslims against Muslims in a court of law is not accepted. Non-Muslims are not permitted to visit the holy cities of Islam such as Mecca. The celebration of Christian or Jewish festivals is expressly forbidden in Saudi Arabia.

Suras 2.288 and 4.34 make it clear that women are inferior to men and must be obedient. If not, the men have the right to beat them. In a sermon preached near Mecca in 632, Muhammad compared women to prisoners of war: Their internment camp is the houses of their husbands, which can left only for certain occasions, under strict surveillance and suitably veiled and covered. Women are only tolerated at mosques. They suffer from various other legal disabilities. In Pakistan, for example, in cases of rape, the woman’s testimony is not accepted. Adultery is punished by whipping and death by lapidation (stoning). The latter has been applied many times recently in Iran.

The Quran is full of lurid descriptions of the punishment awaiting atheists, e.g., Sura 22.19: “As for the unbelievers for them garments of fire shall be cut and there shall be poured over their heads boiling water whereby whatsoever is in their bellies and their skins shall be melted, for them await hooked iron-rods” (Arberry, *The Quran Interpreted*, p. 335).

The Quran also enjoins all Muslims to fight and, if necessary, kill nonbelievers: “When you meet the unbelievers, smite their necks, then, when you have made wide slaughter among them tie fast the bonds” (Sura 47.4). In the Middle Ages, it is indeed the case that the Jews of Islamic lands were better off than their fellow Jews in Christian Europe. One only needs to think of the massacres of the Jews in Mainz and Cologne in 1096 on the eve of the first crusades to be convinced. And yet the golden age of Islamic tolerance is also myth, invented by nineteenth century romantics. There never was an interfaith Utopia. Norman Stillman in *The Jews of Arab Lands* (I have relied heavily on this book to write this section) makes it clear that even in the period of greatest tolerance (900–1200) anti-Semitism existed.

The Prophet himself did not set a good example. The treatment of the Jews of Medina by Muhammad and his followers has always been excused by Orientalist apologists with, “We must not judge Muhammad’s actions from our twentieth century perspective.” All the men of the Jewish tribe of Banu Qurayza were beheaded in the central marketplace of Medina, unjustly accused of having helped Muhammad’s enemies. Their bodies were thrown into large open trenches. Between 600 and 900 men were executed. Muhammad declared that this was none other than Allah’s decision. The women and children were taken as slaves. A little later, a defenseless delegation of Jews, hoping to negotiate with the Prophet, set off with a Muslim escort. On the way, the Muslims turned upon the unarmed Jews, killing all but one.

In 624, Muhammad either commanded or approved of and certainly did not punish the assassination of two pagan poets (one an old man and the other a woman with an infant at her breast) for having written satirical verses about him. The precedent had been set long ago for Khomeini.

Sura 9.29 makes it clear that the non-Muslim was to be subjugated. He was to be made a tribute bearer and was to be humbled. To maintain their safety and the right to worship, non-Muslims had to pay a poll tax and a land tax, which was, as Stillman says “a crushing burden for the non-Muslim peasantry.” Furthermore, they must never strike a Muslim, carry arms, ride horses, or use normal riding saddles. They were forbidden to build new houses of worship or to repair old ones. They could not hold public religious processions or pray too loudly. Later, they were forbidden to build homes higher than Muslim ones, to adopt Arabic names, to study the Quran, and so on. Muslims often blocked the appointment of religious leaders in non-Muslim communities.

In the twelfth century, the Almohads of North Africa spread terror wherever they went. Any community that resisted was put to the sword. The Jewish inhabitants of Fez and Morocco were almost entirely exterminated in 1465. Some scholars attribute the disappearance of Buddhism from India to the intolerance of the invading Muslims in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As Stillman’s story moves to the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, it is increasingly a story of massacres, fanaticism, hostility, and intolerance. Even Islam’s staunchest supporters will testify to the uneasy and precarious position of non-Muslims in the Muslim states of today.

**I Am Not a Muslim, but . . .**

Regrettably, from time to time, I am forced to play it safe. Out of timidity, politeness, discretion, embarrassment, expediency, and, more recently, fear, I have told half-truths or simply lied about my atheism. Sometimes, I have compromised in what seemed to me an honorable way.

My wife was educated in a Catholic convent and her parents are practicing Catholics. We got married at a registry office in London—a purely civil ceremony with only two or three friends present. My wife’s parents wanted a church wedding
as well, back in France. My wife, my brother-in-law, who was a Catholic priest at the time, and I worked out a ceremony that was not only liberal but could justly be termed humanist. We played Bach and Mozart, and I insisted on reading from my favorite text in the Old Testament—Ecclesiastes—which someone described as the most heretical book of the first century B.C.E. Not God, but rather man, is the center of things. Not only does it espouse a skeptical, materialist, epicurean, and pessimist philosophy, it also pours scorn on all forms of fanaticism. My conscience was clear.

When working for a travel agent in France, I was asked to go to Algeria as a courier during Ramadan. To obtain the necessary visa, I had to fill in a form at the Algerian consulate. The form asked my religion, and after some hesitation I put down “Muslim.” It is important to realize that Muslims in the Islamic world would immediately recognize my name as Muslim. To avoid scandal and embarrassment, especially for my company, I lied. On arrival in Algeria, I did not fast, though my Muslim chauffeur and guide did. For the first two days, they kept prodding and asking me why I did not. I hedged and gave some excuse about being a non-practicing Muslim and that it was not very practical to fast when working. Finally on the third day, when they began mocking me, I lost my temper and told them that I was an atheist, and that, furthermore, it was none of their business. I felt my cowardly lie on the visa form had been atoned for.

My Muslim cousins, when they visit, respect my views and don’t object when I drink wine or eat pork in their presence. But I do no such thing when I am in their homes. Older uncles and aunts occasionally ask why I do not go to the mosque. I usually give an evasive reply and the matter is dropped.

Sometimes, in business relations, I have used “Muslimness” to get greater cooperation—“We are both Muslims, why don’t you help me?” I now feel thoroughly ashamed of this ploy.

W e must not be afraid of criticizing Islam and looking at it objectively and scientifically. Our task has been made considerably more difficult by the Rushdie affair. Western media have not helped much by seeing every Muslim as a fanatic or terrorist. Our task is to defend our hard-won liberties—especially the liberty of expression, which is essential to democracy.

We must encourage dialogue with moderate and reformist Muslims. In 1986 in France, there appeared a remarkable book, L’Islam en question, in which twenty-four Islamic writers and intellectuals discussed Islam freely. Many are secular-minded. The Algerian Rachid Boudjera states quite categorically that Islam is incompatible with a modern state. For the Iraqi Mounif and the Palestinian Habibi, religion should always be a personal affair.

Finally, there are signs that many secular-minded people in Islamic countries are looking to their pre-Islamic heritage to escape the tyranny of theocratic Islam or Arabic culture. Many Berbers are offended if you call them “Arab” and are rather proud of their pre-Islamic past, when Massinissa (c. 240 B.C.E.) created a Punic Empire and embarrassed Rome in battle. These Berbers of modern-day Algeria were not at all impressed by the fundamentalists’ recent victories in local elections and hope to follow their own culture.

Similarly Iranians and Iraqis can also point to their pre-Islamic heritage. If they can admit there were great civilizations created by their ancestors before the arrival of Islam, then they can far more easily also allow that there can be something worthwhile without, beyond, or after Islam.

We must do the utmost to integrate fully into our society the children of those immigrants from Islamic countries or we will push them into defending values they do not believe in. The best way is through education—but, here, we must have confidence in our values so that we can define a common curriculum, a common culture for a single society. We must teach the democratic values to which everyone can pay allegiance. Western civilization embodies the idea of the individual, individual choice, responsibility for one’s destiny, the life of the intellect, and the life of reason without recourse to transcendental forces: freedom of thought, wherever it may lead.

Notes

1. Ernest Renan, 1823–1892. In his Vie de Jesus, Renan was perhaps one of the earliest historians to look at Jesus Christ as a purely historical figure, shorn of all the supernatural elements. When asked by someone whether it was true that he had, on abandoning Catholicism, embraced Protestantism, Renan replied testily, “It was my faith that I lost and not my reason.”

2. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, 1881–1938. Ataturk was the founder of modern Turkey. He was dedicated to creating a secular state and determined to eliminate Islam from Turkey. He once wrote: “Islam, this absurd theology created by an immoral Bedouin, is the putrefying corpse that is poisoning our lives.”

3. Omar Khayyam, 1048–1131. Khayyam was a Persian mathematician and philosopher who is often considered an agnostic. He certainly questioned the possibility of an afterlife in his verses (The Ruba’iyat). For example, In Verse 10 (translated by Avery and Heath-Stubb, Penguin Books):

   The cycle which includes our coming and going
   Has no discernible beginning nor end
   Nobody has got this matter straight
   Where we come from and where we go to

Of course the famous translation of his verses by Edward Fitzgerald is entirely skeptical in tone.

4. Ibn Al Rawandi, ninth century C.E.

5. Ibn Warraq, died 861 C.E. Ibn Warraq and Ibn Warraq are often considered the earliest “atheists of Islam”—if one can put it that way. See Encyclopedia of Unbelief, vol. 1, pp. 350–356.

6. Charles Martel, c.688–741. Martel, the King of Franks put a stop to the hitherto successful march of the Saracens northward into Europe at a battle that took place near Poitiers. He later (737) drove them out of Burgundy and Languedoc.

7. Jawaharlal Nehru, 1889–1964. Nehru was the first Prime Minister of Independent India. Nehru, who was educated at Harrow and Cambridge University, was a man of wide culture. He returned from England a rationalist and an admirer of Western science and technology. He was an avowed agnostic with a horror of mystics, astrologers, and religious mumbo-jumbo. A committed democratic socialist and secularist, Nehru’s great desire was to rid India of superstition and poverty.

8. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, 1876–1948. Jinnah was the leader of the Muslims and the father of Muslim Pakistan. Ironically, Jinnah began as a liberal and was not in any way religious. Indeed, he had returned from England with decidedly un-Muslim tastes: He delighted in champagne, brandy, whiskey, and claret, and on occasion took pork. He did not go to the mosque every Friday nor did the Quran play any part in his life.


10. For example, Christmas Humphreys in A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism, p. 95.