



A False Quest for a True Islam

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We often view Islam as a problem—as the world religion most closely associated with political violence, poverty, and lack of individual freedom. Not only does Islam inspire fervid commitment to revelation, it seems particularly intolerant of critics. Any close observer of Muslim lands can compile a disturbing list of scholars persecuted for nontraditional interpretations of the Qur'an, science educators who have suffered for defending evolution, and even a number of intellectuals assassinated because of their public criticism of Islam.

Secular humanists have, by and large, supported skepticism about Islam. Ibn Warraq regularly writes for *FREE INQUIRY* urging more attention to Qur'anic criticism. When critics such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali denounce how conservative Muslims treat women, humanists typically agree. And when Salman Rushdie speaks to secularists about the lack of intellectual freedom in Muslim lands, and also castigates Westerners who would give

in to censorship due to cultural relativism or fear of violence, he knows he is addressing a sympathetic crowd. Secular humanists care deeply about freedom of inquiry, and they perceive that many threats to this freedom today involve Islam.

Nevertheless, secular humanists have not been entirely clear-eyed about Islam. While supporting critical inquiry, many secularists have also been partial to simplistic representations of the Muslim world. Indeed, some popular secular literature opposing Islam is hardly distinguishable from Christian and neoconservative polemics. Secularists have been too eager to seek immediate doctrinal causes for Muslim problems. In doing so, many critics have been tempted to identify an essential "true Islam" that is antagonistic to reason and liberal values.

Now, there is no denying that Islamic countries are too often intellectual disaster areas. I was born and educated in Turkey and now teach physics at an American university, so I am particularly interested in the Muslim world's troubled relationship with modern science. In my book *An Illusion of Harmony: Science and Religion in Islam* (Prometheus, 2007), I draw the dismal picture of Muslim intellectual life. Muslim scientific productivity is very low. Indeed, if Muslims were to stop contributing to science, the rest of the world's scientific community would hardly notice. Moreover, Muslim cultures are marked by ambivalence about the modern scientific outlook. As a result,

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Islam harbors some very powerful pseudoscientific beliefs. Large numbers of Muslims from every nationality and sect are convinced that modern scientific and technological developments have been prefigured in the Qur'an. Evolution is almost absent from science education in many Muslim countries; Turkey has produced a very successful creationist movement. Some devout Muslim intellectuals have proposed that physics and biology be centered on divine design and that sociology and history be studied in a revelation-centered manner. Such pseudoscience is espoused by many university professors as well as popular religious leaders. Liberal Muslims would like to reinterpret their religion, but they are much more tentative than their Christian counterparts.

So it is natural to ask whether Islam is incompatible with science. Modern Jews and Christians have, with the exception of fundamentalists, achieved a less conflicted relationship with scientific institutions than their Muslim counterparts. Perhaps there is something specifically about Islam—beyond its commitment to supernatural agents and revealed texts—that impedes scientific thinking.

Many critics of Islam think so. They argue that Islamic doctrines promote distrust of rationality, and they find these doctrines in the sacred texts of Islam or in classical interpretations that continue to define mainstream Islam today. For example, in his 2002 *Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions about the World's Fastest-Growing Faith*, Robert Spencer, a well-known anti-Islamic writer, takes the Qur'anic passage 5 Al Maidah 64—"The Jews say the hand of God is bound. *Their* hands are bound, and they are accursed, by what they say . . ."—and interprets it as an objection to Jewish and Christian notions of a created universe that operates according to laws. This, to Spencer, means that Islam does not accept a rational, orderly universe, and hence is antagonistic to science.

But 5 Al Maidah 64 is not about an orderly universe; it is about a long-forgotten dispute with Jews over taking action to prevent immoral acts. Yes, medieval Muslim thinkers emphasized God's complete freedom and omnipotence—to the extent of denying that natural causality had any integrity aside from God's will. They interpreted the Muslim sacred sources accordingly. And, yes, this might have contributed to a religious distrust of secular knowledge. It is a gross misrepresentation, however, to suggest that one medieval interpretation is what naturally proceeds out of the Qur'an and inhibits scientific development. Practically no Muslims today agree with Spencer's reading of the Qur'an.

Perhaps I should set Spencer aside; after all, his attacks on Islam serve a Christian agenda. But many secular critics of Islam, including secularists within the Muslim world, also adopt simplistic views. For example, it is common to blame Muslim intellectual backwardness on al-Ghazali, the great Sunni scholar. About nine hundred years ago, al-Ghazali condemned Greek philosophy and disparaged human reason that did not pursue divine purposes. So mainstream Sunni Islam, the story goes, reflected the influence of al-Ghazali and discouraged science. Indeed, secularists and liberal Muslims often argue that Islam needs to revive rationalist movements such as the Mutazila, which were active in the ninth century. This is also a historically naïve view.

Medieval doctrinal disputes are not productive for understanding the uneasy relationship between science and most varieties of modern Islam. Discussions of al-Ghazali or the

Mutazila obscure the very significant discontinuities between modern science and all varieties of medieval thinking. Moreover, emphasizing medieval attitudes that discouraged science and reason ignores how, especially in the last two centuries, most Muslims have been determined to catch up to the West in science and technology. Modern Islamic literature is full of praise of science and reason; indeed, Muslims often insist that Islam is a completely rational religion that encourages scientific inquiry.

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Consider the *Nur* movement, which has been deeply involved with all sorts of pseudoscience in Turkey. The movement promotes crude science-in-the-Qur'an fantasies, such as the notion that Qur'anic verses predict modern astrophysics. *Nur* writers draw on parapsychology to defend the reality of a spiritual realm. And the *Nur* movement has been instrumental in developing Islamic creationism, which has recently emerged from Turkey to become internationally popular. Yet social scientists studying the *Nur* movement remark on how modern-oriented and how science- and technology-positive it is. Indeed, that is an important reason why the *Nur* movement promotes pseudoscience. Anyone trying to explain today's strained relationship between science and Islam has to look at how modern Muslims understand science and their religious tradition—to explore modern religious currents such as the *Nur* movement. The idea that Islam proceeds directly out of sacred texts will only get in the way. Trying to locate an original sin against reason in medieval Islam is, similarly, largely a distraction.

Indeed, attention to Islam as it is actually practiced, rather than focusing on the Qur'an or idealized doctrines of classical Islam, is especially important today. Critics and apologists alike tend to portray Islam as a coherent entity, existing in stagnant (or glorious) continuity with an original revelation and a classical civilization based on that revelation. At the least, this ignores Islam's traumatic encounter with the modern West. In the overcrowded cities of Muslim countries today, Islam appears chaotic, split into many currents that try to assemble different fragments of a religious heritage to create new, modern forms of Islam. Islam is always under construction. We can identify common themes, and, very often, it is legit-

imate to talk of mainstream Islamic beliefs that contrast with minority points of view. But there is no “true Islam” that can be adequately defined by a list of essential characteristics. Muslim religious scholars often try to speak for true Islam, usually to denounce a rival interpretation that also claims to represent true Islam. Occasionally, scholars reach consensus about who is the heretic. But modernization has also undermined tradi-

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tional structures of religious authority. An engineer who lacks classical religious training can feel free to lead an urban discussion group mining the sacred sources for contemporary guidance. True Islam is more pious hope than reality.

So, where science is concerned, there is no single Islam to discuss—just a complicated landscape of sometimes rather new religious orientations. The interesting questions concern the continuing cultural weakness of science in conditions of rapid religious change. There is nothing essential to Islam that prevents a more liberal accommodation with science. Religions can change, and how they change depends more on historical contingencies and constraints than on doctrinal essences. The prospects for an improved relationship between popular varieties of Islam and modern science remain bleak, nonetheless.

Much of what I say concerning science also applies to criticism of Islam, in general. Too often, we go on a quest for a true Islam. For example, Qur’an translations sell very well these days, often because Westerners decide to investigate Islam by consulting the holiest text of Muslims. I expect this often produces bewilderment. The Qur’an can be a very disorganized, often opaque text. And, without the context provided by at least a basic acquaintance with Muslim religious culture, just reading the Qur’an is almost no help in understanding Islam. Trying to get the measure of Islam by sitting down with the Qur’an is a mistake—especially if done with the idea that the Qur’an is the key to the true Islam that most Muslims acknowledge.

Unfortunately, some recent secular critics of Islam make just this mistake. The most egregious example has to be Sam Harris, who, in his 2004 *The End of Faith*, portrays Islam as a violence-obsessed religion. He makes his case by presenting a few pages listing verses of the Qur’an that promise sadistic punishments for unbelievers in the afterlife, urge fighting against infidels, and otherwise show an unhealthy preoccupa-

tion with vengeance and violence. Harris assumes that the Qur’an speaks for itself and that people whose minds are shaped by a violent foundational text will likely be inclined toward violence.

Now, there is no doubt that the Qur’an contains much that is disgusting by modern liberal standards. And it is disturbing that movements emphasizing jihad against the infidel have gained strength. But the Qur’an does *not* speak for itself. The vast majority of Muslims only make heavily mediated contact with the Qur’an. A typical Muslim is unlikely to be literate in classical Arabic, and using translations is not an everyday practice. Ordinary Muslims depend heavily on their local religious scholars, Sufi orders and similar brotherhoods, officially sanctioned clergy, and other mediating institutions. They hold the Qur’an sacred, but their understanding of what Islam demands comes through their local religious culture. Their interpretations are filtered through the mainstream legal traditions and the unexciting, nonviolent needs of everyday life. Even fundamentalists, who ostensibly strip away the accretions of tradition to go back to the original texts, do no such thing. They sanctify diverse modern readings by imagining a return to purity.

This is not to join in the whitewashing of Islam as a “religion of peace.” Violent forms of religiosity are available to Muslims today, as are moderate ways of political engagement. Jihad is a legitimate strand within Islam, no less than quietism. But no argument that presents violent verses in the Qur’an and declares that therefore faithful Muslims must be inclined toward violence deserves to be taken seriously.

I would like to ignore Harris’s views, especially since he did not do even the elementary work of consulting a few scholarly sources before writing his polemic. But he appears to be popular among secular people. Many secularists who are impressed with Harris urge a similar view of Islam. So I worry that, if such attitudes are widespread, it means that many Western secular people harbor grave misunderstandings about Islam, and perhaps even about religion in general. It is precisely an uncompromisingly secular view of religion that should prevent us from going on a quest for a true Islam. The Qur’an is often incoherent, obscure, and archaic—its various, conflicting meanings arise from the interpretive activities of communities that consider it sacred and try to make sense of it in terms of their present needs. Devout Muslims must believe in a true Islam that is the measure of compliance and deviance, a divine reality revealed by the Qur’an. Muslim religious scholars must strive for orthodoxy and keep complaining about how even Muslims are ignorant of the true faith. Those of us who do not accept revelation, however, need not go in search of an idealized, true Islam. We should give up those habits of thought that prompt us to seek a well-defined true faith, now to condemn as barbaric rather than to endorse as divine. Religion is a human activity, and what deserve our attention are the varieties of faith revealed in actual practice.

Secular humanists have been very supportive of science and critiques of Islam; they have stood up for freedom of inquiry. And as a godless infidel, a scientist, and a critic of Islam, I am grateful for this support. But we secularists also have our blind spots, our episodes of intellectual laziness. Accepting the framework of a “true Islam” is one such mistake. We can do better. ■■