

# *The Closing of the Muslim Mind*

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## Chapter 9

### THE CRISIS

The great crisis that has seized the Islamic world poses the question to Muslims: “Can we enter the modern world and also retain our faith?” Underlying this question is the widely held perception, stated by Chanddra Muzaffar, considered one of Malaysia’s most respected Islamic philosophers, that “Islam and the post-Enlightenment secular West are diametrically opposed to one another. Muslims will then realize that unless they transform the secular world of the West, that vision of justice embodied in the Qur'an will never become a reality.”<sup>1</sup> Transformation of the West is the objective; only the means of transformation are in dispute: peaceful or violent? One answer to the question above has been provided by the Islamists and Osama bin Laden. His answer is no; we cannot retain our faith in the modern world. Therefore, we must destroy modernity and reestablish the caliphate.

The answer of Islamism is grounded in a spiritual pathology based upon a theological deformation that has produced a dysfunctional culture. Therefore, the problem must be addressed at the level at which it exists. **To say that the West needs to improve the economic conditions in the Middle East in order to drain the swamp of terrorism is, by itself, profoundly mistaken.** Terrorists are produced by a totalitarian ideology justifying terrorism. That is its “root cause.” If someone had suggested that in order to deal with Nazism one first had to overcome the problem of poverty in Germany, they would be laughed out of school. Yet this kind of thinking is taken seriously today.

The Middle East is poor because of a dysfunctional culture based upon a deformed theology, and unless it can be reformed at that level, economic engineering or the development of constitutional political order will not succeed. If one lives in a society that ascribes everything to first causes, one is not going to look around the world and try to figure out how it works or how to improve it. “In order to function,” writes Pervez Hoodbhoy, “organized societies need modern people—people who can relate cause to effect.”<sup>2</sup> As Fouad Ajami observed, the inability to relate cause to effect is pandemic in the Islamic world.

Is there a constituency within the Muslim world that can elaborate a theology that allows for the restoration of reason, a rehellenization of Islam with Allah as ratio? Can Islam undertake what Samir Khalil Samir calls “an Enlightenment, in other words, a revolution in thought that affirms the value of worldly reality in and of itself, detached from religion, though not in opposition to it”?<sup>3</sup> It is idle to pretend that it would take less than a sea change for this to elaborate a theology that allows for the restoration of reason, a rehellenization of Islam with Allah as ratio? Can Islam undertake what Samir Khalil Samir calls “an Enlightenment, in other words, a revolution in thought that affirms the value of worldly reality in and of itself, detached from religion, though not in opposition to it”?<sup>3</sup> It is idle to pretend that it would take less than a

sea change for this to happen. If it does not, it is hard to envisage upon what basis Muslims could modernize or upon what grounds a dialogue with Islam could take place. There are many Muslims (in Turkey and in the developing democracies of Indonesia and Malaysia, to say nothing of the democratic life followed by the huge Muslim population in India) who want to enter the modern world—with its modern science and modern political institutions—and also keep their faith. The past glories of Islamic civilization show that it was once able to progress. That progress was based upon a different set of ideas, antithetical to those of the Islamists, who would have been considered heretical then.

Fazlur Rahman contended that “the Qur'an itself not only has a great deal of definitive philosophic teaching, but also can be a powerful catalyst for the building up of a comprehensive world view consistent with that teaching. That has never been systematically attempted in Islamic history; it can and must be done.”<sup>4</sup> It seems that Fazlur Rahman was calling for an effort in Islam somewhat analogous to what Thomas Aquinas undertook within Christianity. Aquinas developed what latent philosophic ideas existed in Christian scripture and reconciled them with reason. He showed that Greek Logos was really a preview of Christian Logos. Revelation and reason were ultimately grounded in the same source. The Thomist endeavor took place some thirteen centuries after Christ. Today, Islam stands at nearly the same chronological distance from its founding. Will those who follow Fazlur Rahman's thinking perceive the same need and undertake the task he outlined? There are notable Muslim thinkers who wish to do so and who are struggling to find the public space within which to make the effort.

Unfortunately, the ideas gaining traction today are not theirs. That is the crisis. The answer that is sweeping the Islamic world today does not come from people like them. It is from the al-Qaedaists, neo-Kharjites, and Hanbalites. As described by analyst Tony Corn, “In the past 30 years, one particular brand—pan-Islamic Salafism—has been allowed to fill the vacuum left by the failure of pan-Arab Socialism and, in the process, to marginalize the more enlightened forms of Islam to the point where Salafism now occupies a quasi-hegemonic position in the Muslim world.”<sup>5</sup> Hoodbhoy confirms this view: “Fundamentalist movements have come to dominate intellectual discourse in key Muslim countries and the Muslim modernist movement, which emphasized Islam's compatibility with science and rationalism, has lost its cultural and ideological hegemony. The modernist has been effectively banished from the political and cultural scene and the modern educational system, which was nascent 50 years ago, has visibly collapsed in key Islamic countries. Orthodoxy has arrogated to itself the task of guiding the destiny of Muslims. But their prescription for society is an invitation to catastrophe and possibly to a new Dark Age for Muslims.”<sup>6</sup>

In a powerful description of the coming catastrophe, the contemporary Tunisian Muslim thinker Abdelwahab Meddeb, resident in Paris, says: “In this insane, absolute theocentrism, never before in the tradition of Islam so radically developed, the world is transformed into a cemetery. If Maududi reproached the West with the death of God, we can accuse him of having inaugurated the death of humanity. His outrageous system invents an unreal totalitarianism, which excites disciples and incites them to spread death and destruction over all continents. That is the kind of negation of life, the nihilism to which theoretical reasoning leads when it is not subject to the control of practical reasoning. . . . This radical and terrifying vision establishes

a tabula rasa and transforms the world into a post nuclear place in which we find desolate landscapes wherever we look, on pages blackened by Sayyid Qutb.”<sup>7</sup> Meddeb predicts that the fulfillment of Qutb’s vision of “liberation” would “transform man into one of the living dead, on a scorched land.”<sup>8</sup> But alas, Qutb is everywhere. And little is being done to counter this trend. The transmogrification of Islam into Islamism is bad news not only for the West but also for the majority who have no desire to live in totalitarian theocracies. “For the West it is but a physical threat in the form of terrorism,” said Pakistani journalist Ayaz Amir. “For the world of Islam . . . to be trapped in bin Ladenism is to travel back in time to the dark ages of Muslim obscurantism. It means to be stuck in the mire which has held the Islamic world back.”<sup>9</sup> In the case of most Muslims, their numbers may not matter, any more than they did for the hapless peoples of the Russian empire who suddenly found themselves ruled by a tiny, violent clique of Leninists in 1917. The problem for the side of reason, as expressed by an Indonesian Islamist, is that “liberal Islam has no cadres.”<sup>10</sup> There are ample cadres on the other side. The small, tightly organized, highly disciplined and well-funded groups of Islamists seek to emulate the Leninist success with similar tactics of propaganda and violence. The worse things get, especially in the Arab world, the more appealing the Islamist message becomes as an explanation for the predicament and a program of action to overcome it. For this reason, it is in the Islamists’ self-interest that the situation gets worse. In fact, they can help ensure that it does.

It is not inevitable that the Islamists should succeed, except in the absence of any strategy to counter them. Muslim leaders like the former president of Indonesia, the late Abdurrahman Wahid, who was the spiritual head of the largest Muslim organization in the world, Nahdlatul Ulama, have called for a counterstrategy that would include offering “a compelling alternative vision of Islam, one that banishes the fanatical ideology of hatred to the darkness from which it emerged.”<sup>11</sup> Up until his death in December 2009, Wahid tirelessly advocated a partnership with the non-Muslim world in a massively resourced effort to uphold human dignity, freedom of conscience, religious freedom, and the benefits of modernity before the juggernaut of Islamist ideology swamped the Muslim world. It was a compelling summons, but one that has yet to be answered.

In May 2008, I had the opportunity to talk with President Wahid. When I asked him about the significance of the suppression of the Mu’tazilites in the ninth century, he was somewhat elusive and would not directly respond, which is not surprising considering the regard in which Mu’tazilism is publicly held. However, he found another way to answer which said a great deal. President Wahid told me the story of his going into a mosque in Fez, Morocco. There, under a glass case, he saw a copy of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. At the sight of it, he said, he burst into tears. Then he remarked: “If there had not been such a book, I would have been a fundamentalist.” I asked Wahid how it was that he knew Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics in the first place. He told me that he had first read it at his father’s boarding school in Indonesia. No doubt this was only one of a number of formative influences on Wahid, but an important— even decisive—one that could also be employed in this new “war of ideas” that is taking place within Islam.

There is, in fact, tremendous irony in this story when its lesson is applied to the U.S. response to radical Islamism, which can be encapsulated in the following vignette—a true story

related to me by the American participant. A U.S. interrogator at Guantanamo, who has extensive knowledge of Islamic history and the Arabic language, told me about discussing Aristotle with a fairly high-profile Arab detainee during a conversation about the importance of critical thinking and its role in the works of some Muslim theologians. The detainee was keenly interested in this, and said that he had heard mention of Aristotle during his schooling but that, in his country, students do not have access to the texts of Aristotle. He asked if the interrogator would please provide him with some of the works of Aristotle in Arabic. However, when the interrogator tried to get the detainee library to order these works, the librarians—who were more focused on the Qur'an and light reading such as nature books with lots of pictures—could not see the relevance of Aristotle or believe that a detainee would be interested in him. (This interrogator pointed out to me that “the detainee was far more intellectually engaged than the library staff—no one should make the mistake of thinking these detainees are just violent thugs.”) The library did not order any Aristotle, and yet another opportunity to address the problem at the level at which it exists was lost. **This is a perfect illustration of how to lose a war of ideas because you do not even know what it is about.**

## The Choice

In conversation with a student in Rome, Pope Benedict XVI made a statement that neatly summarizes the core of what is at stake for both Islam and the West. I will omit only one word from it, indicated by empty brackets. He said: “There are only two options. Either one recognizes the priority of reason, of creative Reason that is at the beginning of all things—the priority of reason is also the priority of freedom—or one holds the priority of the irrational, inasmuch as everything that functions on our earth and in our lives would be only accidental, marginal, an irrational result—reason would be a product of irrationality. One cannot ultimately ‘prove’ either project, but the great option of [ ] is the option for rationality and for the priority of reason. This seems to me to be an excellent option, which shows us that behind everything is a great Intelligence to which we can entrust our-selves.”<sup>12</sup>

Of course, the missing word in the bracket is Christianity. The question is whether the word Islam could be inserted in its stead and still have the statement read correctly. Does Sunni Islam still have the option open for the priority of reason? As we have seen, it most certainly attempted to exercise that option under the Mu'tazilites at a time generally acknowledged as being the apogee of Arab Islamic culture. One could have substituted the word Islam at that time, and the statement above would otherwise have stood unaltered as an expression of Mu'tazilite beliefs. We have also seen that there are Muslim thinkers today who are attempting something similar.

Of course, non-Muslims cannot make the choice for Muslims, but the advice of George Hourani comes close to what many Muslims, like Fazlur Rahman, have themselves said is needed: “If I had a choice of what intellectual path Muslims should follow—a choice which I do not have, looking at Islam from outside—I would start over again at the points where the early jurists and the Mu'tazilites left off, and work to develop a system of Islamic law which would openly make use of judgements of equity and public interest, and a system of ethical theology which would encourage judgements of right and wrong by the human mind, without having to

look to scripture at every step. The Mu'tazilites were correct in their doctrine that we can make objective value judgements, even if their particular theory of ethics had weaknesses, which would have to be revised by modern ethical philosophers and theologians. So I think this is the best way for Muslims to revive Islam, and I wish them success in a formidable task.”<sup>13</sup>

If Islam is to find its way out of its current dilemma with the choice Hourani recommends, it must somehow reconcile the unity of God (tawhid) with the unity of reason—reason in God, in His creation, and in man. If reason is absent from any one of the three, the relationship collapses into irrationality, and there would be no way to make “objective value judgements.” If God is without reason, then so will be His creation—for from where else could its rationality come? If creation is bereft of reason’s imprint, man’s reason would be impotent because it would have nothing it could correspond to and with which it could interact. It would not even have anything to reflect upon through which to become aware of itself. All would be will, but it would be blind will, and any faith based upon it would be blind faith. Making either reason or revelation autonomous leads to a distortion of what each is. Reason raises questions that it cannot answer, and revelation’s answers cannot be understood without reason. Divorcing reason from faith (the current crisis of the West) or faith from reason (the crisis of Islam) leads to catastrophe; they should be in partnership.<sup>14</sup>

As intimated above, what Thomas Aquinas did for Christianity, someone needs to do for Islam—if it can be done. This will depend on whether or not Ash’arite voluntarism and occasionalism are seen as integral to the Qur’an or as later accretions that can be disregarded. If for doctrinal or other reasons it cannot be done, if Sunni Islam continues to embrace the moral agnosticism of Ash’arism and the extreme fideism to which it leads, it will not be able to adapt itself to modernity, modern science, or democratic constitutional rule, and its future will be very bleak. The tempestuousness of our times, which many think augurs a resurgence of Islam, may in fact signal its further decline, which could be even more tempestuous. Dr. Muhammad al-Houni, a Libyan reformist living in Italy, comes to the following conclusion: “Arab societies have only one of two options: either to sever their ties with Western civilization and its cultural institutions and to continue to [do] themselves harm . . . or to irrevocably sever their ties with the religious legacy of the Middle Ages, in order for their philosophy to be a philosophy of life and freedom, and not one of death and hatred.”<sup>15</sup>

Or there is another way to put this choice with respect to a very different aspect of the Islamic legacy, expressed by Bassam Tibi: “If that Islamic medieval rationalism that recognized the universality of knowledge continues to be declared a heresy, and if authenticity is narrowed down to a polarization of the self and otherness, then Muslims of the twenty-first century will continue to be unsuccessful in embarking on modernity.”<sup>16</sup>

The problem is that their prospective failure, as tragic as it will be for them, may enfold us all. As was seen in the blood-soaked history of the twentieth century, the “priority of the irrational”—even if embraced only by the radical few—can inexorably lead to limitless violence, because the primacy of the will, whether in God or man, knows no bounds. The recovery of reason, grounded in Logos, is the only sentinel of sanity. This is imperative for the East as well as the West. “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18).

### Chapter 9: The Crisis

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2. Hoodbhoy, *Islam and Science*, 136.
3. Samir Khalil Samir, "Islamic Terrorism: A Result of What Is Being Taught at Madrassas," *Asia News*, March 8, 2007,
4. at <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?en&aart=4071>.
4. Rahman, *Islam*, 256.
5. Tony Corn, "World War IV as Fourth-Generation Warfare," *Policy Review*, January 2006, II.
6. Hoodbhoy, *Islam and Science*, 135.
7. Abdelwahab Meddeb, *The Malady of Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 104.
8. *Ibid.*, 105.
9. Thomas K. Grosse, "The War Within Islam," *U.S. News and World Report*, March 12, 2009.
10. Dhume, *My Friend the Fanatic*, 124.
11. Abdurrahman Wahid, "Right Islam vs. Wrong Islam," *Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2005, A16, at <http://www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=110007743>.
12. Sandro Magister, "Faith by Numbers: When Ratzinger Puts on Galileo's Robes," *Express Online*, January 9, 2009, at [www.chiesa.expressiononline.it](http://www.chiesa.expressiononline.it).
13. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*, 276.
14. I am indebted to Father James Schall for this formulation.
15. MEMRI, at <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=ia&ID=IA24005>.
16. Tibi, *Islam's Predicament with Modernity*, 262.

Reilly, Robert (2010-08-03). *The Closing of the Muslim Mind* (Kindle Locations 4093-4102). ISI Books. Kindle Edition.

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