



ISLAM AND THE WEST... WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

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One of the most serious challenges faced by the West at this time is Islam, both within and without. The West's secular pundits, who often forget that this is essentially a Christian invention and project (harking at least back to Saint Augustine, an African Berber-speaker of Punic), are only now starting to realise what the Church has known for nearly fifteen hundred years. The Church though, unlike many modern populists, always made a distinction between Islam and Muslims, who could and should be converted.

When it comes to Islam, many in our society are either naive or dishonest. So, for example, recently, while waiting for a train connection from Marseilles, I noticed the [memorial plaque](#) for the victims of the Islamic attacks outside the station – “to the victims of the terrorist attacks”, as if “terror” was the underlying ideology, not the instrument. Others speak of religiously motivated terror – although this activity seems largely limited to Islam in a structural sense.

In discussing this challenge, the first thing we need to know is that the modern secular definition of “religion” has many shortcomings. Secondly, we need to cast aside the silly notion that Jews, Christians and Muslims are somehow common spiritual descendants of Abraham, a modern ahistorical anachronism. We must not forget that Christianity is a Faith, and only in Christianity do we find theology *stricto sensu*: Theology as a prudent and rational exploration of the divine is a Christian peculiarity, and thus also a liberation from fanaticism. This is something different from gathering knowledge about one or more gods, their myths, cults and associated rites – theology is something different from having a profound knowledge of religious things.

“Islamic theology,” on the other hand, is an oxymoron, because Allah's relationship with his human believers is that of a master to his slaves, one of “obedience” or “submission” which is actually what “Islam” means, and is fundamentally different from Christianity. Thus, the fact that Islam is a biblically inspired monotheism should not be overstated, as this says nothing about its nature.

Another big difference that I will briefly touch upon is that education was always the core business of Christianity, both for laypersons and professionals. In the Islamic world, illiteracy is the norm; this is not a coincidence. A Muslim imam's qualifications are to merely know the first Surah plus one more, usually a “large” chunk of text, such as Surah 112, and to lead the ritual prayers. When we discuss the possibility of Islamic schooling in the West and the ensuing curriculum problems, we forget that traditional Islamic schooling, unlike in Christendom, was always only for boys, and consisted largely of learning to recite the Qur'an by heart. In the Middle East, until quite recently, bright Muslim children were sent to Christian

schools, for good reason.

Most readers probably are aware of the traditional account of the origins of Islam, the revelations to Muhammad in Mecca, his later flight to Medina, the invasion of Syro-Palestine. Modern historical-critical research, such as that carried out by Inârah, shows that this is largely later mythological fiction. Islamic tradition only starts about a century and a half after Muhammad was supposed to have died. At best, Islamic tradition can only tell us what Muslims of the eighth and ninth centuries thought happened in the seventh century.

Where then lies the problem with Islam? Islam on the one hand is based on a heterodox variant of Christianity, teaching Psilanthropism (Christ was a mere human) and Adoptionism (Christ did not die on the Cross, but was replaced). On the other, it continues ancient Near Eastern Imperial religious traditions – such as, the Egyptian sun cult of Aton under Amenophis IV, later Akhenaten, in the 14th century BC, or the cult of Aššur in the Assyrian Empire. Some have also called these traditions “monotheisms;” but one might better view them as atheism, since Akhenaten, who saw himself as Aton's son, was Aton's sole mediator – the notion of deity is here a totalitarian abstraction. According to this ancient Egyptian “theology” of the state, the king conquered the world for the god, and the help of the god was requested to increase the conquered world, and thus the reign of the god. Since the king is god, the divine and human spheres merge into one another.

We see something similar in the religion of the Assyrian empire, where the “king” was the vicar of the true king, the divine abstraction of Assyrian might, the king-god Aššur. The same is true in Islam, where the Caliph, an Aramaic loan-word meaning vicar, i.e. “*Khalīfat Allāh*,” is the vicar of God, in the Egyptian and Assyrian sense.

Since there is no mediation in the Trinity in Islam, Allah, like Aššur and Aton, is all powerful. Allah, although etymologically related to Hebrew *ʾēlohīm* and Syriac *alāhā* (possibly even a borrowing of the latter form), has much more in common with Aššur, in terms of content: a common etymology does not equate to functional equality. Historically, the caliphs, like the Assyrian kings, were totalitarian rulers who exercised an office in the name of their God. Thus, to the caliph alone does God speak; he alone knows his will, and he alone is entitled to interpret God's word and volition – the earthly ruler becomes God's sole mediator; to him alone does God reveal himself; he alone mediates God's will to the people. Hence, it is not surprising that even moderate Muslims wish for a return of a caliph.

Here we must be clear – the accounts of Islam's origins which we often hear about, Muhammad in Mecca and Medina, to whom the Qur'an was revealed by the intermediary of the Angel Gabriel, is largely a later fiction, as I have noted. What we have with the Umayyads in the seventh century is an Arabic eschatological movement with Judaeo-Christian roots centred in Jerusalem – Safa, Marwa, Bakka, Arafat, etc. are all found here (only later were these relocated to Mecca), And Muhammad is a borrowed Hebrew Messianic epithet – in Christianity, it is for Christ of the Second Coming (in Judaism for the First Coming). When the eschatological expectation did not transpire as expected, the Umayyads lost credibility. They were overthrown by the Abbasids in the eighth century, the real founders of what we call Islam.

The Abbasids, on the basis of this heterodox Judaic Christianity, created an imperial religion to unite their subjects. As with Assyria, the world was divided into believers (those who submit) and the unbelievers (those who are yet to be conquered). In Islam, even today, we see that the world is divided into *Dar al-Islam*, the Islamic World and *Dar al-Harb*, the "House of War" – the area which still must be conquered. Later (fifteenth century) a "third domain" (category) appeared in the Ottoman Empire, intermediate between the first two, the *Dar al-'Ahd* or *Dar al-Suhl* (that is "domain of the pact" or "of the alliance") to describe the relationship of the Ottoman caliphate and sultanate with its Christian vassals, such as the Georgian kingdoms of the Caucasus or the Romanian principalities, which paid tribute, provided troops and protected Muslims in exchange for peace.

For most of the Sunni world, the West falls into this category for two reasons – first, we are useful idiots, i.e., we sell them weapons (to be used to fight the Shiites), and because Islam is patient – we take in Muslim refugees who have a higher fertility rate. Arab newspapers note openly that Jihad can take different forms – the womb can also be a weapon. Since Ayatollah Khomeini, the Shiites have invented a theocracy with global ambitions, but that is another topic.

Here we see that Islam is entirely incompatible with western values and notions of equality. In Christianity, we are saved through Christ and have been set free. In Islam, subjection to a totalitarian abstract notion of the divine is the norm. Prayer is not "free speech" before and with God, but ritualised recitation. The Qur'an is a quite different book than the Bible – a hodgepodge of disparate texts that show a different relationship with the divine than do the Old and New Testaments. But then, again, we must note that the Qur'an actually plays no role in Islam, where doctrine is derived from later tradition, the Sunna. Where Christians follow the example of Christ, Muslims follow that of Muhammad – the results are quite different, as is obvious.

One of the things that continues to surprise us is that after every terrorist attack perpetrated by Muslims on behalf of Islam, or with regard to the Islamic state, western apologists note that these are radicals who misunderstood the teachings of Muhammad. This claim is blatantly untrue as any superficial reading of Muhammad's hagiography (the *Sīra*) shows. One is reminded of Communist sympathisers during the Cold War – Communism is the best system, but the Soviets got it wrong. Funnily enough, all communist states were, like Islamic ones, similarly unenlightened – here though, we should note that while Communism and Islam are antithetical to what the West stands for, we are discussing ideas and not judging people or their sincere beliefs. In this light, Islam should be viewed as a late offshoot of ancient oriental imperial religions (lacking theologies in the Christian, Western sense), as the many disputes about the place of Islam in Western societies alluded to at the outset, make clear.

To illustrate this point, we quote here paragraph 24 of the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam: "All rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration are subject to Islamic Sharia law." So, which "rights" then actually remain? And there are many "experts" ready to clarify what the "Sharia" (a broad term) has to say about any life situation. The relationship of the fundamental rights entrenched in liberal-democracies with Islam is very problematic. Muslims understand this problem very well, as do the refugee offices of Western countries, where critical voices from the *Dār al-Islām* seek their salvation – that some leftists, who themselves implicitly or explicitly reject the universality of such fundamental rights because allegedly "Western" or "imperialist," is not surprising. Here, we should briefly note that the mission to Muslims, especially during the "Golden Age of the Islamic Problem," beginning around 650 and coming to an end around 1570, was always interconnected with the scientific study of Islam.

Indeed, we can trace the rise of what became Islam largely through Christian churchmen of Late Antiquity. They noted clearly and correctly that this was a "heresy", i.e., a heterodox form of Christianity rather than a separate religion. While the Middle Eastern clerics were primarily concerned with survival – in Europe, for medieval people, this problem affected all levels of life. Theologically, it was necessary to confront this problem by shedding light on the ignorance about the nature of Islam. But this could only be done by becoming aware of the facts; these in turn required linguistic and literary knowledge. [Petrus Venerabilis](#) (Peter the Venerable) was one of the most important people of this time who helped to disentangle the image of Islam. Peter had the Koran translated and then wrote an account of Islamic doctrine himself, the *Summa totius haeresis saracenorum*, as well as a refutation in the *Liber contra sectam sive haeresim saracenorum*.

Together with the translations of the Qur'an, these were the first scholarly works on Islam. The *Summa*

in particular was free of the gross errors that had manifested themselves in the centuries before. This new approach contributed much to the emergence of a new image of Islam. The *Summa* objectified the debate and adopted a more scientific attitude towards Islam. Peter was the first to lay the foundations for a confrontation with Islam. Peter did not want to confront Islam with violence, but with the power of the Word of God.

In this context, his translation of the Qu'ran can be seen as a fundamental work for refuting Islam. The translation thus joins the series of writings that Peter called *christianum armarium*. By this Peter understood a Christian library to serve as a weapon against these enemies; but certainly not only as a weapon in the offensive sense, but also as a kind of shield which was to protect Christendom. Peter's main intention with the translation and the *Collectio Toletana* was to provide European Christians with accurate information about Islam. For Peter, however, the Muslims were enemies only insofar as they rejected Christian salvation. Should the Muslims, however, recognise this, Peter's enmity would also be settled.

At his weekly general audience in Saint Peter's Square, on 14 October 2009, Pope Benedict XVI used Peter the Venerable as an example of compassion and understanding, citing Peter's governance of Cluny, diplomacy, and study of Islam. If the West is to have any future, we need to address Islam as set forth by Benedict, following Peter's study, prayer and mission.

But then again, unless we in the West return to our Christian roots and reconcile ourselves with Christ – well then Islam will steamroll us. Secular values are but fleeting vanity.

A version of this was delivered as a lecture at the French Riviera Institute, October 15 2021. Translated from the French.

The [*featured image*](#) shows, "The Annunciation," from the *Chronology of Ancient Nations* by Al-Biruni, 1307.

