

Guest Editorial

Special Issue: Islam, Culture, and the Charlie Hebdo Affair

In the Aftermath of the Terror Attacks in France

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As a moderate Muslim, who works to unite moderate, traditional, conventional, spiritual, and even conservative (but *not* radical) Muslims, I must begin any commentary on the French atrocities by rejecting the claim that extremism and terror are not aspects of Islamic history. To declare, as even French president François Hollande did, “these terrorists and fanatics... have nothing to do with the Muslim religion” is inaccurate.

Islam, like other faiths, has been divided between extremists and moderate believers since its beginning. Prophet Muhammad himself was challenged by a radical trend, the *Khawarij* or “rebels,” also known as Kharijites, who declared that anybody who did not conform to the degree of piety they demanded was an apostate and should be killed.

The *Khawarij* challenged the honesty of Muhammad, and assassinated the third caliph who followed Muhammad, Uthman Ibn Affan. They supported Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad who succeeded Uthman as fourth caliph, but then killed Ali as well. The degree of contention within the House of Islam then is illustrated by the example of Aisha, the widow of Muhammad, who incited Muslims against Ali, her relative by marriage.

Although remnants of their tradition survive today in Oman and Sub-Saharan Africa, the *Khawarij* were defeated. Over the centuries, they abandoned their radicalism. As will be seen, this habit of accommodation to reality is a consistent motif in Islam.

Thus, in the 11th century C.E. a faction of the Ismaili Shia Muslims, led by a preacher, Hasan-i Sabbah, attempted to spread Ismailism by a strategy of assassi-

nation. His sect became known in the West as “the Assassins” and was the source of numerous legends involving alleged drugging of the killers using hashish. But the Ismailis, who today are a powerful element of Islam in India and the West, also left their past fanaticism behind and are now among the most modernized Muslims in the world.

A century after the Assassins, the Sunni Almohads or *Al-Murwahiddun* (self-designated “monotheists”) took over Morocco and erupted into Islamic Spain. Led by a Berber, Ibn Tumart, they represent one of several movements in Islam supporting a self-proclaimed “*mahdi*” or Islamic messiah – not identical in Islam to Jesus as a messiah to return in the Last Days. Their effect on Spanish Islam was calamitous: the chaos the Almohads wrought undermined the Spanish Muslim polities and facilitated Christian victories over the Muslims. In this regard, the impact of the Almohads in weakening Islam may prove comparable to that of radicals today.

During the 18th century C.E., Islam saw the emergence of Wahhabism, the doctrine of which Al-Qaida and the so-called “Islamic State” or “*Daesh*” (to use the Arabic acronym for the “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/the Levant”) are the most notorious recent adherents. Wahhabis are often called “*Khawarij*” by moderate Muslims because of their intolerance, violence, and habit of declaring traditional Muslims apostates.

Wahhabism became the doctrinal foundation of the Saudi kingdom, which is not a theocracy – it is ruled by the royal family, rather than by clerics. At the end of the 1920s, Ibn Sa’ud, founder of the contemporary Saudi state, was compelled to restrain the Wahhabis

who had helped him gain power. More recently, Saudi Wahhabism has demonstrated again that its extremism is lessening, especially in the face of the crimes perpetrated by the “Islamic State.” Small but real reforms under King Abdullah Ibn Abd Al-Aziz, who took power in 2005, have elicited condemnation from the followers of Al-Qaida and the “*Daesh*.”

Another example of radical Islam illustrates that fundamentalist sects may become more, rather than less volatile. The Deobandi school in India and Pakistan began in the mid-19th century C.E. after the defeat of the Indian rebellion against Britain. The Deobandi clerics argued that they could not overcome the British by force of arms, and must therefore purify their faith. The Deobandis were seen as non-violent, but with the passage of time they became the inspirers of the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan – protectors and allies of Al-Qaida and the “*Daesh*.”

The fate of Deobandism has yet to be determined. The same may be said of other radicals: the Muslim Brotherhood, the powerful South Asian jihadist Jamaat-e Islami, and the Iranian clerical state.

The Wahhabis and Deobandis, who delight in declaring their opponents to be apostates, have themselves been accused of apostasy by Muslim authorities. But even that fact does not exclude them from consideration as a part of Islam. Islam is not homogeneous. Radicals, including terrorists, are not intrinsic to Islam, do not define or represent Islam as a whole, and may be considered ideological more than theological. In this respect, to respond to the depredations of radical Muslims by questioning whether Islam is a “religion of peace” is problematic. Islam will be a religion of peace if Muslims are permitted to make it so – but in the meantime, does the world want moderate Muslims to be peaceful in dealing with the radicals? Should we tell the Muslims fighting against Al-Qaida and the so-called “Islamic State” that they must be peaceful for the sake of their religion? That would mean surrendering to the radicals.

What, however, were the origins of the abominable Paris events?

French Muslims and their offspring are caught in a system that encouraged their immigration after the French withdrawal from their colonial possessions in North Africa, but failed to integrate them. Unlike

other Muslims in Western Europe, the great waves of immigration to France and Britain comprised many former soldiers in the French and British armies. Having risked their lives in opposition to the Algerian Revolution, and then fleeing to France, how can the Arab veterans of French military service not have felt, in some sense, resentment at the poor rewards they received? The same may be argued about Indian and Pakistani Muslims in Britain. For this reason it is probably unsurprising that France and Britain are centers of radical Islam in Western Europe, far exceeding any other countries.

It has been pointed out that French education is oriented toward the training of an elite, and that employment may often be discriminatory against those with Arab names or addresses in neighborhoods where immigrants congregate. By contrast, Germany, which has a much less significant problem of radical Islam, maintains both university-track and apprenticeship options that encourage young people of all ethnicities to find a place in society.

Nevertheless, the crisis of Islam and the West began with the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979, not with immigrant issues. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini gave a new impetus to Islamic radicalism, inspired partly by links to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Pakistani Jamaati movement. The Brotherhood was a revolutionary conspiracy, and the Jamaat proclaimed a global revolutionary goal. The Iranian Islamic revolution produced resentment on the part of the Saudi Wahhabi establishment since Iran, with its Persian heritage and Shia Islam – contrasting with claims for Arab leadership of the world’s Sunnis by the Saudis – had exceeded the Wahhabis in zeal. The Wahhabis had always condemned Shias as apostates. The Wahhabis, nevertheless, preached against the West, but the Saudi royal family benefited from an economic partnership with Western energy interests. The Iranian Khomeinists acted against the West, breaking relations fully and defiantly.

The Saudi Wahhabis were humiliated, and elements among them responded by creating the predecessors of Al-Qaida. They were joined by Egyptian radicals drawn from the milieu of the Muslim Brotherhood, who claimed in the Wahhabi manner that Arab secular, nationalist, and leftist regimes were headed by apostates. The Russian invasion of Afghanistan and its disastrous outcome further invigorated radicals

in belief in their own power. They attempted – and Al-Qaida and the “*Daesh*” are still attempting – to control all the Sunnis in the world and to wipe out all Muslims and non-Muslims who differ with them. But September 11 was as much a shock to the Saudis as to the West, which contributed to the authority of Saudi King Abdullah in initiating a limited course of reforms.

With the failure of the “Arab Spring” in most of the countries where it took place – Tunisia and Morocco being notable exceptions – a fresh incentive for radical agitation appeared. The civic protest movement in Syria has been repressed brutally by the regime of Bashar Al-Assad, with the assistance of Iran and Hezbollah. Sunni moderates in Syria begged for international action to curb Al-Assad, but were ignored. The enthusiasts of the “Islamic State” emerged to prove that some would aid the Syrian Sunnis, and that their actions could not be dismissed as irrelevant. Faced with the agony of Syria, Sunni Muslims in Western countries as well as in Muslim-majority lands proved exceptionally vulnerable to terrorist recruitment.

If it is, as I argued at the beginning of this essay, a mistake to exclude radicalism from Islamic history, it is an equal or worse mistake, as I have indicated, to identify all of Islam with outbursts of radicalism. A similar error consists in proposing a “reformation” of Islam as a solution to radical aggression, as if all of Islam were at issue. Islam has always been a spectrum, with fundamentalists at one end, benign dissidents (including metaphysical Sufis) at the other, and a great majority of moderate believers between them, over which both the fundamentalists and the benevolent non-conformists compete. The 8th-9th century C.E. Muslim scholar Al-Jahiz commented, “every Muslim thinks he is a theologian and that no one else is more adept at arguing.” This situation continues today, perhaps somewhat aggravated.

But religious “reformation” is a contradictory phenomenon. Reformers of religion may represent modernization, or they may embody “purification.” Saudi Wahhabis, Deobandis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and their peers have all claimed the mantle of “Islamic reform,” in that they oppose the spiritual practices of the Sufis, such as celebration of Muhammad’s birthday. But like Martin Luther, they are purificationists. Calls for an Islamic Luther ignore the mistake of attempting to transfer the patterns of Christian histo-

ry to the Islamic world. Do we want the decades of bloodshed that made up the Christian Reformation to be imposed on Muslims? Would such a development not merely increase Muslim radicalism? Finally, Luther’s greatest achievement was to promote the reading of a vernacular Bible. But Qur’an, the sacred text of Islam, began to be translated into Persian during the life of Muhammad, and versions in other local languages followed.

Additionally, Luther advocated murder of Jews and destruction of synagogues. Yet one of the brightest chapters of Islamic history is found in the rescue of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews from the Inquisition, at the end of the 15th century, by the sultans of Morocco and Turkey. Given the need for authentic peacemaking between Jews and Muslims today, is it not dangerous to promote the legacy of Luther to Muslims?

To emphasize, it is little understood by non-Muslims that because the Wahhabis, Deobandis, Muslim Brotherhood and other radicals project themselves as “reformers,” a posture in favor of “reformed Islam” is viewed with suspicion by the moderate majority. That majority must be mobilized to defeat the radicals; but I do not believe it can be done on the basis of “reformation.” Islam, I believe, needs a Renaissance, not a Reformation.

Regarding calls for reforming Islamic belief in a “modernizing” direction, few Westerners seem aware, for example, that Qur’an does not call for any punishment for apostasy from Islam in this world. The text specifies that those who stray will be denied the benefits of paradise, though some may be pardoned. The juristic approval of a death penalty for apostasy – as opposed to the chaotic brutality of the *Khawarij* – emerged as a political weapon employed beginning in the eighth century C.E. by the Abbasid caliphate that seized power in Baghdad from the Umayyad dynasty. The Umayyads were hounded and murdered as alleged apostates. Qur’an calls on Muslims to “turn away” from those who reject them, and to be “patient” when insulted.

What, then, is the solution to the problems posed by the *Charlie Hebdo* killings? Islamic tradition from the time of Muhammad, when Muslims oppressed in Mecca fled temporarily to the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, calls on them to obey the laws of

countries to which they emigrate. Since then, Muslim emigrants were counseled – at least until 1979 – that if they could not obey the laws of a non-Muslim land, they should return to Muslim territory. As Ahmed Aboutaleb, the Moroccan-born mayor of Rotterdam, put it in remarks widely-quoted following the horrors in Paris, “It is incomprehensible that you can turn against freedom... But if you don’t like freedom, for heaven’s sake pack your bags and leave.” Muslims in Western Europe must be fully educat-

ed on their duties to their religion and to the nation where they have taken up residence. In addition, several Muslim countries, including Kosovo, Albania, Malaysia, and even Saudi Arabia, have adopted harsh judicial penalties for individuals who incite or recruit for terrorism in Syria. It seems, then, that recourse to Islamic and Western doctrines and laws, if applied intelligently, will provide a solution.

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