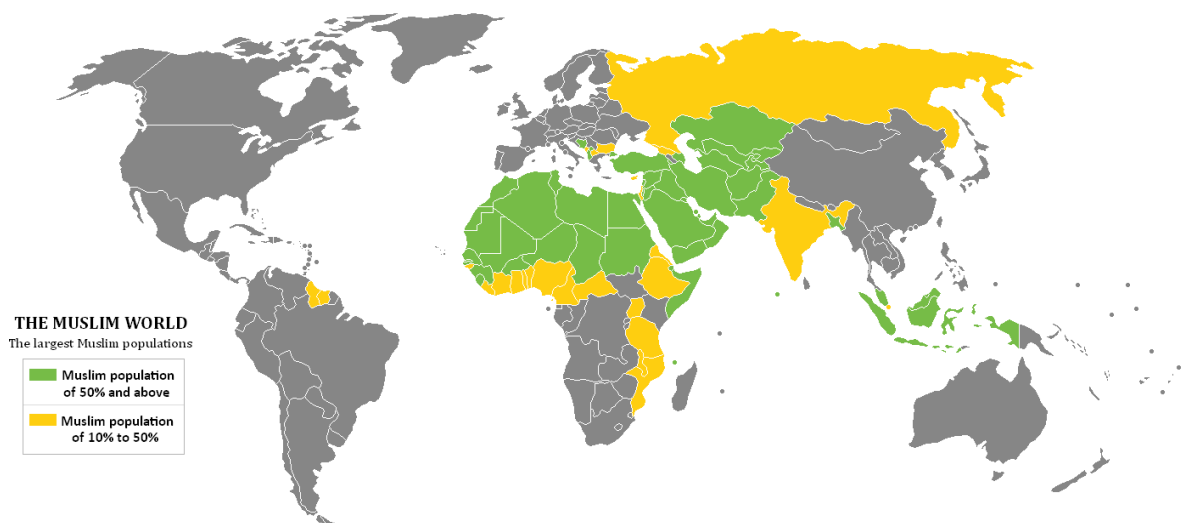


The Case for Islamic Reform



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Dear Reader

Much of what you will read in these pages may run counter to what you have been taught about Islam, its history and tenets; but it is based on millions of words of research by hundreds of the world's leading Islamic scholars, spanning more than a hundred years, carried out independently of financial support and constraint from the great centres of Islamic power.

This work is factual.

The editors

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The Case for Islamic Reform

Part 1: Why Islamic Reform ?

With an estimated 1.5 billion followers, Islam has been described as the world's fastest growing religion.

But differences over interpretation of the scriptures have existed since the earliest days of Islam. Some have been based on a highly selective interpretation of the scriptures with demands that Muslims adopt the most conservative rules of conduct while others have been more liberal.

But since the middle of the 20th century it is a conservative Salafi/Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, a political ideology known as political Islam or **Islamism**, that has gained the ascendancy world-wide.

Conflating religious belief and political control, Islamism is nothing new, first appearing in the eighth century in support of the Arab conquests of North Africa and the Middle East, and reappearing from time to time ever since throughout the history of Islam.

Islamism goes far beyond Allah's revelation in the Qur'an, and is based on a highly selective reading of the scriptures, having little or no historical or theological validity. It is out of step with internationally accepted standards of human rights, freedom, equality, and democracy, and with what science has taught us since the seventh century about the world and ourselves: all overwhelming evidence of the need for reform.

Our case is against Islamism, not Islam.

We support the right of every individual: believers and non-believers alike, to exercise their faith in peace, and to the right to freedom expression that falls short of incitement to hatred and violence.

But over the past decades we have gradually been losing those rights as the Islamists have succeeded in imposing their totalitarian ideology on nations around the world. Funded by more than 100 billion dollars by Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich states, it is now estimated that some 90% of the world's mosques, madrassas and Islamic centres are under the control of Islamism.

In this series of essays, we summarise the work of Islamic scholars: theologians, historians, philosophers and political scientists, spanning more than 100 years, to present the case for reform, with evidence that completely undermines Islamist ideology.

We call upon the world to reject Islamism and to return to the benign, liberal Islam of our ancestors as revealed by Allah: to guidance not compulsion, and to peace not violence.

Who are we?

The international Organisation for Islamic Reform is an informal network of liberal Muslims concerned by the growth of Islamism: an intolerant, aggressive interpretation of our faith that has come to dominate the Islamic world.

The Case for Islamic Reform has been compiled by some of the world's leading Islamic scholars: historians, scientists, theologians, philosophers and political scientists, united in their understanding that change is needed and dedicated to the struggle for reform and the defeat of Islamism.

Based upon the work of Islamic Scholars from the 19th century to the present, today's reform movement represents the ideals and aspirations of millions of peace-loving, tolerant and faithful Muslims around the world.

The Case for Islamic Reform

Part 2: A short history of Islam

Muslims believe that Mohammed was the final Prophet (PBUH), that his message is the final word of Allah to his people, and that Islam is therefore the final, immutable word of God: the one true faith.

Yet huge differences exist between interpretations of the scriptures. With no single leadership in the Islamic world, multiple interpretations of the faith have been able to flourish for centuries: from the most conservative to the most liberal.

The schism between Sunni and Shia began with the debate over the succession to the Prophet, and has continued unabated for more than 1,200 years^{1,2}.

We know that the text of the Qur'an, more or less in its present form, was brought together in about 650 CE under the third Caliph, Uthman ibn Affen. By that time there were a large number of differing versions of the Qur'an in circulation, some written but most carried by oral transmission from the time of the Prophet.

Uthman brought together all the known Qur'anic manuscripts, fragments and stories believed to have originated with the Prophet. These were selected and summarised into the final canonical version of the Quran that has come down to us.³ He ordered all of the original sources to be destroyed.

But in 1972 tens of thousands of manuscripts that had been missed by Uthman and dating from the earliest period of Islam were discovered in the Grand Mosque in Sanaa, including an early version of the Quranic text that differs substantially from the canonical text. The theological implications of this discovery have yet to be fully assessed.⁴

The Qur'an and Hadith

The Qur'an, revealed to the Prophet between 610 and 632 CE, provides Allah's guidance to his people: guidance on how we should live, but does not define a system of law.⁵

The Sunna, the traditions and practices of the Prophet developed over a longer period following the death of the prophet, with up to 200,000 examples (Hadith)

¹ The Sunni/Shia divide: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shia_Islam

² <https://www.cfr.org/article/sunni-shia-divide>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canonization_of_Islamic_scripture

⁴ Professor Gerd Puin who had been charged with cataloguing and interpreting these texts was dismissed by the Yemeni authorities following that discovery.

⁵ The Sharia is mentioned only three times in the Qur'an.

being known by the end of the 8th century CE, the vast majority of which lacked any validity. Disagreement concerning the validity of the Hadith continue to this day although modern scholarship has finally begun to bring clarity to this issue.⁶

It was during the 9th and 10th centuries that the five main schools of Sharia were developed as systems of law based upon different collections of the hadith (reports on the life and sayings of the Prophet), each now carrying the name of its founding Islamic scholar, and with each claiming divine sanction. But there is clearly no theological justification for any of these man-made schools of jurisprudence to claim divine origin for itself.⁷

There is no “Holy” Sharia.

By the end of the 10th century, contact with other cultures and exposure to the knowledge of other civilisations: Greek, Roman and Persian, had led to new ideas based on both revelation and reason: the beginning of the Islamic Golden Age.

One of the first groups to adopt such ideas in the 9th century was the Mutazilites⁸ who saw God’s gift of free will as justification for their review of the scriptures in the light of reason: the first crack in the facade of Islamism as an absolutist creed.

The Golden Age of Islam.

By the end of the 10th century, Islam entered what has come to be known as the Islamic “Golden Age”, a cultural flourishing, beginning with the Persian Samanid caliphate (819 – 999 CE) ⁹. Open to the learning of the ancients, with translations of classical Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Persian and Indian manuscripts into Arabic and Syriac, the Samanid capital, Bukhara became a centre of learning to rival Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid caliphate.¹⁰ Prominent among the savants of the age was Ibn Sina (980 – 1038 CE) (Avicenna), a prolific polymath, he wrote more than 400 books on medicine, astronomy, philosophy and theology. His medical encyclopaedia translated into Latin was in use in European universities for more than 500 years. Creativity in the arts, medicine, astronomy and mathematics continued to flourish in the Islamic world well into the 15th century.¹¹

⁶ <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Rethinking-Tradition-Islamic-Thought-Cambridge-ebook/dp/B0029ZA2ZW>

⁷ See Part 4 of this series: “The Theological Case for Islamic Reform” for doubts regarding the vast majority of the Hadith.

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mu%27tazilism>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samanid_Empire

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abbasid_Caliphate

¹¹ <https://iIoir.org/mnroy> “M.N.Roy on the Golden Age of Islam” for an excellent summary of how the Arabs saved and preserved the knowledge of the ancients.

Reaction and Revival

As Islam spread geographically the rigid absolutism of the conquerors was gradually diluted by contact with other faiths and cultures. There was a return to an understanding that faith is a personal matter for the individual.¹² It was probably inevitable that there would be a conservative reaction to this liberal evolution of the faith, with pressure for a revival of the hard-line ‘purity’ of the Islam of conquest.

The main proponent of that revival was Al-Ghazali (1038 - 1111CE), a Persian polymath and jurist, two of whose works: “The Revival of the Religious Sciences” and “The Incoherence of the Philosophers”¹³ became hugely influential and led to a gradual, centuries-long decline in philosophy and inquiry throughout the Islamic world, effectively closing the door on the belief that one’s faith could be a matter of personal choice. Nine hundred years later, his arguments still resonate, including the idea that everything that happens on earth is a direct result of the will of Allah.¹⁴

Al-Ghazali also promoted the purity of Islam as exemplified by Sufism, a mystical version of islam based asceticism and the search for spiritual purity.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Al-Ghazali didn’t have it entirely his own way. Another movement for the liberalisation of Islam began as early as the 12th century with Ibn Rushd (1126-1198 CE)¹⁶, an Andalusian polymath known in Europe as Averroes. He argued that philosophy should have a central role in the interpretation of religion, rather than being seen as an alternative. Averroes wrote a stinging rebuttal of Al-Ghazali’s work called “The Incoherence of Incoherence” but failed to have any real impact on mainstream Islam because by that time Al-Ghazali’s thinking had come to dominate the Islamic world. In Europe, however, Averroes was lauded as “the father of rationalism” and his ideas can be seen to have led eventually to the Enlightenment.

Ibn Taymiyyah and Salafism

Another historically influential proponent of Islamist revival was Ibn Taymiyyah¹⁷ (1263-1328 CE), known as “Sheikh al-Islam”, who urged a return to the purity of the first three generations of followers of the Prophet, and a conservative interpretation of the scriptures now known as Salafism. Under the

¹² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mu%27tazilism>

¹³ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/al-ghazali/>

¹⁴ Even in classrooms where children still chant “2 times 2 is 4 by the grace of Allah”.

¹⁵ Sufism, however, also promotes the near-divinity of Muhammad as the ideal role-model for humanity: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sufism>

¹⁶ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-rushd/>

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Taymiyyah

influence of Ibn Taymiyyah and other revivalists, Islamic absolutism became entrenched as both a guide for personal and family behaviour, and in the Sharia, the five main schools of which have come to define an entire way of life for most Muslims ever since.

But such literalist and intolerant versions of Islam have never had it all their own way. Throughout the East, from India to Indonesia, Islam continued to be influenced and tempered by other faiths and cultures, leading to a more benign version of the Sharia. By late 18th century, as the British took control of India, the governor of Bengal, Warren Hastings complained of the laxity of Sharia law, “reluctant to shed blood”, and he oversaw its replacement throughout India by the far more brutal British colonial law.¹⁸

By the late 19th century and partly as a reaction to western imperialism, Islamist reformers urged a return to Salafism and to the teaching of Ibn Taymiyyah: to a literal interpretation of the scriptures, and for full adoption of the Sharia. This movement began the modern blurring of the distinction between Islam and Islamism: the political ideology that is still with us.

Over recent decades, it is Islamism¹⁹ that, following billions of dollars of investment by Saudi Arabia and others, has gained effective control of the Islamic world.²⁰ The Iranian revolution in 1979 came as a wake-up call to the Saudis, whose control of the Arabian Peninsula was dependent of the support of the Wahhabi clergy. They set themselves the task of taking back control of the Islamic world by the imposition of the Wahhabi/Salafist interpretation of Islam world-wide.

Evidence of the extent to which they have succeeded can be seen all around us: the beards, burkas and hijabs now seen in virtually every city of the Islamic world, and throughout the West.

The New Game Plan

Funded by Saudi billions, Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood sprang up around the world, challenging both western influence in the postcolonial era and the corrupt, secular regimes such as Nasser’s Egypt that had replaced them.

One of the leading thinkers of the Islamist revival was Abul Ala Maududi (1903-1979), founder of the Jamat-i-Islami²¹ who, motivated by the decline in Islam

¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warren_Hastings

¹⁹ Introduction to “Islamism – A New Totalitarianism”:

<https://www.rienner.com/uploads/58cab21ebe24c.pdf>

²⁰ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/24/farah-pandith-saudi-how-we-win-book/>

²¹ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1154419/abul-ala-maududi-an-existentialist-history>

under colonial and secular rule, was inspired to work for an Islamic revival. By a selective reading of the scriptures, he was able to persuade a generation of Muslims to return to his vision of the original purity of the faith: in effect, a rejection of any tolerant passages in the Qur'an and Hadith in favour of an absolutist and deeply intolerant Islamism. Widely seen as the leading theoretician, indeed the architect, of modern Islamism, Maududi's works have since become widely used as textbooks for the imposition of Islamist ideology.²² In Pakistan, for example, they provided the blueprint for the 1977 Islamist revolution under General Zia ul-Haq and the strict imposition of the Sharia including the death penalty for blasphemy and apostasy.

Another highly influential leader in the rebirth of Islamism was Sayyid Qutb (1908-1969 CE) who in his 1966 book "Milestones" set out a step-by-step strategy for the Islamist conquest of the world; a plan that has been followed assiduously by the Islamists ever since.²³ If Maududi can be called the leading theoretician of Islamism, Qutb can be seen as its leading strategist.

That strategy depends first on acceptance within the Islamic world (the Dar al-Islam) of the Islamist version of Islam as the one true faith, based upon a selective interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith, total acceptance of Islamic law, and conformity to Islamist teaching in matters of personal conduct. Every Muslim is required to conform, with severe punishment for anyone who questions, or worse, who rejects, any aspect of Islamist teaching.

In the rest of the world, known as the Dar al-Harb (the House of War) progress will be made through stealth, with gradual acceptance of Islamist norms by the Muslim population while sensitising non-Muslims to co-existence with their Muslims neighbours. From there, finally, we will arrive at the imposition of Islamist norms on the whole of society.

Insistence that Islamism is the one true faith enables the Islamists to claim that they alone are the true representatives of Islam and that they speak for the entire Muslim community; a claim totally rejected by liberal Muslims, but which nevertheless seems to have gained wide acceptance among Western politicians, academics and commentators, hesitant to attack an ideology that claims religious justification.

As a result, the distinction between Islam the faith, and Islamism the political ideology, has been blurred in the minds of public and politicians alike. Any criticism of Islamism is now treated as an insult to Islam and greeted by cries of

²² Ibid

²³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milestones_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milestones_(book))

“Islamophobia”, falsely equating any criticism of Islamist values or practices with hatred of Muslims²⁴.

That failure has been exacerbated by the western obsession with combating terrorism as though terrorism was an isolated phenomenon, not merely the tip of the hard-line Islamist iceberg of intimidation and indoctrination of the world’s Muslim youth.

How Islamism conquered the world.

Sixty years after the publication of Milestones, the success of the Islamist strategy can be clearly seen with the disappearance of almost every secular regime in the Islamic world, from Egypt to Pakistan, and the prevalence of Islamic dress on the streets of every city. More and more Muslims are feeling the pressure to conform.²⁵

Among the greatest strengths of Islamism is its absolutism, offering Muslims certainty in an unfair and uncertain world: false hope and simple solutions to the complex issues of modern life. But accepting Islamism is a one-way street, with threats and draconian punishment for anyone who dares to disagree or wants to leave. Once in, there is no way out. The greatest weapon in the armoury of Islamism has been the threat of violence. The Danish journalist Flemming Rose has expressed regret that western politicians, academics and commentators have lacked honesty in their response to threats, leaning on “sensitivity” and “timing” for example as reasons for their unwillingness to confront the issue. “It would clarify what is going on in the public mind if more of us were to say: ‘we chose not to publish because we were afraid of reprisals’”.

In 1969 the Islamic states created the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation²⁶ (the OIC) which now boasts 57 member states of which 47 are Muslim majority countries. The OIC defines its mission as defending Islamic values while promoting peace, harmony and education. In reality, and despite its stated mission, the OIC has invariably adopted a strongly Islamist line within the United Nations and other international bodies. In 1990 it rejected the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in favour of the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam (CDHRI) in which all rights “are subject to the Islamic Sharia”.²⁷

The CDHRI was condemned within the UN Human Rights Council as an attempt to shield the Islamic States from criticism of their human rights abuses: “Mr. President, this Council is not about promoting or defending religion, but about

²⁴ <https://humanists.uk/2019/01/28/humanists-uk-and-faith-to-faithless-express-concern-about-proposed-definition-of-islamophobia/>

²⁵ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/24/farah-pandith-saudi-how-we-win-book/>

²⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organisation_of_Islamic_Cooperation

²⁷ <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instreet/cairodeclaration.html>

human rights”.²⁸ The OIC has actually succeeded in bringing together sworn enemies such as Iran and Saudi Arabia²⁹, under the common banner of Islamism. For the past 20 years effective control of the UN Human Rights Council has enabled the OIC and its allies to silence any criticism of their human rights abuses; and any reference to the Sharia is now forbidden in Council debates.³⁰

It was however the Salman Rushdie affair³¹ of 1989 that brought into clear focus the gulf that now exists between western values such as of freedom of expression and the extent to which Islamist ideology now controls public opinion in the Islamic world. Clearly insulting to Islam, the book *Satanic Verses* brought condemnation around the world, from a fatwa by the Iranian Supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, condemning the author to death, to the fire-bombing of bookstores in the UK and the United States, and the deaths of dozens of protesters in Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan during riots. Rushdie received thousands of death threats and several attempts on his life, leading to years of living under police protection and the breakup of his marriage. All this despite the fact that hardly any of the millions of protesters had read the book, (published only in English); protesting because they had been told that the book had been “insulting to Islam”, demonstrating the extent to which millions of ordinary Muslims were now susceptible to Islamist propaganda.

The aftermath of the affair has been self-censorship on the part of western politicians, academics and the media, now far more sensitive to saying, writing or publishing anything that might be perceived as giving offence to Muslims.

It has been well noted that today’s young Muslims are more religious than their parents and grandparents. But this could never have happened without the massive, multi-billion-dollar investment by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States in the world-wide indoctrination of young Muslims.³²

“Give me the child until the age of seven” boasted Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, “and I will give you the man”³³: a lesson the Islamists have learned

²⁸ Heard in a UNHRC debate in that brought into clear focus the extent of the gulf between the UNHRC and the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam:

²⁹ currently fighting one another in a devastating proxy war in Yemen

³⁰ <https://humanists.international/2008/06/discussion-religious-questions-now-banned-un-human-rights-council/>

³¹

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satanic_Verses_controversy#:~:text=The%20Satanic%20Verses%20controversy%2C%20also,about%20censorship%20and%20religious%20violence.

³² The hundred billion dollars estimated to have been spent by Saudi Arabia in promoting Islamism since 1979, pales in to insignificance compared to the profit made by Aramco, the Saudi national oil company I just one year, 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/mar/12/saudi-aramco-161bn-profit-is-largest-recorded-by-an-oil-and-gas-firm>

³³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ignatius_of_Loyola

well. And given the increased sensitivity of western society to the demands of the Islamists, this indoctrination in mosques, madrassas, Islamic centres and even prisons, has been allowed to continue unchecked. One result has been an increase of the number of Islamist complaints and threats against school teachers and university lecturers in the West who fail to conform to Islamist norms in matters ranging from art, to science, history and personal behaviour.³⁴

As Islamism, in its guise as the sole representatives of Islam, has become more assertive, so Muslims have become increasingly reluctant to point out the deep-rooted flaws in this political ideology; western commentators have become hesitant of expressing concerns about its increasing political influence for fear of accusations of racism and Islamophobia; and politicians have fallen back on the threat of terrorism as their primary concern, neglecting the Islamist roots of Islamist terror.

The reality of life under Islamism in both the Islamic world and in the West is covered in more detail in Part 3 of this series: “Living under Islamism”. In Parts 4 to 7, we expose the deep theological, historical, philosophical and political flaws in the Islamist ideology, and call for a return to the “benign Islam of our forefathers”.

We suggest the time has come for every thinking Muslim to confront and reject the false Ideology of Islamism.

³⁴ See Part 3: Living Under Islamism – in the West

The Case for Islamic Reform

Part 3: Living Under Islamism

In the Islamic world

Even before the war between Hamas and Israel erupted, with so much bad news emerging from Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and other lands where Islamism holds sway, we really did begin to wonder what kind of world the Islamists really want.

Following the attack on the twin towers in 2001, a conference was called in Amman, Jordan to discuss the possibility of expelling Muslim terrorists from Islam. The conclusion was an unequivocal 'No': anyone self-identifying as Muslim by reciting the Shahada³⁵ is a Muslim. Yet Islamic history is rife with stories of Muslims fighting Muslims, all in the name of Islam! Persecution of Shias and Sufis by Sunnis has been endemic. The persecution of Ahmadis has been widespread following the ban in Pakistan on any Ahmadi self-identifying as Muslim and has led to thousands of deaths. Even more outrageous is the barbaric proxy war being fought between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen under the guise of a war between Sunni and Shia.

In Afghanistan the Taliban, promoting the most extreme form of Islamism on earth, call themselves Muslim and describe Afghanistan as an "Islamic" rather than an "Islamist" state, thereby helping obscure even further the distinction between Islam, our faith, and their Islamist ideology. We hear of girls' schools closing, education for girls banned from the age of nine, of musical instruments and games (even chess) being banned, and of their hard-line interpretation of Islamic law being imposed on the whole of society. A UN report highlighted the deteriorating situation in the country, especially for women and girls, and the torture and execution of hundreds of former government officials.³⁶ Yet, as we demonstrate in this series of essays, such strict adherence to the Sharia is unfounded and based on a flawed interpretation of Islam: not simply a religious obligation, but a system of political control.³⁷ A group of UN experts recently reported that 20 years of progress in women's rights in Afghanistan has been wiped out since the Taliban took power in 2021.^{38,39}

In Iran, the death in custody in September 2022 of Mulisa Amini, accused by the religious police of failing to wear her hijab properly, led to nation-wide protests

³⁵ "I affirm that there is no god but Allah and that Mohammed is the messenger of Allah".

³⁶ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/08/afghanistan-un-human-rights-experts-denounce-idea-reformed-taliban>

³⁷ See Parts 4, 5 and 6 of this series.

³⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/03/afghanistan-un-experts-say-20-years-progress-women-and-girls-rights-erased>

³⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-66461711>

against the regime and a government crack-down on dissent, to the arrest of thousands of protesters and the execution of at least seven men after hasty trials and the extraction of confessions under torture.

Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Saudi Arabia has taken the world lead in spreading the most intolerant form of Islam, Wahhabism. A Pew report in 2006 highlighted what it called “The Saudi Curriculum of Intolerance”. Despite denials, the Saudi government continues to propagate an ideology of hate towards “unbelievers” which for the Wahhabis includes Christians, Jews, Shiites, Sufis, non-Wahhabi Sunnis, Hindus, atheists and others. The ideology is presented in school textbooks from 1st to 12th grade, where students are instructed to “do battle” in order to spread the faith.⁴⁰

This teaching has formed the basis of the multi-billion dollar, Saudi-funded program of indoctrination world-wide over the past several decades, to become the dominant ideology throughout the Islamic world.

Following the promise of the Arab Spring in Tunisia in 2010, the situation in that country has gradually deteriorated with the recent arrest and imprisonment of some 30 opposition politicians including the leader of the biggest opposition party, Rached Ghannouchi.⁴¹ The slow drift from liberal democracy to Islamism is now well under way.⁴²

Indonesia, the largest Islamic state by population, was long notable for its tolerant, liberal interpretation of Islam, but together with an equally tolerant Malaysia has seen an upsurge in Islamist ideology in recent years, primarily among the young. More than a thousand Islamic (read Islamist) schools have recently opened in the country. Many moderate politicians have lost their seats including the Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta, Ahok, who lost his seat to an Islamist and was later imprisoned for two years for blasphemy.⁴³ An Indonesian defence minister recently said that LGBT activists were “a greater danger than nuclear war”.

Pakistan, an Islamic state since 1977, is now totally dominated by Islamist ideology. In August 2023 a mob of around 7,000 descended on the town of Jaranwala in the Punjab after two Christians were arrested for allegedly desecrating the Qur’an. 17 churches and some 400 homes of Christians were destroyed and 100 of the rioters were arrested.

⁴⁰ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED500608.pdf>

⁴¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/may/25/families-ask-human-rights-court-to-free-jailed-tunisian-opposition-leaders>

⁴² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/06/tunisia-crackdown-media-freedoms>

⁴³ <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/rise-islamist-groups-malaysia-and-indonesia>

The myth of Islamic solidarity has fallen on its face in Pakistan with the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Afghans from the country in November 2023, many of whom had lived in Pakistan for more than a generation.

In recent years Pakistan has seen education in mathematics, science and the humanities in a slow spiral of decline. In an article in *The Dawn*⁴⁴, Pervez Hoodbuoy, a leading Pakistani scientist and intellectual, decried the “Dumbing Down” of the nation under the national education system. Politically, Pakistan is showing all of the signs of a failed state.⁴⁵

Dumbing down and decadence have sadly become commonplace in states where Islamist ideology is used to impose the imposition of the most brutal system of political control; including Saudi Arabia, Northern Nigeria and in the (mercifully short-lived) so-called Islamic State.

The plight of the majority of women in Islam is of particular concern not only to women themselves but to all concerned with notions of equality, autonomy and human dignity. Inequality between man and women is endemic, not only in communities ruled by Islamism but in Islam in general. It is graphically illustrated in the video “Honor Diaries” by Raheel Raza.⁴⁶

Inequality is built into the Sharia, regardless of which of the schools of Sharia is followed.

Many young Muslims both in the Islamic world and the West find themselves taught that instruction in Islam is the only knowledge they will ever need in the world, while in fact denying them a proper education in history, geography, the sciences or philosophy. We ask young Muslims: Is this: kind of regime that the Islamists are attempting to impose around the world, what you want for yourselves, that millions of Muslims have been cowed into accepting by a combination of misinformation, intimidation, indoctrination, and threats?

There is an alternative: to stand up to the intimidation, to reject the imposition of Islamism both locally and nationally, to seek a comprehensive education more suited to the modern world, and finally to return to the benign Islam of our forefathers: to the liberal, tolerant interpretation of Islam that prevailed virtually world-wide until the middle of the 20th century.

Do not be cowed into submission by the Islamists: With enough support for Islamic reform, Islamism will wither and die, as has happened to every other tyranny throughout human history,

⁴⁴ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1768503>

⁴⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/aug/08/the-guardian-view-on-pakistan-and-the-generals-holding-a-nation-back>

⁴⁶

In the West

There is no doubt that many Muslims feel uncomfortable in the West, many experience hostility from indigenous Europeans, even if sometimes only hostile looks. A natural reaction has been to seek refuge among one's friends, among other Muslims. But we can easily find ourselves on a slippery slope when faced with the Islamist-inspired campaign of over-reaction to every perceived insult to Islam. The Salman Rushdie affair⁴⁷ was seminal in hardening Muslim attitudes against the West, against international standards of freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, and against western culture in general.

Sadly, as a result of Islamist indoctrination, many young Muslims seem prepared to provoke hostility among non-Muslims by their over-reaction to quite trivial events. Recent examples include incidents in the UK^{48, 49, 50, 51} the United States⁵² and France⁵³ where, despite fair warning by a teacher or lecturer that anyone who might be offended was free to leave, some did take offence, reported these incidents to the school or college authorities, who then suspended the teachers involved and reported the incidents to the police as a "hate incidents" with extremely serious consequences for the accused, including the murder of one French lecturer. When the British Home Secretary reminded the police and educators that there is no blasphemy law in the UK, the Islamist reaction was swift and damning: "one of the most blatant examples of Islamophobia to appear in the mainstream media in recent years", screamed one commentator.⁵⁴ The result of this hyper-intolerance has been a backlash, not against Islamism but Islam itself in public opinion and the media⁵⁵, unable because of Islamist propaganda to distinguish between Islam and Islamism.

⁴⁷ See in Part 2: "How Islamism Conquered the World".

⁴⁸ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2021/03/teacher-suspended-after-using-muhammad-cartoon-in-class-on-blasphemy>

⁴⁹ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2021/05/the-outcome-of-the-batley-investigation-is-a-surrender-of-liberal-principles>

⁵⁰ [University of Bristol professor's anger at Islamophobia claim - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-56325254)

⁵¹ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11819099/Suella-Braverman-wades-row-pupils-suspended-slight-damage-copy-Quran.html>

⁵² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/hamline-university-professor-fired-prophet-muhammad-images-b2258410.html>

⁵³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-56325254>

⁵⁴ <http://ioir.org/5pillarsreaction>

⁵⁵ Eg: the Daily Mail.

Campaigns in the West⁵⁶ and even in India⁵⁷ to sensitise public opinion to the difference between Islam and Islamism have tended to fall on deaf ears because the Islamists claim to speak for all Muslims, adding to a quite unnecessary climate of hostility towards Muslims in general, a hostility that does not exist towards Hindus, for example, or the followers of any other religion.

The Islamist agenda is clear, to gradually sensitise the West, the media and public opinion to Islamist norms, and eventually to the full acceptance as Islamism as the dominant culture.

We are now seeing Islamist-ruled communities in Europe where it has become commonplace to refuse the friendship of non-Muslims, to ban any celebration of non-Islamic holidays, such as Christmas, and to join the global protest against any perceived insult to Islam anywhere in the world. Such over-reaction is simply playing into the hands of our enemies: both right-wing bigots and the Islamists themselves playing the victim card at every opportunity. As former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, once said: “sometimes the best response to provocation is to ignore it”.

Before joining the clamour of protests every time someone accidentally drops a copy of the Qur'an or shows her students a medieval painting of the Prophet, let's step back and save our anger for those who go out of their way to deliberately insult Islam or Muslims. At the same time, we need to recognise the validity of criticism of Islamic extremism, and to reject Islamism for what it is, “a political ideology masquerading as a religion”.

⁵⁶ Eg: the One Law for All campaign in the UK:

⁵⁷ Islamist reaction to the Indian campaign for the “one civil law for all”:

The Case for Islamic Reform

Part 4: The Theological Case for Islamic Reform

Since the end of the Second World War, Islamism, a hard-line version of Islam claiming theological justification, has developed as the dominant version of Islam throughout the world: in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and even in the West. Internationally, Islamism is supported by the 57 member states of Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (the OIC) and has benefited from hundreds of billions of dollars of investment by Saudi Arabia and others, for the indoctrination and intimidation of both Muslims and non-Muslims world-wide.

Yet, as we show in this essay, the Islamist narrative and its purported theological justification are deeply flawed: based on bias, selectivity, and misinterpretation of the scriptures.

1. The nature of theology

Theology, the study of the divine, if it is to have any validity, must start not by assuming what it seeks to prove but from the available evidence: it must take account of, or at least not conflict with, everything we now know about God's creation, including what science has discovered about life, the Universe and everything.

In the Qur'an⁵⁸, Allah asks Muslims to think, so that human understanding of His creation would grow over time, leaving the door open to humanity to add new knowledge to His revelation". But by rejecting modern science in favour of a major misreading of a few words in the Qur'an,⁵⁹ the Islamists are attempting to deny God's promise.

Advances in research in textual analysis, archaeology and numismatics have made it possible to shine new light on the origins of the Qur'an and Islam which can be used to settle some age-long disputes as to meaning.

From this it follows that, in the search for truth, modern research into the meaning of the scriptures, theological research, must be allowed to continue – wherever it may lead.

⁵⁸ Quran 29:20, 20:114, 3:137, 16:79, 8:22 and many other verses

⁵⁹ Bucaillism: See <https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Bucailleism>

2. The problem of interpretation

The need for interpretation began with the first revelation of the Qur'an; the Prophet (PBUH) was illiterate. Had Mohammed been able write down what he heard he would no doubt have done so immediately, but he had to dictate what he had learned to his companions who wrote it down. But there was a problem: at the time, Arabic had not yet become a stable written language. The earliest Qur'anic text lacked diacritical marks necessary to distinguish between consonants. It was only with the introduction of diacritics some centuries later that an authorised vocalisation of the text became canonical. The possibility of misinterpretation was therefore present from the outset, exacerbated by the fact that many words only appear in Arabic for the first time in in the Qur'an, leaving their real meaning open to debate⁶⁰, a debate that has continued through the centuries.

Differences in interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunna since the earliest days of Islam have given rise to a multitude of differing schools of thought. By the late 7th century, multiple versions of the Qur'an were in existence and the Caliph, Uthman⁶¹ (reigned 644 – 656) decided to consolidate them into a single canonical version, essentially as we know it today. The original sources were destroyed.⁶²

By the end of the 10th century the dominant versions of Islam: Sunni, Shia and Sufi, had crystalised.

Consolidating the Sunna into a single narrative proved to be a bigger problem, however, and arriving at a single definitive version of the Sharia has proved impossible. With more than 20,000 hadith in circulation, it took scholars almost another 200 years to settle on the four main schools of Sunni jurisprudence: the Hanbali, Maliki, Shafi and Hanafi schools, and the Shia, Jafari school. The geographical distribution of these schools today is shown below. All are based on different collections and interpretations the hadith, yet all claim to be the "Holy" Sharia.

But before we dig further into the issue of interpretation we have to ask, after more than a thousand years in which numerous versions of Islam have

⁶⁰ https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Diacritical_Marks_of_the_Qur%27an

⁶¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uthman>

⁶² Not all of the existing versions of the Qur'an at the time of Uthman were destroyed, however. Among the 12,000 Quranic documents discovered in the Great Mosque in Sanaa, Yemen in 1972 are some parchments that can be dated to the mid 7th century, quite possibly written during the lifetime of the Prophet. Suffice to say they contains significant differences from the Qur'an as we know it today. An excellent overview of the development of the Qur'an can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M544DtdLD9Q>

crystallised, whether we, or anyone, have the right to question any of the traditional narratives?

To answer that question we need to recognise that the argument against reinterpretation of the scriptures is, and has always been, purely political, not theological.

For centuries it was considered inadmissible for anyone to attempt to revise or reinterpret the widely accepted traditional narratives, even through the recognised process of *Ijtihad*. So for centuries, inconsistencies in the received text, even including some contradictions, were allowed to go unchallenged.

3. Abrogation

There is general agreement among scholars that the concept of abrogation in the Qur'an was created in an attempt to justify some of the war-like passages in the Quran revealed in Medina that appear to contradict some of the more peaceful passages revealed in Mecca. Sadly, debates have continued down the centuries as to how many, or few, of the earlier suras were abrogated. An exhaustive review of this issue can be found in "Abrogated Rulings in the Qur'an" by Justin Parrott, published by the Yaqueen Institute for Islamic Research.⁶³ The conclusion is that, rightly understood, and using the earliest definition of abrogation, none of the earlier passages in the Qur'an were ever replaced, but reinterpreted, and all verses need to be interpreted and understood together.

But the Meccan verses are unconditional and absolute, unqualified by any reference to time or circumstances. There can therefore be no valid argument that any of the earlier verses have been cancelled or replaced. To do so would be to deny the infinite wisdom of Allah, or to argue that He changed His mind in light of the changed circumstances of the Prophet.

From a theological perspective, the continuing existence of differences over interpretation demonstrates better than any polemical arguments that:

No-one can claim with absolute certainty that theirs is the one true version of Islam.

We suggest that this fact alone is sufficient to justify continuing research into the origins of Islam and the true meaning of our faith.

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<https://archive.nyu.edu/bitstream/2451/43710/2/Abrogated%20Rulings%20in%20the%20Qur%E2%80%99a%20Discerning%20their%20Divine%20Wisdom.pdf>

4. Theological flaws in the Islamist narrative

Islamism is nothing new. This political movement, based on a selective reading of the scriptures, can be traced back to the earliest years of Islam. The Qur'an as revealed by Allah is not a book of law but clearly intended as guidance to the faithful on how we should live.⁶⁴ But following the conquest of North Africa and the Middle East, the conquerers needed a religiously justified system of law to support their conquests against the prevailing Persian and Byzantine legal systems. Over the two centuries following the death of the Prophet, the five main schools of the Sharia developed, based on differing but careful selections of hadith.

The modern Islamist narrative is based largely on Wahhabism⁶⁵ and the writings of Sayyid Abd A'la Maududi⁶⁶ (1903 – 1979) and Sayyid Qutb⁶⁷ (1925-1969). Of these two, Maududi has perhaps the greater claim to be considered the architect of modern Islamism. The author of more than 100 books, he has been of immense influence as an advocate of the need for strict adherence to the Sharia and for Islam to become a political movement against western hegemony. His best-known work (in English translation "The Meaning of the Quran") has been translated into more than 30 languages.⁶⁸ Maududi was imprisoned on at least four occasions and even sentenced to death for his advocacy of the need for violence, but later reprieved.

His greatest success during his lifetime (he died in 1979) was as the architect of the Islamisation of Pakistan in 1977 under General Zia ul Haq. But since his death his influence has grown even wider with the support of Saudi Arabia and other Islamist states pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into the promotion of Salafi/Wahhabi-style Islamism. The Islamic world has been quite simply overwhelmed by Islamist ideology, but until now, very little liberal opposition had emerged to the Islamist plan for world domination.

Nevertheless, such opposition does exist and is beginning to gain traction by exposing the deep theological flaws in the Islamist program. Among the leaders of that theological opposition is the Canadian/Bangladeshi writer Hasan Mahmud, who in his book "How Sharia-ism hijacked Islam" has exposed the selectivity, bias and overtly political misrepresentation of the scriptures in Maududi's writing. and provides a total refutation of Maududi's theological arguments for

⁶⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tafhim-ul-Quran>

⁶⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wahhabism>

⁶⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abul_A%27la_Maududi

⁶⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sayyid_Qutb

⁶⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tafhim-ul-Quran>

Islamism.⁶⁹ A summary of Hasan Mahmud's argument can be found in "How Mawlana Maududi Distorted Islamic Theology" in Annex below.

The major flaws in the Islamist interpretation of Islam can be summarised as:

1. Their rejection of sura 2:256, "There is no compulsion in religion" on a variety of spurious grounds, and their denial of the truth that faith is necessarily a personal matter and cannot be imposed.⁷⁰
2. Their rejection of the distinction between religion and politics: claiming divine sanction for their political ideology.
3. Their false claim for the divinity of the Sharia.⁷¹
4. Their rejection of science as the best method of increasing our knowledge of God's creation, and their rejection of many of the findings of modern science, such as evolution.⁷²
5. Their claim that their absolutist, intolerant interpretation of Islam is the one true faith, and that it is blasphemy and/or apostasy to adhere to any other interpretation, punishable by death.
6. That it is incumbent on every Muslim to defend and promote the Islamist version of Islam, with violence if necessary.
7. Their rejection of international standards of equality, justice, democracy and the concept of a just society, and their rejection of internationally agreed standards of human rights.⁷³

Comprehensive, detailed rebuttals of all of these claims can be found elsewhere in this series of essays.

5. 'The primacy of personal faith

Following their indoctrination with the deeply conservative Islamist ideology, many Muslims are faced with a huge problem: how to distinguish between Islam, our religion, and Islamism, the ideology. The evidence suggests that many find it impossible. For the Islamists there is no distinction; it is precisely the confounding of the two that has formed the bedrock of their hugely successful political campaign. Muslims under the sway of Islamism are obliged to conform to their tenets without exception.

The door to personal judgement in matters of faith was actually opened in the Qur'an, in sura 2:256: "There can be no compulsion in religion". But the meaning

⁶⁹ <https://www.amazon.com/s?k=How+Sharia-ism+hijacked+Islam&i=stripbooks-intl-ship>

⁷⁰ See in this essay "The primacy of personal faith" and for a detailed review of the entire debate surrounding sura 2:256, See:

https://www.ias.edu/sites/default/files/hs/Crone_Articles/Crone_la_ikraha.pdf

⁷¹ See in this essay below: 6. "The man-made Sharia"

⁷² See: "Science and Islam" in Part 5: "The Philosophical Case for Islamic Reform."

⁷³ See: "Part 6: "The political case for Islamic reform"

of this apparently unequivocal statement has been the subject of debate within Islam for more than a thousand years, a debate that continues today: Is sura 2:256 descriptive: i.e. is it impossible to compel anyone to accept a religion? Or is it prescriptive: i.e. we must not attempt to compel anyone to adopt a religion? Or perhaps it applies only to those accepting Islam, since the merits of Islam are so self-evident that no compulsion is necessary?

Today, as it was for the Mutazilites⁷⁴ 1000 years ago, the most widely accepted interpretation of this sura makes clear the distinction between external acceptance of a religion and one's internal convictions. The state can impose religious observance on society but cannot impose real belief on the heart and mind of the individual; there can be no compulsion when it comes to one's personal faith: to what one truly believes, whereas religious observance can be imposed. But for the Islamists, despite what sura 2:256 may say, there *is* compulsion in religion.

It has been argued that if Allah had wanted to reveal a final, unambiguous plan for mankind He could have done so, but that the uncertainties surrounding the revelation suggest strongly that it has been left to humanity to interpret His will.⁷⁵ And since Allah has endowed each of us with the gift of free will, it is for each of us to seek our own truth from what we have learned in life.

For the reformist Shia philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush⁷⁶ (b 1945), we must distinguish between faith and religion: between what one truly believes and the tenets and practices that can be imposed externally. Faith cannot be compulsory: *"True believers must embrace their faith of their own free will – not because it was imposed, or inherited, or is part of the dominant local culture. To become a believer under pressure or coercion isn't true belief."*⁷⁷

He also argues that the believer must remain free to leave his religion, even Islam.⁷⁸

A former Sunni proponent of the need for reform but who has since changed sides is Khader Abou El Fadl, chair of the Islamic Studies program at UCLA. He argued that sura 2:256 amounts to a general overriding principle that cannot be contradicted by any traditions attributed to the Prophet, and noted that the Quran never proposed earthly punishment for apostasy in this life.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mu%27tazilism>

⁷⁵ Reference **needed**

⁷⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdolkarim_Soroush Voted in an on-line poll in 2005 the world's 7th most influential public intellectual.

⁷⁷ "Reason, freedom and democracy in Islam". Essential writings of Abdolkarim Soroush, Oxford 2000

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Khaled Abou el-Fadl "The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists", and <https://newrepublic.com/article/66588/moral-hazard>

Unsurprisingly, the Islamists tie themselves in knots⁸⁰ over this issue, arguing both that Islam is tolerant, quoting sura 2:256, and that atheism is not a religion so sura 2:256 does not apply to non-believers. For the Islamists, becoming a Muslim is a one-way street, there is no way out and apostasy is punishable by death.

For secularists, liberals and Islamic reformers alike, sura 2:256 is clearly prescriptive: no one can be compelled to adopt any religion, including Islam, and everyone is free to leave if so guided to do so by their conscience.^{81,82}

6. The man-made Sharia

The Sharia (the Way) is mentioned only three times in the Quran,⁸³ leading to the observation that Islam, as revealed by Allah, was intended purely as guidance to His people, rather than as a system of law. Nevertheless the Sharia developed over several centuries based upon the Sunna, the purported sayings and deeds of the Prophet.

But with huge differences existing between the five main schools of the Sharia⁸⁴, each claiming 'divine' sanction, can any of them justifiably claim the title of the "Holy" Sharia?

The prime example of injustice under the Sharia that many Muslims find totally unacceptable is the treatment of apostates and blasphemers.

Do the Islamists really believe that Allah, the creator of the Universe, needs their earthly protection? Such an idea is clearly blasphemous. And the imposition of the death penalty is clearly intended to be a weapon of political control, rather than a religious necessity: an attempt to usurp the authority of Allah. The Creator, the all-powerful and all-knowing, never suggested that apostates should be punished in this life, so why are the Islamists so keen to do so, thereby risking divine punishment for themselves? An analysis of the deep flaws in the Islamist Sharia is given elsewhere in this series.

For more than 1000 years, based on their understanding of the scriptures, liberal Islamic scholars have advocated freedom of religion for all. Everyone has the absolute right to believe whatever they want to believe and to express their beliefs, even if others believe those beliefs to be false. The only caveat is that no-one has the right to act upon their beliefs to the detriment of others.

⁸⁰ Patricia Crone in Open Democracy (2007): "No compulsion in Religion". <https://ioir.org/patriciacrone>

⁸¹ Ref Abdolkarim Sorouch in "Part 5: "The Philosophical Case for Islamic Reform".

⁸² See Part 6: "The political case for Islamic reform" for the need for external observance of the norms of one's community, even if it means paying lip service to a faith one does not share.

⁸³ In the Quran: Ash:3, Jashiya:18, and Mayeda:48

In the end, theology is about what can *reasonably* be believed, not about what *must* be believed. It is precisely here that Islamism falls short and must be rejected.

Annex How Mawlana Maududi distorted Islamic theology.

By Hasan Mahmud

Maududi's Vision

Mawlana Abd Ala Maududi (1903-1979) is widely regarded as the leading theoretician, indeed the founding father, of modern Islamism. Appalled by western domination of the Islamic world, he was determined to

revive and modernize an earlier political Islam to combat the decadence and evil of western culture. His vision is well-reflected in his writings:

1. "The Muslim Party will inevitably extend invitations to the citizens of other countries to embrace the faith..... And if the Muslim Party commands adequate resources it will eliminate un-Islamic governments and establish the power of Islamic governments in their stead..... Islamic "Jihad" does not recognize their (non-Muslims') right to administer State-affairs according to a system which in the view of Islam is evil."⁸⁵
2. Maududi was strongly against the creation of Pakistan in 1947 and argued that as a global religion Islam cannot be confined in a particular state. But when Pakistan became a reality on 14 August 1947, he changed his statement to: "Although an Islamic State may be set up anywhere on earth, Islam does not seek to restrict human rights or privileges to the boundaries of such a State."⁸⁶
3. "The system of this (Islamic) government is such that it does not leave much room for man to exercise his own free will."⁸⁷
4. "Islam, speaking from the viewpoint of political philosophy, is the very antithesis of secular Western democracy."⁸⁸
5. "Dancing, singing, etc., are "ugly arts."⁸⁹
6. "Islam wishes to destroy all States and Governments anywhere in the face of the earth which are opposed to the ideology and program of Islam. If the Muslim Party

⁸⁵ JIHAD IN ISLAM, The Holy Quran Publishing House, (1939).

⁸⁶ HUMAN RIGHTS IN ISLAM, Islamic Foundation, (1976).

⁸⁷ A SHORT HISTORY OF THE REVIVALIST MOVEMENT IN ISLAM, Islamic Publications, (1963).

⁸⁸ THE ISLAMIC LAW AND CONSTITUTION, Lahore: Islamic Publications, (1977).

⁸⁹ A SHORT HISTORY OF THE REVIVALIST MOVEMENT IN ISLAM, Islamic Publications, (1963).

commands adequate resources, it will eliminate un-Islamic governments and establish the power of Islamic governments in their stead.”⁹⁰

7. “Truth is one of the most important principles of Islam and lying is one of the greatest sins. But in real life some needs are such that telling a lie is not only allowed, in some circumstances it is decreed mandatory.” (Maududi)⁹¹

We will see however that Maududi’s thesis was based on a biased and selective interpretation of the Qur’an, with the specific purpose of mis-representing it as endorsing his vision for an Islamic state.

Justifying the vision

In order to justify his vision Maududi needed support from the holy scriptures, the Qur’an and the Sunnah. His great work of Quranic exegesis (interpretation and explanation of the Qur’an), is a six-volume work, *Tafhim ul Qur’an*, written in Urdu, begun in 1942 and published in 1972, it has since been translated into many other languages including English, and has been hugely influential ever since in promoting the idea of an Islamic state among the ummah.

But in order to justify his political vision he was obliged to distort, ignore and/ mis-interpret multiple verses of the Qur’an. He did so by explaining and commenting on only those passages that could be interpreted as support of his vision, whilst skipping lightly over others that would have undermined it.

Consider the question of how the Quran describes itself:

- 1) “Say: “That is a Message Supreme” (38:67).
- 2) “This is no less than a Message to (all) the Worlds”. (38:87).
- 3) “Verily this is an Admonition” (73:19).
- 4) “This surely is an admonition”. (74:54).
- 5) “We have made the (Qur'an) a Light”. (42:52).
- 6) “We have, without doubt, sent down the Message.” (15:9).
- 7) “For it (the Qur’an) is indeed a Message of instruction” (80:11).

Maududi’s exegesis fails to comment on or explain these verses, all of which make it clear that the Qur’an defines itself purely as a message, as guidance. Nowhere in the Qur’an is there a single verse referring to itself as a book of law, or concerning itself with the administration of justice.

Presenting the Qur’an as a political work was one of Maududi’s most significant betrayals of Islam. Similarly, whilst the Quranic word “Sharia” originally meant “Path to salvation”, he accepted the meaning first transformed by early Muslims to “State Law”.⁹²

⁹⁰ JIHAD IN ISLAM 6 & 2 4, (The Holy Quran Publishing House, 1939).

⁹¹ TARJAMANUL QURA’AN 54.

⁹² Sharia” literally means the path to go to water.

The Role of the Prophet

Maududi also failed to comment on many passages in the Quran explaining that the role of the Prophet is to teach, not to rule or judge: ⁹³

1. "Therefore, do thou give admonition, for thou art one to admonish." (Quran 88:21)
2. "Thou art not one to manage (men's) affairs". (Quran 88:22)
3. "Say: O ye men! I am not (set) over you to arrange your affairs." (Quran 10:108)
4. "Our Messenger's duty to proclaim (the message) in the clearest manner". (Quran 5:92)
5. "The Messenger's duty is but to proclaim (the message)". (Quran 5:99)
6. "But what is the mission of apostles but to preach the Clear Message?" (Quran 16:35)
7. "verily thou dost guide (men) to the Straight Way". (Quran 15:89)
8. "he is but a perspicuous warner". (Quran 7:184)
9. "But if they turn away, thy duty is only to preach the clear Message". (Quran 16:82)
10. "It is not required of thee, O Messenger, to set them on the right path, but Allah sets on the right path whom He pleaseth". (Quran 2:272)

There are dozens more such passages in the Quran making it clear that the role of the Prophet is to instruct and to teach, not to rule, judge or administer. ⁹⁴

The Sharia is thus revealed by the Qur'an itself to be *lacking any divine authority* and is now understood to be a man-made system of law, capable of improvement and change just like any other man-made system. If the Islamists want national and regional laws to be based on the Sharia, it is for them to seek the consent of those to be so ruled. But no Muslim should ever feel guilty about rejecting Sharia law, lacking as it does any theological justification.

⁹³ Quran Araf 7:184. See also e.g., Kahf 18:56; Ahzab 33:45; Ghashiyah 88:21, 22; Anam 6:107; Ra'ad 13:40; Nisa 4:80, 165; Tawba 9:51; Bakara 2:119, 272; Nahl 16:82; Sa'ad 38:65, 70; Fatir 35:23, 24; Ahkwaf 46:9; Anam 6:52, 66; Ash Shura 42:48; Yunus 10:108; Kwahf 29; Mayeda 5:92, 93; Hija 15:89.

⁹⁴ A myriad of further examples can be found in "How Sharia-ism Hijacked Islam" by Hasan Mahmud <https://www.amazon.com/s?k=how+sharia-ism+hijacked+Islam>

Indeed, Maududi himself commented: *“It is emphasized that the Prophet (peace be on him) is only required to preach the Truth and try to call people to embrace it. His responsibility ends at that for he is, after all, not their warden”*.

Yet even after agreeing to many of the verses ruling out any role for the Prophet in government or administering the law, Maududi’s vision is all about establishing a theocratic state. He even declared, quite contrary to the Qur’an, that we will not be completely Muslim unless we establish the Islamic State.⁹⁵

Muslims in general see prophets as great preachers and not as Presidents or military leaders. Very few of the prophets throughout history were rulers and the few who were, such as Solomon, were the exception rather than the rule. Conducting politics, waging wars, or running an administration were never conditions of prophethood.

Islamist support for the killing of apostates: Contrary to both the Qur’an and the Prophet.

The Qur’an mentions apostasy in several verses, but never mentions any worldly punishment. Rather, in 4:137 the door is kept open for apostates to come back to Islam:

“Allah will neither forgive nor show the right way to those who believed, and then disbelieved, then believed, and again disbelieved, and thenceforth became ever more intense in their disbelief”.

One cannot kill apostates without violating this verse.

Yet despite the lack of divine sanction for the imposition of earthly judgement, the Sharia evolved into a widely used system of criminal law throughout the Islamic world, originally in support of Arab conquests of the first millennium, but in recent times in support of hard-line Islamist ideology. It is in the proposed treatment of apostates and blasphemers that the dissonance between the Qur’an and the Sharia is revealed in its harshest light.⁹⁶

Maududi himself agrees that 2:217 says apostates will be hurled “into the eternal torment in the Hellfire.” Consider the following:

1. The context of verse 3:86 was Harith’s apostasy. The verse doesn’t mention any punishment⁹⁷: “How can Allah guide people who once believed, after they received clear signs and affirmed that the Messenger was a true one, then lapsed into disbelief”.

⁹⁵ Maududi “Witness to Mankind” p32

⁹⁶ Towards Understanding the Quran, Islamic Studies, <http://Hudud.tafheem.net/main.html>.

⁹⁷ IBN HISHAM/IBN ISHAQ, SIRAT – page 384.

2. Regarding the killing of covenant breakers, Maududi concluded that 9:11 could

*"in no way be construed to mean breaking of political covenants. Rather, the context clearly determines its meaning to be 'confessing Islam and then renouncing it'. Thereafter the meaning of 'fight the heads of disbelief' can only mean that war should be waged against the leaders instigating apostasy."*⁹⁸

In this Maududi is completely wrong: those verses are not about apostasy at all, but about non-Muslims who broke the peace treaty with Muslims.⁹⁹

3. As a ruler the Prophet did punish people, some of them were apostates, but each of them without exception were guilty of some other crime or crimes. There is not a single instant in Sahi Sitta (Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Daud, Tirmiji, Nasaee or Ibn Majah) where he punished anyone solely for leaving Islam. Sahi Bukhari Vol 9 hadis 318:

"Narrated Jabir bin 'Abdullah: A bedouin gave the Pledge of allegiance to Allah's Apostle for Islam. Then the bedouin got fever at Medina, came to Allah's Apostle and said, "O Allah's Apostle! Cancel my Pledge," But Allah's Apostle refused. Then he came to him (again) and said, "O Allah's Apostle! Cancel my Pledge." But the Prophet refused. Then he came to him (again) and said, "O Allah's Apostle! Cancel my Pledge." But the Prophet refused. The bedouin finally went out (of Medina) whereupon Allah's Apostle said, "Medina is like a pair of bellows (furnace): It expels its impurities and brightens and clears its good".

For Maududi, there can be no freedom of belief and no room for apostates in the Islamic fold. He proposed:

"[The conquerer must] notify the Muslim population in the area where an Islamic revolution occurs that people who in belief and practice have defected from Islam and wish to remain as defectors should disclose their non-Muslim identity and leave our social order within a year from the date of the notification. After this period, all those who are born of Muslim lineage will be considered to be Muslim, they will be subject to all Islamic laws, they will be compelled to perform the religious duties and obligations, and then whoever steps outside the fold of Islam will be executed. Following this announcement utmost effort should be made to save as many sons and daughters born of Muslims as possible from the lap of kufr. Then whoever cannot be saved by any

⁹⁸ QURAN 9: 11-12.

⁹⁹ Bangla translation of the Quran by Mawlana Muhiuddin Khan, pages 553 & 556.

means should be cut off and cast away, sadly but firmly, from his society forever. After this act of purification, a new life for Islamic society may begin with only those Muslims who are dedicated to Islam.”¹⁰⁰

Such a horror may be Islamism, but Islam it is not.

Conclusion

We have seen that Maududi distorted the message of the Quran to support his own hard-line interpretation of Islam: a distortion that for decades has misled Muslims into adopting Islamism, an absolutist and intolerant interpretation of Islam, rightly described as “a political ideology masquerading as religion”.

The Qur’an is revealed in its own pages as a book of enlightenment and guidance to the faithful and is not to be construed as a book of law. But the existence of the five principal schools of the Sharia since the time of the Arab conquests has imbued the Sharia with the patina of history. How could the Sharia have existed, virtually unchanged, throughout the history of Islam without theological justification? The answer is: from the support of generations of conservative Islamic scholars, prepared to accept whatever collection of hadith was cited in support of their political agenda, unchanged since the effective ban on ijtihad (reinterpretation) in the 13th century.

But such bans on reinterpretation are no longer acceptable to modern Muslims; we are able to access the latest research into the origins of Islam and are aware of the advances in our understanding of God’s creation brought about by modern science.

¹⁰⁰ ABUL ALA MAWDUDI, THE PUNISHMENT OF THE APOSTATE ACCORDING TO ISLAMIC LAW, translated by Syed Silas Husain and Ernest Hahn, (1994).

The Case for Islamic Reform

Part 5: The Historical Case for Islamic Reform

1 The traditional narrative

Most Muslims believe that Islam was first revealed to the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) by the angel Jibreel in Mecca beginning in 610 CE, and later in Medina until 632 CE. Mohammed recited his revelation to his companions, who memorised it and wrote it down.

But the Qur'an was only codified in the form in which we know it today under the orders of the third Caliph, Uthman ibn Affan in about 650 CE, by which time there were many partial versions in circulation, mostly oral, in a culture at a time when reading and writing were rare skills. Once Uthman had settled on his canonical version of the Quran, he had all other known copies destroyed.¹⁰¹

There were however considerable difficulties in interpreting God's message due to the incomplete nature of written Arabic at the time, lacking for example diacritical marks indicating the distinction between consonants, and the exact meaning of large numbers of words appearing in Arabic for the first time in the Qur'an. Debates regarding the ultimate meaning of the text have continued until today.

One result of this textual uncertainty was that it contributed, with uncertainty regarding the validity of vast numbers of Hadith, to the development of the three main versions of Islam: the Sunni, the Shia, and Sufism, and the evolution of five main versions of Islamic law, the Sharia, all of which had crystallised by the end of the 9th century.

In this essay we explore the flaws in the traditional narrative which, since the early 19th century, have been exposed by historical research. Sadly, much of this original research has until now been ignored or suppressed by the traditionalists, unwilling to accept the validity of any discoveries that contradict the traditional view.

¹⁰¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uthman>

2. Flaws in the traditional narrative.

Scepticism regarding the traditional Islamic narrative is nothing new and has existed among scholars since the earliest days of Islam, even though re-examination and reinterpretation of the scriptures has been strongly discouraged since at least the 12th century CE.¹⁰² Research into the origins of Islam was given a new lease of life in the 19th century by scholars such as Ignatz Goldziher and others¹⁰³, and has continued up to this day with, most notably, the work of Inarah, the Institute for Early Islamic History and the Qur'an, based at the University of Saarland¹⁰⁴.

The major points of difference between the traditional and modern views centre on the origins of Islam: there are now good grounds to doubt both the original language of the Quran and whether the story of the birth of Islam in the Hejaz is actually authentic.¹⁰⁵

Of particular concern is the notion that the Sharia, as a system on criminal law, has divine sanction. We read in Part 4 of this series: *The Theological Case for Islamic Reform*, that Allah intended the Quran to provide advice and guidance to the faithful, not as the basis for a system of law, governance or administration.¹⁰⁶ Could anything be clearer? There is no call by Allah for the creation of an Islamic State: the whole idea runs counter to His will as expressed in the Quran.¹⁰⁷ Yet a system of Islamic law is precisely what developed in the decades following the death of the Prophet.

How did this come about? What is more likely, that the Prophet, immediately after receiving the revelation of the Qur'an, would disregard completely one of its major tenets? Or that, 100 years after the death of the Prophet, the Arab conquerors would have compiled a collection of Hadith, sayings and reports on the life of the Prophet, to provide pseudo-religious support for their control of the conquered lands?

As early as 850 CE, Emir al-Bukhari (d 870 CE) had travelled the world and concluded that of the 600,000 examples of Hadith he had discovered, fewer than 1% (about 4,000) could be considered authentic.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ijtihad>

¹⁰³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ign%C3%A1c_Goldziher

¹⁰⁴ <http://inarah.net/>

¹⁰⁵ IOIR.org/IntroducingInarah

¹⁰⁶ See: Part 4 of this series: "The Theological Case for Islamic Reform".

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ "The Life of Mahommet" Sir William Muir, (1861). 1894 version pp 41-42.

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/life-Mahomet-original-sources-introd/dp/818599076X>

It is now widely understood that the vast majority of these “recollections” lack any historical validity and were fabricated more than 100 years after the events to which they purport to relate. Whilst the Sharia can still be considered as God’s guidance on how Muslims should conduct their private lives,¹⁰⁹ it lacks all credibility as a system of criminal law for which it is totally lacking in divine authority.¹¹⁰

There is no “holy” Sharia.

3. Islam is not unique.

Mohammed may have been the last prophet, but he was by no means the first; he had many predecessors, including Moses, Isaiah, and Jesus (Issa), many of whom had already received parts of the divine revelation.

It has been known for more than 100 years that Islam incorporates many earlier beliefs from Judaism and Christianity¹¹¹. Islam is not therefore unique and cannot be considered the sole repository of knowledge of God. Debate has raged among scholars as to which: Judaism or Christianity had the greater influence on the development of Islam. All three religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, carry part of God’s revelation and it is evident that their believers all worship the same God but in differing ways.

Islam, as a set of beliefs, laws and practices, only crystallised more than 100 years after the death of the Prophet, partly from the tenets enshrined in the Quran but also from later accretions in the Sunna, based on the supposed life and sayings of the Prophet collected in the Hadith, thousands of which are known to be of dubious validity.

Islam, as it has been handed down to us, can now be seen as a compilation of religious and political beliefs: a 9th century political system based partly on religious guidance but overlain by laws originally created to control the newly conquered lands of North Africa and the Middle East.

For centuries, Muslims have been deceived into believing that the political system that emerged was based entirely on the word of God. But we now know that all such claims are false,¹¹² but have nevertheless been a powerful weapon in the pursuit of political control across the World.

¹⁰⁹ See Essay 1 of this series: “The Theological Case for Islamic Reform”.

¹¹⁰ A summary of the millions of words of evidence for this claim can be found in “The Evidence” below.

¹¹¹ See, for example: IOIR.org/IntroducingInarah

¹¹² See Part 4 of this series: “The Theological Case for Islamic Reform”

Throughout history, autocrats have used religion and the fear of divine retribution to enforce their control, and the caliphs and rulers of the Islamic world have been no different: a phenomenon that continues to this day. With Islamism, the political ideology now dominating some 20% of the world's population, we see fear of punishment for apostasy or blasphemy acting as a powerful deterrent to any but the bravest who dare question its accepted tenets.

The time has come to expose the false history on which Islamism and the Sharia, are based, and to urge the Ummah to return to a benign, liberal interpretation of Islam based exclusively on God's will, as revealed in the Qur'an.

There is no historical justification for claiming absolute certainty for any traditional version of Islam, nor for intolerance in the face of differing religious views, whether Islamic or any other.

We call upon Muslims to totally reject Islamism as lacking any historical or religious validity.

4. The Evidence

For more than 100 years, evidence has been accumulating that the traditional narrative regarding the origins of Islam is deeply flawed. Taken together, this evidence demonstrates unequivocally that there is absolutely no justification for the belief that the traditional Islamic narrative is a valid, historical account of the origins of our faith.

Modern research into the history of Islam uses the historical-critical method (the standard scientific procedure for analysing historical texts) as well as the methods of philology, archaeology and numismatics. This research continues the work begun in the late 19th century, of Julius Wellhausen, Adolf von Harnack and Ignaz Goldziher who had already concluded that the widely accepted narrative of Islamic origins did not accord with historical reality, and with Joseph Schacht, Günter Lüling, Suliman Bashear, Yehuda Nevo, John Wansbrough and Patricia Crone, Michael Cook and Ibn Warraq in the 20th century.

Every Muslim must already be aware that sharp differences exist between God's revelation as set out in the Holy Qur'an, and Islam as augmented by the thousands of stories of the life and sayings of the Prophet recounted in the Hadith: many of which directly contradict the message of the Qur'an, and most of which were compiled more than 100 years after the death of the Prophet. The majority of the Hadith were transmitted orally long after the death of Mohammed, and a vast majority are known to have been created in order to justify some political point.

Rather than list directly the hundreds of examples of distortion and misrepresentation that have been discovered in the traditional narrative, it will suffice here to give references to collections of evidence that justify this claim.

Doubts regarding the authenticity of the traditional narrative began soon after the codification of the canonical version of the Qur'an under the third Caliph, Uthman, and have continued throughout history.

Often conflicting with the traditional narrative, this research has been largely ignored by mainstream Islam, and many who would undertake such research have found their funding disappear. Times are changing however. Since 2007 Inarah, the Institute for Research into early Islam and the Qur'an based at Saarland University, have published 11 volumes of their researches (in German) as "Die Entstehung einer Weltreligion" volumes 1 to 11, published by Schiler & Mucke (Berlin and Tübingen).¹¹³

More usefully, for the English reader at least, will be a summary of the key findings of the Inarah group over the past 15 years, entitled "Introducing Inârah"¹¹⁴

Perhaps the most readable overview of the original sources on the early history of Islam can be found in "The Quest for the Historical Mohammed" by Ibn Warraq, published by Prometheus Press, Amherst, NY in 2000; and a collection of sceptical writing on the origins of Islam from the 2nd to the 19th centuries in "Virgins? What Virgins? And other essays" (2009) by the same author.

The discovery by the Islamic scholar Christophe Luxenberg that many of the uncertain words appearing in the Quran could be far more easily understood as Syriac¹¹⁵ than Arabic, has shaken our understanding of the Qur'an, most notably the discovery that the 72 virgins awaiting the martyr in heaven are actually a mistranslation of 72 pieces of ripe fruit.

Mainstream Islamic institutions and schools of Islamic studies have largely failed to engage with, or have chosen to ignore, this new research for fear of being drawn into a losing debate or worse, of losing their funding.

But, as noted in other essays of this series, it is surely the responsibility of every student of Islam to support honest research into the origins of our faith as the surest way of clarifying God's will, unbiased by political ideology.

The honest search for truth must reign supreme.

¹¹³ <https://schiler-muecke.de/>

¹¹⁴ <http://ioir.org/IntroducingInarah>

¹¹⁵ See for example: Christoph LUXENBERG, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran – Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, Berlin and Tübingen 2000.

The Case for Islamic Reform

Part 6: The Philosophical Case for Islamic Reform

Theology is the study of what can be reasonably concluded about the nature of the divine, based on our knowledge of the scriptures. Since the scriptures of different faiths are different, there are necessarily vast differences between Christian, Islamic and Hindu theology. But as we also showed in Part 4 of this series, the *Theological Case for Islamic Reform*, there are also vast differences between the conclusions of, on one hand, Islamist theology based on a highly selective reading of the Quran and Hadith, and on the other, a more liberal interpretation of Islam based on a wider reading of the scriptures, enhanced by more recent knowledge of God's creation.

We showed how within Islam the Islamist narrative starts from selected passages from the scriptures that support its hard-line agenda, and from there to the Sharia: rules for how the faithful must live and be governed. But the five main schools of the Sharia all differ in important ways from one another: all define highly conservative systems of law, and all are equally deeply flawed theologically.

In contrast with theology, philosophy is the study of knowledge; starting from what can be known with any certainty about life, the Universe and everything, based on observation, logic and reason, without accepting any scriptures as proven.

Faith vs Religion

Philosophical arguments for the liberalisation of Islam began soon after the death of Mohammed, as Islam expanded its territory, came into contact with other cultures, and was influenced by them.

Despite attempts by 12th century thinkers such as Ibn Rushd¹¹⁶ to again bring philosophy to bear in the interpretation of Islam, these voices went unheard in mainstream Islam, which by then was dominated by the absolutism of al-Ghazali¹¹⁷. He argued that everything that happens here on earth only does so through the grace of Allah. This viewpoint sees Allah, the creator of the universe,

¹¹⁶ See Essay 1: "A Short History of Islam"

¹¹⁷ Ibid

as intervening in the daily lives of everyone on earth. It effectively shut the door on philosophy, scientific inquiry and *ijtihad* within Islam for more than 800 years.¹¹⁸

Modern philosophical arguments against Islamism centre around its absolutism and intolerance, its disdain for science, and the incompatibility between the tenets of traditional, conservative Islam and today's understanding of ourselves and our world.

Absolute certainty and Intolerance

One of the most attractive aspects of Islamism for many Muslims is the absolute certainty that it offers to those searching for meaning in a poor, complex and unequal world. But we have shown that there is no overriding theological justification for any particular version of Islam, nor for any other religion, to claim that theirs is the one true faith, nor can the intolerance that typically accompanies such claims be justified. No human being can claim absolute knowledge of the divine. The absolutism and intolerance promoted by Islamism are not merely wrong but have for centuries been the poisons eating away at the heart of Islam, and they still continue to pose an existential danger to society.

As Karl Popper warned in "The Open Society and its Enemies (1945)"¹¹⁹:
"Absolute certainty is the foundational component of totalitarianism.... If one is sure that one's philosophy will lead to the best possible future for humankind, all manner of terrible acts become justifiable in service of the greater good."

He also warned against the danger of tolerating intolerance:
"Unlimited Tolerance can lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of those who are intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed and tolerance with them."

One of Islamism's greatest strengths has been the persuasive but totally unjustifiable certainty with which the Islamists have presented their case: offering false hope and simple solutions to those seeking certainty in an unequal, complex and uncertain world. Their solution is for Muslims to cast their better feelings aside, with threats of violence to anyone who fails to accept their taboos.¹²⁰ Of one thing we can be sure: *Anyone offering absolute certainty in this uncertain world is lying!*

¹¹⁸ And as can still be seen in schoolrooms to this day as children recite their tables: 2 times 2 equals 4 by the will of Allah".

¹¹⁹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/popper/>

¹²⁰ See Part 2: "Living under Islamism" for multiple examples of how intolerance is still playing out in the Islamic world.

Islam and Science

Since the dawn of modern science in the 17th century, the quality of life of virtually everyone on earth has improved almost beyond measure. Life expectancy for a baby born anywhere on Earth today averages more than 70 years, compared to just 30 years for those born as recently as 1870.¹²¹

Traditionalists argue that the improvements in public health came about because it was the will of Allah, but many advances in medicine were opposed by Islamic traditionalists because they conflicted with the religiously approved practices of the time. Centuries of prayer never led to any improvement in life expectancy. It was only the advent of modern medicine and advances in sanitation and public health that made the difference.

The traditional Islamic worldview, born in a pre-scientific age, has had a long and troubled relationship with science. There is no doubt that science education across the Islamic world is in a very poor state, and the neglect of science is endemic. In his book “Islam and Science (1990)¹²²”, physicist and social commentator Pervez Hoodbhoy castigates mainstream Islam for its disdain for science. He cites a former Pakistani Minister of Education who suggested the world energy crisis could be solved by harnessing the energy of djinns, mythological entities purportedly made of fire. He is appalled that among the world’s 221 Nobel Prize winners in Physics there is only one Muslim, Abdus Salaam (an Ahmadi, and reviled as such by the majority of mainstream Muslims).

Earthquakes happen when the pressure building up in the earth’s crust causes the interface between tectonic plates to rupture. Hoodbhoy recalls that following the Pakistan earthquake in October 2005, a majority of his postgraduate physics students said they believed that the quake was a punishment or warning from Allah. Only a small minority recognised that it was a result of natural processes.¹²³

But the greatest mistake the traditionists continue to make is to insist on divine intervention in daily life on earth, despite the fact that all astronomical, geological, meteorological and biological events can be fully explained as the result of natural processes. The notion of divine intervention is both unnecessary and redundant. William of Occam (1285 – 1347), a Franciscan friar, argued that when two alternative explanations exist for the same event, the simplest – i.e. that requiring the fewest assumptions – is probably correct: an aid to decision-making, now known as Occam’s Razor. From earthquakes to

¹²¹

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9a/Life_expectancy_by_world_region%2C_from_1770_to_2018.svg

¹²² <https://eacpe.org/content/uploads/2014/02/Islam-and-Science-BOOK.pdf>

¹²³ <https://eacpe.org/content/uploads/2014/02/Islam-and-Science-unhappy-bedfellows.pdf>

epidemics, when science has discovered a natural process to explain events, Occam's razor will defeat a supernatural explanation every time.

We now know that the Universe began in a Big Bang around 13 billion years ago and has been expanding ever since. The Sun and solar system, including the Earth, were formed around four billion years ago through the working out of natural processes. We know that all life on earth evolved over a period of more than a billion years from the most primitive molecules to the vast array of life forms we see on earth today; they were not created at a stroke just a few years ago.

Storms and tempests, floods and droughts came as unwelcome surprises to our ancestors and the resulting loss of life was seen as divine punishment for our sins. But today computers can predict the weather hour by hour as weather patterns develop, with no need for divine intervention.¹²⁴

We are taught that Allah will never demand or cause an evil act. So it is surely blasphemous as some leaders do to suggest that Allah has any hand in natural disasters that kill innocent children.¹²⁵

We reject the idea that the creator of the Universe has any hand in natural disasters or is directly involved in daily life on earth.

Islam and Evolution

But the biggest thorn in the side of the traditionalists is evolution. Since first published by Charles Darwin in 1859, the *Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection*¹²⁶ has passed every scientific test ever thrown at it, and evolution has been observed in action from the finches of Galapagos to the evolution of the Covid virus. Evolution is the central fact of biology, the mechanism by which all life developed. For any thinking Muslim, evolution explains how God's creation has come to be; to deny evolution is to deny one of God's greatest gifts without which human life itself could never have arisen.

The final blow to the anti-evolutionists should have been the 1953 discovery by Crick and Watson of the structure of DNA and the genetic process by which evolution occurs.¹²⁷ But despite overwhelming evidence in its favour, the denial of evolution has been a growth industry among Muslims. Hundreds of so-called experts have published innumerable books and articles claiming to prove that

¹²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weather_forecasting

¹²⁵ <https://timesofislamabad.com/24-Aug-2022/destruction-from-floods-is-punishment-from-allah-due-sins-of-people-of-pakistan-claims-top-pakistani-political-leader>

¹²⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolution>

¹²⁷ <https://www.nature.com/articles/171737a0>

evolution is false. Just one example will suffice: the publication and printing of 10 million copies of the glossy coffee-table book: “The Evolution Deceit” by Harun Yahya¹²⁸, distributed to almost every school in Europe, which became a laughing stock among the scientifically literate for its egregious errors of fact.¹²⁹

The denial of science, both the process of discovery and of scientific discoveries, is at variance with God’s injunction to increase our knowledge.¹³⁰ And the best way of increasing our knowledge of His creation is surely by learning what science has to teach us: about life, the Universe and everything.¹³¹

The fantasy of science in the Qur’an

Centuries of prayer and relying on the Quran and hadith for all knowledge, never improved life expectancy or health outcomes. It was only science, modern medicine and social progress that finally led to success.

The value of human knowledge lies in its detail. It is the height of hubris to claim that all knowledge can be found in the Qur’an: a claim the Qur’an itself does not make.

It took millennia for human knowledge to develop to the point where it could be used to influence the future of humanity: in medicine, in our quality of life and in the environment. All that remains is the need for the political will to use that knowledge wisely.

Yet while science education in much of the Islamic world is in an abysmal state, Islamists have been promoting the idea that virtually every scientific discovery of modern times was already foretold in the Qur’an, and furthermore that science has now proved that the Qur’an was divinely inspired.¹³² This movement, known as Bucaillism¹³³, has been extraordinarily successful, even gaining endorsement (often by trickery) from western scientists. Needless to say, all such “proofs” are nonsense, based on misinterpretation and distortion of the evidence.¹³⁴

But as we have seen, most people will believe what they are taught, especially if it reinforces what they already believe. The Islamist multi-million-dollar misinformation industry has been hugely influential. So popular has been the idea that the Qur’an foretold all of science that books purporting to give examples have become best-sellers.¹³⁵ According to the Islamist scholar Zaghloul El-

¹²⁸ <https://www.amazon.com/Evolution-Deceit-Harun-Yahya/dp/1897940971>

¹²⁹ https://www.academia.edu/7259981/A_Critique_of_Harun_Yahyas_Evolution_Deceit

¹³⁰ Quran 29:20, 20:114, 3:137, 16:79, 8:22 and many other verses

¹³¹ <https://www.meforum.org/2593/pervez-amirali-hoodbhoy-islam-science>

¹³² https://faithfreedom.org/Articles/DGolden/touting_science.htm

¹³³ <https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Bucailleism>

¹³⁴ https://faithfreedom.org/Articles/DGolden/touting_science.htm

¹³⁵ See for example: https://www.islamicbulletin.org/free_downloads/quran/bible_quran_science.pdf

Naggar, “One of the main convincing evidences to people to accept Islam is the large number of scientific facts in the Qur’an”.¹³⁶ But if that were so, why weren’t these ‘facts’ used to improve our quality of life: why did we have to wait centuries for the advent of science for the world to achieve that?

Despite Pervez Hoodbhoy’s condemnation of the state of science in the Islamic world, very little has changed over the past 30 years. Young Muslims are still being taught that “all knowledge you will ever need is there in the Qur’an”, a conceit that is nowhere articulated in the Qur’an itself.

If the Qur’an was a science textbook, why did we have to wait a thousand years for ‘Quranic science’ to improve our quality of life? Why? Because it took real science, not fantasy, to achieve it.

If we really want to know how the world is, rather than simply indulge in wishful thinking, we should return to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, following the scholars of early Islam, from the Mutazalites onwards, for whom the search for truth was grounded in evidence and observation of what actually is.

Science has taught us more about God’s creation than a thousand years of theological speculation.

Islamic education

In both East and West, Islamic education has focused more on religious studies and less on secular subjects than their western counterparts. One of the guiding principles of Islamic education has been the supremacy of religious knowledge over secular subjects such as geography and the sciences. One classic example: during a visit to Ayatollah Khomeini in Paris prior to the Iranian revolution, a reporter was asked by Khomeini where he was from. “Switzerland”, he said. “Where is that?” asked Khomeini.

There is a vast difference between religious education (which, inevitably, implies learning by rote), and education in the sciences where progress depends on a spirit of questioning and inquiry. Islamic students are still encouraged to learn to recite the Qur’an in Arabic, even if they understand neither Arabic nor the meaning of the words: the hypnotic effect of the repeated sounds is considered sufficient¹³⁷, creating the impression that the sounds themselves have some divine, magic qualities. But it is surely the meaning of Allah’s message that is important, not simply the sounds.

¹³⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zaghloul_El-Naggar

¹³⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6178573>

So entrenched is rote learning in Islamic schools that questioning the teacher is considered disrespectful and almost universally discouraged.¹³⁸

Saudi funding of Islamic education in schools, colleges, madrassas and Islamic centres has had a devastating impact on general levels of educational attainment of Muslims in both the Islamic world and the West. Along with the much-needed finance for 'education' however came a clear understanding that the funding was conditional on the schools adhering to the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam.¹³⁹

The Islamist disdain for science is disdain for knowledge. Around the world, Muslims are being left behind in their understanding of reality.

Muslims demand far better education for our children than is offered by Islamism.

¹³⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/nov/25/islam-science-muslims-religion>

¹³⁹ From a private conversation with the dean of SOAS

The Case for Islamic Reform

Part 7: The Political case for Islamic Reform

Islamism and International Law.

The atrocities perpetrated by the Nazi regime during the Second World War, and the sheer brutality of the Japanese towards the conquered and prisoners of war led to a strong resolve among the world's post-war leaders to create an international organisation based on the rights of the individual.

In what has since become a fractured and divided world, it can be difficult to imagine the overwhelming consensus following WWII that “humanity could do better.”

The United Nations was founded on the principle that everyone, regardless of race, creed, culture or gender was endowed with inalienable rights, including freedom of thought, conscience and belief, and the right to personal autonomy. These principles were first enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 which, although not an international treaty, has since been adopted as a set of guiding principles by all 192 member states of the United Nations. Those principles were later codified into the form of two international conventions (treaties): the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of 1966 that are binding on all signatory states.

Among the rights so enshrined are the right to have a religion but (under pressure from the Islamic States) there is no right to change or leave your religion. In many Islamic states it is still a crime to leave Islam (apostasy), and in seven of them apostasy is punishable by death. But as many Islamic scholars have pointed out¹⁴⁰, this is in conflict with any reasonable interpretation of the Quranic statement that “there can be no compulsion in religion.”

The ICCPR has since been adopted by 173 of the 193 member states of the UN. and the ICESCR by 171 of the members, but the Covenants lack teeth. There are no sanctions against states that fail to honour their commitments under the

¹⁴⁰ https://psipp.itb-ad.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Abdolkarim-Soroush-Reason-Freedom-and-Democracy-in-Islam_-Essential-Writings-of-Abdolkarim-Soroush-2000-2.pdf

covenants, no penalties for failure to conform, only the power of public and international opinion.

The UDHR and the Covenants were weakened when in 1990 the 57 member states of the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) adopted the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (CDHRI) which undermines the Universality of the UDHR by making all rights in the CDHRI “subject to the Islamic sharia”.¹⁴¹

The CDHRI has been strongly criticised in the Human Rights Council by, inter alia, the International Commission of Jurists and Humanists International.¹⁴² Claiming to be “complimentary” to the UDHR, the CDHRI is clearly intended as an alternative, abandoning the universality of the UDHR in favour of a set of limited rights conforming to the Islamic Sharia.

The malign influence of the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (the OIC) within the United Nations was already noted in Par2, where its de-facto control of the organisation has been a major obstacle to the promotion and protection of the internationally agreed standards of human rights.

Freedom of Religion or Belief

By adopting the CDHRI, the OIC has clearly aligned itself politically with Islamism, abandoning any pretence to support freedom of religion or belief or freedom of expression. Their dubious ‘justification’ for imposing the death penalty for apostasy and blasphemy in spite of the Quranic injunction that there can be no compulsion in religion (Quran 2:256) is that the truth of Islam is so self-evident that apostacy can only possibly be the result of ignorance or compulsion!

But Islamism does have its opponents within the Islamic world and we are seeing the increasing influence of more liberal interpretations of Islam among Muslim intellectuals.

Modern Islam has been strongly influenced by the politico-religious philosophy of Abdolkarim Soroush (born 1943)¹⁴³, known primarily for his emphasis on the distinction between faith, which is internal to the human mind, and religion, a set of tenets and practices, that can be imposed. From being a key supporter of the Iranian revolution in 1979, and whilst accepting that religious concepts must be allowed to influence politics, he fell out of favour with the regime for his opposition to their making politics subservient to religion.

¹⁴¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20081031135736/http://www.iheu.org/node/3162>

¹⁴² <https://humanists.international/2008/03/islamic-law-vs-human-rights/>

¹⁴³ Described by Prospect Magazine as the 7th most influential public intellectual in the world, he has suffered severe criticism from conservative opponents, most notably in his native Iran.

The Sharia

In earlier essays in this series we discussed the Sharia: its adoption as a system of control in support of the Arab conquests of the Middle East and North Africa, its lack of Quranic justification, and its role in the growth of the political ideology of Islamism over recent years.

The treatment of women and religious minorities under the Sharia is of particular concern. As are the barbaric punishments demanded for victimless crimes, such as blasphemy and apostasy, and for sex outside marriage.

Lacking any agreed standards of evidence, Sharia trials are open to abuse, with convictions often based on the testimony of a single individual and the naïve belief that no Muslim man would lie to a Sharia court.¹⁴⁴

Internationally, the Sharia has been heavily criticised as an acceptable system of law. At a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in 2009, a speaker attempted to point out that the Cairo Declaration and Sharia law were incompatible with the ICCPR and the ICESCR but was stopped on a point of order by the Pakistani delegate complaining that:

"It is insulting to our faith to discuss the Holy Sharia in this forum". Incredibly, the president of the Council agreed, saying that

"there is no need, and we will not, discuss any particular system of law":

a ruling that has stood in the Council ever since. But if it is not permissible to discuss in the world's highest forum for the protection and promotion of human rights a legal system which advocates systematic abuse of human rights, where can it be discussed?

In 1998, the European Court of Human Rights upheld a ban on the Turkish Welfare Party on the grounds that the introduction of the Sharia in Turkey would undermine democracy.¹⁴⁵ The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in resolution 2253 of 2019¹⁴⁶ "considers that the various Islamic declarations of human rights adopted since the 1980s, fail to reconcile Islam with human rights insofar as the Sharia is their unique source of reference.... It is therefore of great concern that Albania, Azerbaijan and Turkey ... have endorsed the 1990 Cairo Declaration."

The insistence by the Islamists that the Sharia be given special protection as the "Holy Sharia" is clearly invalid simply because there is no single agreed

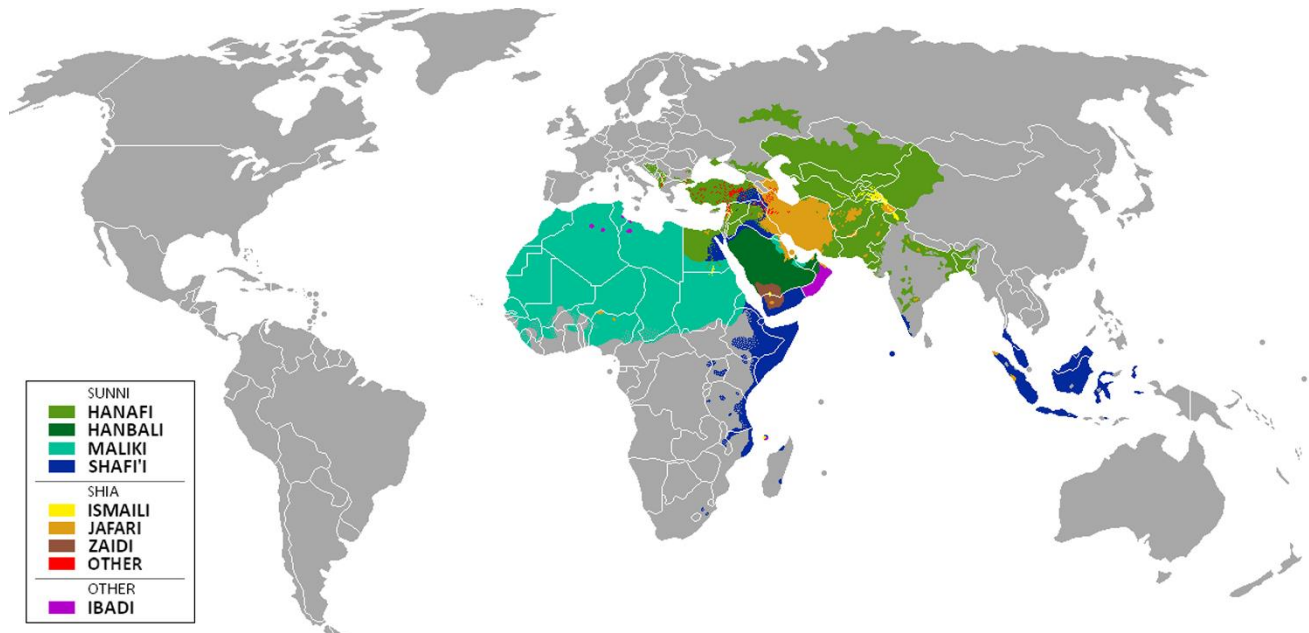
¹⁴⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/2/21/sentenced-to-death-for-blasphemy-surviving-pakistans-death-row>

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[https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{%22fulltext%22:\[%22Turkey%20welfare%20party%22\],%22documentcollectionid2%22:\[%22GRANDCHAMBER%22,%22CHAMBER%22\],%22itemid%22:\[%22001-60936%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/#{%22fulltext%22:[%22Turkey%20welfare%20party%22],%22documentcollectionid2%22:[%22GRANDCHAMBER%22,%22CHAMBER%22],%22itemid%22:[%22001-60936%22]})

¹⁴⁶ <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=25353>

interpretation of Sharia law that can be considered definitive, with all five main schools of the Sharia all claiming “Holy” status. Each of these versions has been adopted as dominant in one or other regions of the Islamic world, as shown below:



The biggest problem we face however is the imposition of the Sharia by governments. As has been pointed out:¹⁴⁷

“The Sharia contains religious obligations for Muslims, but they must be observed voluntarily. When the government enforces Sharia rules as law, Muslims lose their freedom to choose, and since they can’t choose, they also lose the chance to be rewarded by God for making good choices. Enforcement by the government encourages hypocrisy (saying or doing one thing while believing another) and takes away freedom of belief.”

Today’s world is far removed from the desert society of the first millennium when Islam arose. Today, in most democracies, women are guaranteed equality with men and have the protection of laws based on modern ideas of justice, freedom and human rights. Every adult: man and woman, is considered autonomous with certain inalienable rights, having the protection of just and equal laws without the need for special protection or control by male family members. The world has moved on since the 9th century, but the Sharia has not.

¹⁴⁷ <https://www.mpvusa.org/sharia-law>

Women under the Sharia

For centuries, Muslim women have been cowed into submission by the 7th century customs and practices of a desert tribe that are totally out of step with any modern understanding of human freedom and autonomy.

Throughout the history of Islam, women have been invisible: merely the bearers of children; under the control and “protection” of fathers, husband, brothers and sons; the bearers of family honour; and denied any right to personal autonomy. One will look in vain within the volumes of fatwas, interpretations, and judgements in Islamic scholarship for the name of a single woman author.

The plight of women under the Sharia is graphically illustrated in the video “Honor Diaries”¹⁴⁸ featuring personal testimony from nine women living under the Sharia. This factual account has, unsurprisingly, been falsely accused of being a “hate video” by Islamists and their supporters.¹⁴⁹

Claimed by the Islamists to be of divine origin, the Sharia is based largely on the hadith, the reported acts and sayings of the Prophet, and frequently in direct contradiction with the message of the Quran, a message which, corrupted, distorted and sidelined over the centuries, has denied Muslim women of any semblance of dignity and autonomy.¹⁵⁰

We do not need here to rehearse the absence of women’s equality with men in matters of family or civil law, nor their barbaric treatment, including death by stoning, honour killing, under-age and forced marriages, and lack or redress for rape, to be aware that *nowhere in the Quran* did Allah set the Prophet, nor by implication, any of his successors, in judgement over men or women.

The time has surely come for Muslim women to reclaim their God-given right to personal freedom and autonomy.

Conclusion

We have seen that the Sharia as a system of law developed in the earliest years of Islam for the purposes of political control in the newly conquered lands of North Africa and the Middle East, and has remained an instrument of political control ever since.

Given its lack of theological, historical, philosophical or political justification, liberal Muslims totally reject the use of the Sharia as the basis for civil or criminal law anywhere in the world.

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.amazon.com/s?k=Honor+Diaries&i=movies-tv-intl-ship&crid=2CY3FI2HN688W&srefix=honor+diaries>

¹⁴⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honor_Diaries

¹⁵⁰ See, for example: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/ABCs-Islamism-Everything-wanted-radical/dp/1777198623>

The Case for Islamic Reform

Part 8: In Conclusion

This series of essays has presented overwhelming evidence for the need for Islamic reform. For generations the world has been misled by flawed interpretations of Islam, culminating in Islamism: a political system masquerading as a religion that has come to dominate the Islamic world. The main principles underpinning the case for Islamic reform can be summarised as:

The 12 Principles of Islamic Reform

1. There is no one true version of Islam.
 2. Traditional Islamic history has little or no validity.
 3. Islam is our faith. Islamism is a political ideology lacking theological, historical, philosophical or scientific validity, and falls short of the internationally agreed standards of equality, democracy, justice and human rights.
 4. There can be no compulsion in religion: faith is personal; no-one can control what's in your heart.
 5. God will judge us on **our** decisions, not on those imposed upon us.
 6. Allah sent the Qur'an as a book of guidance, not of law.
 7. It's not the sound of the Qur'an that matters, it's the meaning.
 8. The Sharia is not God's law, it was compiled from dubious sources long after the death of the Prophet.
 9. Allah does not punish the innocent.
 10. Science is the best method ever found of understanding God's creation; the Qur'an is not a book of science.
 11. There is no Quranic justification for the promotion of hatred or violence in the name of Islam.
 12. **We call on Muslims word-wide to reject Islamism, hatred and violence, and to return to the benign Islam of our forefathers.**
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