

Islam and Islamophobia

By DEEPA KUMAR

OVER THE course of 2006, the attacks on Muslims and the vilification of Islam has been relentless. When Muslims protested the cartoons that caricatured Islam published in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten in September 2005, they were denounced for not appreciating Western values of "free speech." When a United Arab Emirates company was to take over the running of six U.S. ports from a British company in early 2006, the Democrats and Republicans whipped up a xenophobic frenzy. After Hezbollah defeated Israel in the Lebanon war, Bush referred to Hezbollah as an "Islamofascist" organization, and stated that "Islamic fascism" was the biggest threat facing the United States.<sup>1</sup> Tony Blair talked about an "arc of extremism [in a] specifically Muslim version" stretching across the Middle East. Then the Pope suggested that Islam was violent and that "reason" was more at home in the West. British Cabinet Minister Jack Straw advised Muslim women not to wear veils because the practice had "implications of separateness" which creates "parallel communities." And right behind him came Tony Blair himself, blithely supporting his bigoted minister.

In his address to the nation on September 11, 2006, President Bush's arguments revealed the perverse logic of Islamophobia today:

Since the horror of 9/11, we've learned a great deal about the enemy. And we have learned that their goal is to build a radical Islamic empire where women are prisoners in their homes, men are beaten for missing prayer meetings, and terrorists have a safe haven to plan and launch attacks on America and other civilized nations. The war against this enemy is more than a military conflict. It is the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century, and the calling of our generation... This struggle has been called a clash of civilizations. In truth, it is a struggle for civilization. We are fighting to maintain the way of life enjoyed by free nations.<sup>2</sup>

The common thread that ties together all these attacks on Islam is a polarized view of the world. On one side are the values of freedom, democracy, rationality, women's rights, liberty, and civilization; all associated, furthermore, with Christianity. On the other side are a people who are irrational, evil, barbaric, and uncivilized; who hate freedom and democracy and want to create, according to Bush, an Islamic empire stretching from Europe to South East Asia.

What is striking about this characterization of "the West" and "Islam," is not only the degree of hyperbole but the fact that it finds resonance within the wider culture. Today, it has become commonplace for media pundits, not only on Fox but also on CNN, to call for the racial profiling of Arabs and Muslims. Hollywood has churned out a steady stream of films that portray Arab Muslims either as terrorists incapable of being reasoned with, or as sheiks and belly-dancers.<sup>3</sup> Disney's *Alladin*, for instance, begins with a song that describes Arab society in the most stereotypical terms and then concludes: "It's barbaric, but hey-it's home." When the Pope issued a statement expressing regret over Muslim reactions to his comments, but not directly apologizing for equating Islam with violence, a poll found that two-thirds of Americans believed that the Pope had done enough to apologize to Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

Significant minorities of Americans hold negative views of Islam. In a U.S.A Today/Gallup Poll conducted in late July, 39 percent of Americans admitted to feeling some prejudice against Muslims. About the same percentage favored requiring Muslims, including U.S. citizens, to carry a special ID "as a means of preventing terrorist attacks in the United States." Nearly one in four—22 percent—said they wouldn't want to have Muslims as their neighbors.<sup>5</sup>

In short, Islamophobia today has wide resonance. However, these attitudes and ideas are not new, and they were not developed from scratch by the Bush or Blair administrations. Rather, Islamophobia in its current form derives from a body of knowledge known as "Orientalist" thought, which came into being in the late eighteenth century, and it is here we must turn in order to understand the roots of Islamophobia.

#### Orientalist roots

As Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, and other imperial nations embarked on a mission of colonial expansion, they developed ideologies to justify conquest. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, colonizers justified the slaughter and exploitation of the Indians in the New World by arguing that the Indian "savages" were wild animals, idolaters whom God had ordained to be enslaved by Christians.<sup>6</sup> The enslavement of Africans was similarly justified through the book of Genesis. It was argued that Africans were a cursed people (drawn from the myth of the Curse of Ham or Canaan) whose skin color had blackened to mark the curse. Thus, even after the African slaves converted to Christianity they could be retained as slaves.<sup>7</sup>

The shift from religious to "scientific" justifications took place in the eighteenth century in the context of the Enlightenment and the growth of science. Ethnologists such as Carolus Linnaeus and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach divided human beings into various races with distinct characteristics. Not surprisingly, the logic that flowed from this classification was that white Europeans were superior and other "darker, colored peoples" were both "ugly" and at best "semi-civilized."<sup>8</sup> Racism, as an ideology to justify slavery and conquest, grew up around this time.<sup>9</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, when the British poet Rudyard Kipling wrote "The white man's burden" he was simply reinforcing an idea that was by then widespread. Kipling wrote of the inherent superiority of the West and their "burden" to civilize and tame the peoples of the East. Characterized as "half devil, half child," the colonized were seen as both evil/barbaric, but also childlike and therefore in need of protection. Originally published in 1899, Kipling used the subtitle "The United States and the Philippine Islands," as a way to urge the U.S. to take on the same responsibilities as the British.<sup>10</sup><sup>11</sup>

The encounter with the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa took a similar form. When Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798 he took with him not only soldiers, but an army of scientists, botanists, biologists, architects, etc. all with the goal of producing a "scientific" survey of the country that was designed for use not by the Egyptians but by the French.<sup>11</sup> Various imperial nations commissioned scholars to develop knowledge about what they called the "Orient" in order to better control their subjects.

The body of Orientalist thought that emerged from this process has a few characteristic features. First, it draws on a "civilizational" view of history—the idea that civilizations come into being, prosper, and then go into decline. Such a view of history assumes that civilizations are distinct entities, which exist in isolation from each other, and which have a core set of values that drive them. Freedom, law, rationality, science, progress, intellectual curiosity, the spirit of invention, and so on, were seen as the core values of the so-called West, thus constructing the West as a unique civilization with its roots in ancient Greece. Every other civilization was then defined in relation to this notion of a superior West. Predictably, the world of Islam was characterized as despotic, static, undemocratic, and rigid.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to civilizational theories, the Orientalists drew on the theories of race discussed above that placed European Caucasians at the top of the racial hierarchy and colonized peoples close to the bottom. Maxime Rodinson describes the origin of race-based understandings of Muslims as follows:

The Oriental may always have been characterized as a savage enemy, but during the Middle Ages, he was at least considered on the same level as his European counterpart... In the nineteenth century, however, he became something quite separate, sealed off in his own specificity, yet worthy of a kind of grudging admiration. This is the origin of the homo islamicus, a notion widely accepted even today.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, Orientalists argue that the West is a dynamic, complex, and ever changing society, while the Orient, and particularly the world of Islam, is static, barbaric, and despotic, and therefore in need of Western intervention to bring about progressive change. If these ideas served to justify French and English conquest of the Middle East and North Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they are still very much in vogue today. Books like Rafael Patai's *The Arab Mind*, which was used by the U.S. military to devise the torture techniques used in Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, are a reassertion of homo islamicus. Modern-day Orientalists like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington have argued that the conflict between the U.S. and the Middle East is a "clash of civilizations." According to Huntington, who has done much to popularize this notion, "Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic societies."<sup>14</sup>

While these ideas remained on the margins during the 1990s, when the Clinton administration preferred the language of "humanitarian intervention" to justify U.S. imperialism, they have now assumed center stage after 9/11, with both the Republicans and Democrats equally comfortable with this rhetoric. The end result is a political climate in the U.S. where Islamophobic ideas are largely taken for granted. So much so that, as I have argued elsewhere, large sections of the Left have internalized the "clash of civilizations" thesis.<sup>15</sup> When Lewis's essay on the rise of Islamic "fundamentalism," "The Roots of Muslim Rage," was published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the cover featured an angry, bearded, turbaned man. In October 2005, when the *Progressive* ran an article by Sasha Abramsky that internalizes the clash argument, the cover featured a bearded, turbaned man brandishing a scimitar.

In what follows, I begin by laying out the Marxist approach to religion and then debunk five inter-related myths about Islam and the West that are in play today:

1. Islam is a monolithic religion;
2. Islam is a uniquely sexist religion;
3. The "Muslim mind" is incapable of rationality and science;
4. Islam is inherently violent;
5. The West spreads democracy, Islam spawns terrorism.

#### Marxism and religion

Historically, Orientalist scholars were philologists, and as philologists, they drew their conclusions about how different societies functioned simply by examining written texts. The Orientalist H.A.R. Gibb, who moved from Oxford to Harvard University in 1955, wrote about the unchanging "Arab mind" based on his readings of classical Islamic texts.<sup>16</sup> Imagine if scholars had similarly attempted to deduce observations about contemporary Catholics based on readings of the New Testament; they would surely have been scoffed at and derided. Yet, when it comes to learning about Muslims and Arabs such research methods are seen as acceptable. Gibb, and others like him, saw no need to gather information about the reality of life in the Middle East or elsewhere before drawing conclusions. Thus, much of their writing is based on distortions of history and reality. In contrast to this, Marxists explain the dynamics of a society, and the role of religion within it, based on actual historical reality. The Marxist method of analysis, historical materialism, looks at the concrete circumstances in which human beings shape, and are shaped by, their conditions of existence.

Marxists have argued that the impetus for religious thought initially emerged from human beings' relative lack of control over nature, and later, the oppressed condition of the exploited majority. As Frederick Engels notes, "All religion...is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces. In the beginning of history it was the forces of nature which were first so reflected and which in the course of further evolution underwent the most manifold and varied personifications among various peoples."<sup>17</sup> Religion has since played a contradictory role in history. It has functioned as part of the ideological apparatus of ruling classes, and as an ideology of the oppressed. Christianity, for example, emerged as the religion of the oppressed against the exploitation of the Romans. However, once the Roman Empire accepted the religion it was transformed into its opposite; it became a bulwark of the system.<sup>18</sup> Different denominations of Islam have followed similar trajectories, for example Shiism in Iran. Religion's mass appeal in most cases, however, has not been as a challenge to the status quo, but as a comfort and solace for the oppressed. As the Russian revolutionary Lenin wrote,

Those who toil and live in want all their lives are taught by religion to be submissive and patient while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward. But those who live by the labor of others are taught by religion to practice charity while on earth, thus offering them a very cheap way of justifying their entire existence as exploiters and selling them at a moderate price tickets to well-being in heaven.<sup>19</sup>

At various points, religious wars have been fought by various sects. Marxists understand these wars as being motivated not by particular religious differences, but by the class interests represented by the various factions. In his analysis of the Reformation in Germany, Engels writes:

In the so-called religious wars of the Sixteenth Century, very positive material class-interests were at play, and those wars were class wars just as were the later collisions in England and France. If the class struggles of that time appear to bear religious earmarks, if the interests, requirements and demands of the various classes hid themselves behind a religious screen, it little changes the actual situation, and is to be explained by conditions of the time.<sup>20</sup>

He goes on to explain that all attacks against feudalism had to confront the Church, and in so doing "all revolutionary, social and political doctrines, necessarily became theological heresies."<sup>21</sup> But these were not theological debates in the abstract. Rather they represented the interests of the nascent bourgeois class in their struggle against the feudal monarchy, as well as the more radically inclined artisan and peasant rebels against serfdom. During the German Reformation, peasant leaders, for example, demanded the abolition of serfdom "unless it be shown from the Gospel that we are serfs." Luther, a defender of property against the peasantry, insisted that those who died fighting rebellious peasants were "true martyrs for God."<sup>22</sup> During the various revolutionary wars, the bourgeoisie was animated by an explicit opposition to religious dogma. However, once in power, the bourgeoisie brought religion back as a bulwark of established order.<sup>23</sup>

In short, the role of religion in any society is best understood by examining the specific historical conditions that constitute that society. All the major religions of the world have undergone transformations in order to adapt to changing circumstances. In some instances, religion has played a progressive role and in others a reactionary one. In still others, it has simply adapted to new conditions in order to retain its mass appeal.

#### Myth 1: Islam is a monolithic religion

The idea that Islam is a monolithic religion is not only false but functions as the basis for all the other myths. For it is only by denying the diversity of Islamic history and practices that one can then argue that it has certain inherent, unchanging characteristics that render it anti-democratic, violent, backward-looking, etc.

Islam is practiced in dozens of countries around the world. According to U.S. State Department figures, nearly 1.5 billion people around the

world are Muslims—85 percent are Sunni and 15 percent are Shiites.<sup>24</sup> Within these two main denominations, there are many more branches.

There are several countries and regions which have majority Muslim populations, and they span the globe from Indonesia, to Bangladesh, to several central Asian countries, the Middle East, and North Africa. Islam looks very different in each of these regions and countries largely because as the religion spread it adopted the customs and traditions of the people of various lands. Thus, Sufi Islam practiced in Northern India is quite different from Wahabi/Salafi Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia, which is in turn different from the type of Shiism practiced in Iran. The claim that Islam is a homogenous and monolithic religion is therefore ludicrous, given the diversity of Islamic practices in nations that run the gamut from secular democracies (such as Indonesia) to dictatorships (such as Saudi Arabia).

Much of the current Islamophobic rhetoric seeks to demonize Arabs in particular. However, all Muslims are not Arabs, and all Arabs are not Muslims. Arabs are people who speak Arabic, share certain common cultural traditions, and claim a common Arab identity.<sup>25</sup> Geographically, the Arab world has traditionally been divided into two parts (east and west of the river Nile): the Maghreb or the West, which includes Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan and so on, and the Mashreq or the East, which includes Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and all the countries to the east up to, but not including, Iran. Because of linguistic and cultural differences, Iranians and Turks are not considered Arabs.

Like all religions, Islam has adapted. Religious texts may be more or less fixed, but the ideas and practices they are made to justify are ever-changing, based on historical transformations that are independent of religious ideology. As Chris Harman notes,

Islam is no different to any other religion in these respects. It arose in one context, among a trading community in the towns of 7th century Arabia, in the midst of a society still mainly organized on a tribal basis. It flourished within the succession of great empires carved out by some of those who accepted its doctrines. It persists today as the official ideology of numerous capitalist states (Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Pakistan, Iran etc), as well as the inspiration of many oppositional movements.

It has been able to survive in such different societies because it has been able to adapt to differing class interests. It has obtained the finance to build its mosques and employ its preachers in turn from the traders of Arabia, the bureaucrats, landowners and merchants of the great empires, and the industrialists of modern capitalism. But at the same time it has gained the allegiance of the mass of people by putting across a message offering consolation to the poor and oppressed. At every point its message has balanced between promising a degree of protection to the oppressed and providing the exploiting classes with protection against any revolutionary overthrow.<sup>26</sup>

Myth 2: Islam is a uniquely sexist religion

Islam is unique in its sexist approach to women, goes an oft-repeated argument, and therefore, Muslim women need to be rescued by white men in their pith helmets and jodhpurs. This was one of the arguments that the Bush administration used to justify its war on Afghanistan. And more recently, France passed a ban on the hijab (couched as a ban on all religious symbols in schools) and many argued that this would “liberate” Muslim women. The reality is that neither Afghan nor French Muslim women have been liberated by these actions. Today Afghan women are no better off than they were before the war.<sup>27</sup> If anything, as the documentary *Afghanistan Unveiled* captures quite well, in the rural areas conditions have only deteriorated.<sup>28</sup> The French ban represents an attack on all visible expressions of Islam, and therefore a restriction of religious rights. It does not represent a step forward for women, which would have entailed allowing women to choose whether or not to wear the hijab.<sup>29</sup>

This argument about women’s liberation has a long history. The British used a similar justification when they invaded and occupied Egypt in 1882. Lord Cromer, who oversaw the occupation, viewed Egyptian society and Islam as follows: “Islam as a social system has been a complete failure...the degradation of women in the East is a canker that begins its destructive work early in childhood, and has eaten into the whole system of Islam.”<sup>30</sup> The solution was that Muslims “be persuaded or forced into imbibing the true spirit of Western civilization.”<sup>31</sup> For Cromer there was no contradiction between championing women’s rights in Egypt while trying to curtail them at home. As a colonial overlord, he was simply deploying arguments that could strengthen Britain’s hold over Egypt. At home in Britain, he was against women’s rights and was a founding member and president of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage. Similarly, while the Bush administration trumpeted women’s liberation in Afghanistan, it has sought to further curtail women’s rights at home.

Imperialist justifications for war and occupation have always been a sham, but one might still ask if Islam as a religion is uniquely oppressive towards women. After all, women’s rights have been severely curtailed by right-wing Islamist regimes in power, such as that in Afghanistan under the Taliban. All the world’s major religions, however, are sexist. Doesn’t the Christian creation myth tell us that Eve was created out of Adam’s rib? Women who were thought to be witches were burned at the stake, not only in Europe but in the U.S. barely three centuries ago.

Women’s rights are under attack in the U.S. today. Only 13 percent of U.S. counties offer abortion services. Several states have passed laws that allow pharmacists to refuse to fill birth control prescriptions, including the “morning after” pill. At the same time as women’s right to control their bodies has been restricted, the fetus has been granted rights. The *Unborn Victims of Violence Act* makes it a crime to harm a fetus during an assault on a pregnant woman. These attacks on women’s rights are due in no small part to the influence of the Christian Right on U.S. politics.

Recently, Nicaragua, a predominantly Catholic country, passed a ban on abortion making no exception even if the woman’s life is in danger. In short, Islam has no monopoly on misogyny. Furthermore, while predominantly Muslim countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia have elected women to the position of head of state, the “enlightened” U.S. has yet to do the same. The dominant religion in any society does not automatically shape social reality, rather religious ideology is itself shaped and reshaped by material factors.

There has been much debate about the role of women in Islam. The Koran, like any religious text, is contradictory and lends itself to multiple interpretations. There are passages in the Koran that grant women the same rights as men to divorce and that permit them to own and inherit property, marking a step forward for women in Arabian society at the time.<sup>32</sup> There are, however, also passages that condone polygamy and that restrict women’s inheritance rights to only half of what men are entitled to.<sup>33</sup>

Scholars like Leila Ahmed and Asma Barlas have argued that Islam is not inherently misogynistic.<sup>34</sup> They point to the egalitarian passages in the Koran that suggest equality between men and women. Barlas argues that sexist interpretations of the Koran are a product of particular societies that needed religious authority to justify sexual inequality. Ahmed states that prior to the institutionalization of Islam, women in Arab society participated in warfare and religion and had sexual autonomy. Montgomery Watt even goes so far as to argue that Arab society at the time was predominantly matrilineal.<sup>35</sup> However, Maxime Rodinson rejects this analysis stating instead that Arabia is more appropriately described as a patrilineal society where polyandrous practices, combined with substantial social roles for women, prevailed in certain regions.<sup>36</sup> The Prophet Muhammad’s first wife Khadija was a wealthy woman who at age forty, proposed to the twenty-seven-year-old Muhammad. And while Khadija was Muhammad’s only wife at the time, she had several husbands. After her death, Muhammad practiced polygamy and married several women.

As Islam spread, it adopted the cultural practices of various empires, including that of the neighboring Persian and the Byzantine empires. Among the Christians who populated the Middle East and the Mediterranean there were more rigid customs associated with women. In the Christian Byzantine Empire, the sexes were segregated, women were not supposed to be seen in public, they had to be veiled, and were

given only rudimentary education. As the expanding Islamic empire incorporated these regions, it also assimilated these cultural and social practices.<sup>37</sup> In short, the particular misogynistic practices that Islam came to adopt were largely inherited from the religious customs of the neighboring—and conquered—Christian and Jewish societies. The significant point here is that sexist attitudes towards women, far from being unique to Islam, were prevalent among Christians and Jews as well.

However, this was not the first time that the women of this region saw a further curtailment of their rights under Western influence. A similar fate had befallen Egyptian women when the Greeks conquered Egypt around 333 BC.<sup>38</sup> In contrast to Greek society, where women led segregated lives, where their prime role was to care for children, and where the law considered a wife to be a “veritable child,” in Egyptian society women, especially upper-class women, had a high status. In the period of the New Kingdom (1570–950 BC), Egyptian women and men were considered equals under the law. Women had the right to inherit property and to own and manage it, marriage laws were egalitarian, women could move freely in society and weren’t secluded. This is not to suggest that sexism didn’t exist. It was still very much a male-dominated society, but the systematic oppression of women of the kind found in Greek society didn’t exist until Greek conquest of Egypt. In fact, the Greek philosopher Aristotle believed that the male “is by nature superior, and the female inferior, and the one rules and the other is ruled.”<sup>39</sup> In short, the great “liberal” Western tradition is not only mired in sexism, but as the case of Egypt shows, it has even played a part in curtailing women’s rights in other societies. Moreover, it is crucial to remember that the rights that women do enjoy anywhere in the world today are the result of struggles waged by women (and men) for those rights. It took no less than a hundred years of bitter struggles for women to win the right to vote in the United States.

Myth 3: The “Muslim mind” is incapable of science, rational thinking, and reason

On September 12, 2006, when Pope Benedict XVI gave his now-infamous speech, he equated Catholicism with reason and Islam with violence and the lack of reason. Paraphrasing a fourteenth century Byzantine emperor, he stated that when a religion (like Islam) is spread through violence it goes against reason, and also against nature, for “not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God’s nature.”<sup>40</sup> In making this argument, the Pope joined a long line of Orientalists who have argued that reason, rationality, and science are alien to the world of Islam.

Ernest Renan, who championed science and reason, in an essay published in 1883 titled “Islam and Science” stated: “Early Islam and the Arabs who professed it were hostile to scientific and philosophic spirit.”<sup>41</sup> In a lecture at the Sorbonne, he said:

Anyone with any knowledge of current affairs can see quite clearly the actual inferiority of the Muslim countries, the decadence of the states governed by Islam, the intellectual barrenness of the races that derive their culture and education from that religion alone. All those who have traveled to the East or to Africa have been struck by the totally narrow mind of the true believer, the kind of iron band around his head that closes him off completely from science and him quite incapable of learning anything or opening his mind to any new ideas.<sup>42</sup>

Today, the so-called debate on whether Iran should be allowed to have nuclear weapons draws from these arguments. The mainstream media faithfully reproduce the line of the political elites and don’t raise the question of why it is legitimate for the U.S. to police other nations, especially when it is the only country to have ever used nuclear weapons. Iran is represented, at best, as a petulant child incapable of responsibly handling nuclear technology, and at worst, a demonic force that must be vanquished. Little time is devoted to shedding light on why Iran, as a rational political actor, might want to acquire nuclear weapons. After all, Iran is surrounded by states that possess nukes such as India, Pakistan, China, Russia, and Israel, not to mention by U.S. bases in Qatar, Iraq, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan, which might have nuclear weapons.

There are many ways to debunk this myth about Islam, science, and rationality. I will focus on the hidden history of Islam and science. The important point here is that the West would not have gone through the renaissance had it not been for the contributions made by the Muslim empires.

After the fall of Rome from the fifth to the tenth century, Europe entered the so-called Dark Ages, a period of scientific, artistic, and cultural decline. During the seventh century, Islam came onto the scene and the Muslim armies established a vast empire that stretched from Central Asia through parts of Europe, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. The Muslim rulers of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties (661–1258 AD) recognized the advanced development of the kingdoms and cultures they had conquered and took it upon themselves to assimilate and adopt these cultures. They established libraries and translation centers where the great works of science, medicine, and philosophy, both Eastern and Western, were collected and translated. This age of translation was followed by a period of great creativity when a new generation of Muslim thinkers and scientists built upon this knowledge and made their own contributions.

The Persian scholar Ibn Sina—known in Western histories as Avicenna—laid the basis for the study of logic, science, philosophy, politics, and medicine. Ibn Rushd systematized Aristotle’s thought so as to introduce rationalism and anti-mysticism to a new audience; but he also went beyond Aristotle to promote rational thought as a virtue in itself. Ibn Rawandi wrote several books questioning the basic principles not only of Christianity and Judaism, but of Islam as well. Ibn Rawandi belonged to the Mu’tazilite sect, who went so far as to question whether the Koran was really a collection of the revelations that Muhammad received from God. They used rationalist thinking, fragments of Greek philosophy, and their own observations to develop theories to explain the physical world.<sup>43</sup> In short, science thrived in the world of the Islamic empires.

When Europe emerged from the Dark Ages, its renaissance in art, culture, and the sciences drew on this enduring legacy of the past, as European thinkers flocked to the great Muslim libraries to not only re-learn their own history and traditions, but also absorb the further development of these traditions by Muslim thinkers. But this history is either ignored or revised by the Orientalists who present this mythical entity known as the “West” that apparently developed in isolation from the rest of the world.

It is also significant that the Pope in denouncing Islam for lacking reason, fails to bring up the Catholic Church’s hostile opposition to the scientific revolution and to the birth of non-religious and rational ways of understanding the world. The scientific revolution (and the Enlightenment) stood in opposition to Christian dogma and was viewed as a threat by the Church. Scientists who employed reason and rationality to explain the physical world were severely punished. Giordano Bruno, who championed the Copernican system of astronomy, was imprisoned for eight years by the Roman and Venetian Inquisition for refusing to recant his beliefs. He was later burned at the stake. Galileo was similarly brought before the Inquisition and placed under house arrest for the rest of his life.

The Pope’s speech is deeply rooted in Orientalist myths because he has an interest not only in presenting a particular vision of a rational and enlightened “West,” but also in obscuring Christianity’s history of violence. He thus quoted the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus, who said, “Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.”<sup>44</sup> The great irony of our times is that the Pope, who used to be head of the Vatican office of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly known as the Inquisition), can denounce the spreading of religion through violence and get away with it.

Myth 4: Islam is an inherently violent religion

Today, it has become commonplace to argue that Islam is an inherently violent religion and that the growth of political Islam is the logical

result of the teachings of the Koran. One of the Danish cartoons featured the Prophet Muhammad with a bomb on his turban. This is nothing if not the visual depiction of the notion that Islam is inherently violent. The term "jihad" is used repeatedly to signify a "holy war" that the East is supposedly waging against the West. Mahmood Mamdani argues against this translation, stating that the term jihad has two meanings. The first, which is the greater jihad, refers to the struggle within oneself and against one's own weakness. The second, the lesser jihad, is about self-preservation and self-defense and is more appropriately described as a "just war" rather than a "holy war." Mamdani shows how the "just war" has been "occasional and isolated, marking points of crisis in Islamic history."<sup>45</sup>

Yet, this is not how the history of Islam is represented by politicians and the media. Instead, Islam is portrayed as a violent and intolerant religion. Thus, Bush routinely refers to the "enemy" as "evil doers" bent on destroying the West through violence and establishing a "radical Islamic empire." U.S. News and World Report recently featured a historical overview of Islam titled "Spreading the faith: A chronology," that begins with the birth of Muhammad in 570 and ends with 9/11, thus drawing an unbroken line of continuity between the two events.<sup>46</sup>

These claims are self-serving, and justify a level of violence in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine on the part of the United States, its allies, and Israel that far surpasses in the scale of killing and devastation anything that small bands of terrorists have inflicted in the United States, Israel, or Europe.

I will address this myth in two parts. In this section, I will discuss Christianity's history of brutality. In the following section, I explain why today's Islamist movements are not the direct descendants of seventh-century Islam, but are instead the product of contemporary historical conditions.

The claim that Islam was spread through war is indeed accurate. In the two decades after the Prophet's death in 632 A.D., the Muslim armies defeated the two great neighboring empires, the Byzantine and Persian (Sassanid) empires, conquered large segments of their land, and set up an Islamic empire. The reason why the Muslim armies could defeat these two powerful empires is that constant warfare between the Byzantines and the Persians over the previous century had left the people war-weary. In fact, in some villages the people actually welcomed the Muslim armies. Once in power, and unlike their orthodox Christian counterparts who persecuted heretics and ruled through fear, intimidation, and terror, the Muslim invaders gave people the choice to either convert to Islam or pay a tax.

While the Pope and his ilk like to harp on Islam's use of war and violence, they want us to forget Christianity's own brutal history. Christianity had also risen to dominance through conquest and conversion, first in the Roman world and then in the neighboring areas of Europe, Armenia, Arabia, Eastern Africa and Central Asia.<sup>47</sup> And the Crusades were yet to come. These religious wars waged by European Christians from the eleventh to the thirteenth century were driven partly by religious fervor to capture Jerusalem, and partly by the desire to loot the wealth of the region.

During the First Crusade of 1099, the crusaders went on a killing spree after taking control of Jerusalem, and murdered almost the entire population of Muslim men, women, and children. The Jews, who fought side by side with the Muslims to defend the city, were not spared either. The crusaders set fire to a synagogue where the Jews were hiding, and made sure that every single Jew burned to death.<sup>48</sup> The same levels of brutality were seen even during the Third Crusade, when King Richard of England (Richard the Lion-Hearted) beheaded thousands of men in cold blood in full view of their armies after a battle. In contrast, after the Sultan of Egypt, Saladin, successfully retook Jerusalem from the crusaders, acts of vengeance and violence against the crusaders were forbidden, Jews were given state money to rebuild synagogues, and churches were left untouched.<sup>49</sup> This is consistent with the way in which the Muslim empires treated Christians and Jews. During 500 years of Muslim reign in Jerusalem, from the seventh to the eleventh century, Christian churches were left largely untouched, and Jews were permitted to return and resettle in the area. This harmony was violently interrupted by the Crusades, when the Christian crusaders wreaked havoc in the region, destroyed synagogues and mosques, and killed Jews and Muslims.

Christian empires were no less brutal towards their own populations, and the Inquisitions stand out as an example of the incredibly repressive forms that Christian rule took in Europe. The Inquisitions consisted of a series of movements orchestrated by the Catholic Church and Christian orthodoxy to reassert their economic control over Europe. The Spanish Inquisition, for instance, is remembered for its utter brutality, mass torture, and the burning of men and women at the stake. Many Jews and Christians fled Europe to escape the Inquisition and sought a new home under the Muslim Ottoman Empire (1299-1922). Ottoman society was far more tolerant, Jews and Christians lived peacefully and some even attained high positions in the bureaucracy (sometimes through conversion to Islam but at other times even without conversion).<sup>50</sup>

Today, no sane person would look at this brutal history of Christianity and argue that all Catholics are bloodthirsty fanatics. To my knowledge, no mainstream newspaper or magazine has drawn a straight line between the Crusades and the Holocaust. Yet, when it comes to demonizing Muslims, it would appear that this sort of logic is acceptable.

On balance, the history of Christianity is just as violent as, if not more violent than, that of Islam, yet Orientalists have undermined this history and cast Islam as the violent aggressor. The scholarly bigot Bernard Lewis claims, for instance, that

[t]he struggle between Islam and the West has lasted fourteen centuries. It has consisted of a long series of attacks and counterattacks, jihads and crusades, conquests and reconquests. Today much of the Muslim world is again seized by an intense and violent-resentment of the West. Suddenly, America has become the archenemy, the incarnation of evil, the diabolic opponent of all that is good...for Muslims.<sup>51</sup>

Rewriting history, Lewis argues that Islam is the aggressor, while the West simply responds, whereas in truth "resentment," to the extent that such a thing exists in the Middle East, is a product of imperialist intervention in the region.

Mamdani recently observed that after 9/11, the sales of the Koran rose as Americans sought out the holy book of the Muslims to find an explanation for 9/11. He pointed out that, on the contrary, when the U.S. bombed and destroyed Afghanistan and Iraq, the people of the Middle East didn't rush off to buy the Bible to look for explanations of U.S. policies. For there are no cultural or religious explanations for these wars. The explanations are historical, political, and economic, but by focusing on religious wars, the peddlers of the "clash of civilizations" thesis insist that we look for cultural explanations instead. This recourse to "culture talk" then takes attention away from the real reasons for U.S. intervention, offering up instead some vague references to transhistorical civilization and cultural rivalries.<sup>52</sup> There are some in the Middle East who share this view and see U.S. intervention as a cultural and religious war. However, in this they are just as mistaken as their Western counterparts. The U.S. is in Iraq and Afghanistan not to wage a religious war but to assert its control over the region's strategic resource: oil. This is why Saudi Arabia, whose royal family adheres to the ultra-conservative Wahhabi/Salafi strand of Islam, is an ally of the U.S., while the largely secular Syrian Baathists are not.

Myth 5: The West spreads democracy, while Islam spawns terrorism

The classic version of this myth states that Islamic civilization [sic] is not capable of democracy, and it can only produce despotism. Since it is a static and unchanging society, it is the burden of the West to civilize, modernize, and democratize. This "white man's burden" argument has been used, in different forms and guises, by all the European powers in the past. It is no wonder, then, that today the U.S. too finds it useful, just as it seeks, for the first time, to actually occupy and administer a Middle Eastern country. The Bush

administration has insisted again and again that the U.S. is in the Middle East to bring democracy to the people of the region.

The reality, needless to say, is quite different from this rhetoric. The U.S. has never had an interest in "bringing democracy" to the people of the Middle East, or to any other people for that matter. If anything, the U.S. has a record of wrecking democratic movements and replacing them with dictatorships.<sup>53</sup>

After the Second World War, the Middle East and North Africa were rocked by national liberation struggles. Between 1932 and 1962, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria all succeeded in shaking off the hold of their colonial masters (mainly Britain and France). In the wake of these struggles there was a widespread mood for reform and change in region, and new political and social forces emerged. Secular Arab nationalism gained a stronghold, but socialist and communist parties also vied for political influence.

U.S.-Middle East policy has been motivated by one chief objective: namely, to control the oil wealth of that region, at any cost. Consequently, U.S. foreign policy has been directed toward preventing the emergence of any government or movement that might threaten its dominance in the region. Thus the U.S. ruling class viewed the emergence of Arab nationalism and socialism as a threat. From the 1950s to the 1970s, U.S. policy in the region was twofold: to minimize the influence of the Soviet Union, and to squash all progressive and leftist challenges to U.S. domination.

It achieved these goals in various ways: it maintained powerful naval forces and military bases in the region. When necessary and where possible it intervened militarily, such as in 1958 when U.S. Marines briefly entered Lebanon to block an attempt by Arab nationalist forces to topple the pro-Western government in power. It propped up dictatorships and repressive regimes such as the Saudi monarchy and funded, trained, and armed the military and security forces of its allies. It also hatched coups to get rid of unfriendly governments. In 1953, the CIA toppled the secular nationalist Mohammed Mossadegh who had been democratically elected to power in Iran in 1951. Mossadegh's crime was that he nationalized the oil industry. The U.S. then replaced him with Reza Pahlavi, the Shah, who ruled with an iron fist, murdered and tortured tens of thousands of political dissenters, and abolished all political parties but his own.

The strongest challenge to the U.S. was Arab nationalism. Arab nationalists like Gamel Abdel Nasser attempted to unify Arabs across different countries as a way to fight imperialism, particularly U.S. imperialism. The program of Arab nationalism rapidly acquired revolutionary overtones in response to militant working-class pressures from below. Nasser, the president of Egypt, went so far as to declare himself an advocate of "Arab socialism." Although what he meant by socialism was a more or less authoritarian state planning of the economy, or "state capitalism," even this was too much for the U.S., as it pushed Egypt closer to its Cold War rival, the USSR.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, the U.S. ruling class used every means necessary to not only block Arab nationalism, but also curtail the influence of various communist and socialist parties. This involved, for instance, aiding governments and right-wing paramilitaries in killing leftists, and in 1963, the CIA supplied the Baathists with the names of Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) members after the Baathists grabbed power in a coup. It involved cultivating Israel as the proxy of the U.S. in the region, particularly after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. It also meant supporting and funding Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which the U.S. saw as a bulwark against the Left.

If today the main political forces in the Middle East are Islamist parties and organizations, it is in no small part due to U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. played a key role in marginalizing secular and leftist forces, thereby creating the political vacuum that Islamist groups would come to fill. In addition, the U.S. funded, armed, and trained the Mujahideen in Afghanistan to fight their proxy war against the Soviets in the 1980s. In the process, the U.S. created an army of jihadist fighters who would turn on their patrons once the Soviets were defeated. This turn was to be expected, given that modern Islamist organizations, whether mainstream or right wing, came into being as a means to fight imperialism (first British and French colonialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and then later U.S. imperialism).

There are also internal factors that explain the rise of political Islam. Arab nationalism, despite its radical rhetoric and promises, had weaknesses and contradictions. Ultimately, it was a movement of the middle classes in the interest of the middle classes. And like their counterparts in many other postcolonial nations, the Arab nationalists failed to deliver economic growth and prosperity for the vast majority of ordinary people, establishing oppressive dictatorships that crushed dissent. The Left in the region, primarily the thoroughly Stalinized communist parties, failed to offer an independent class-based alternative to the nationalists, but rather tailed them uncritically. The ICP, for example, offered support to the nationalist Qasim regime in 1959, even denouncing class struggle as "left-wing extremism," at the same time that the party was being repressed by the regime.<sup>55</sup> The failure of nationalist movements, combined with the crushing impact of poverty and the pressures of capitalism, the weakness of the Left, and the support given at times by local ruling classes to Islamic parties have all played a part in strengthening the parties of Islamism.<sup>56</sup>

In short, it is a combination of these pressures—U.S. imperialism, on the one hand, and internal dynamics on the other—that laid the groundwork for the emergence of political Islam. And radical Islamist groups, far from being the direct outgrowth of the teaching of the Prophet in the seventh century, are the products of particular historical conditions.

#### Conclusion

Today, the weakness of the Left and the collapse of liberalism in the U.S. has meant that much of the history discussed in this article remains hidden. Many liberals, and some on the left as well, have bought into the clash of civilizations argument. Thus, when liberals went along with Bush's argument that the U.S. invaded Afghanistan to liberate the women of that country, they bought into the racist idea that it is legitimate for the U.S. to "democratize" the Middle East because the people of the region are incapable of doing it themselves. On the flip side of this coin, some antiwar liberals have argued that it is not legitimate for the U.S. to "democratize" the Middle East because "democracy" is an alien concept to the people of the region.

Confronting Islamophobia and challenging American racism towards the people of the Middle East is an essential precondition for the rebirth of a strong antiwar movement. Thus far, the movement's inability, or unwillingness, to confront Islamophobia has been one of its biggest weaknesses. And while Bush argues that "the calling of our generation" is to fight "Islamofascism," we need to assert instead that the calling of our generation is to build an anti-racist antiwar movement that can challenge the attacks on Muslims and Arabs domestically and that can stop U.S. imperialism in its tracks and shape the course of the twenty-first century. Our future, quite literally, depends on building such a movement.

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