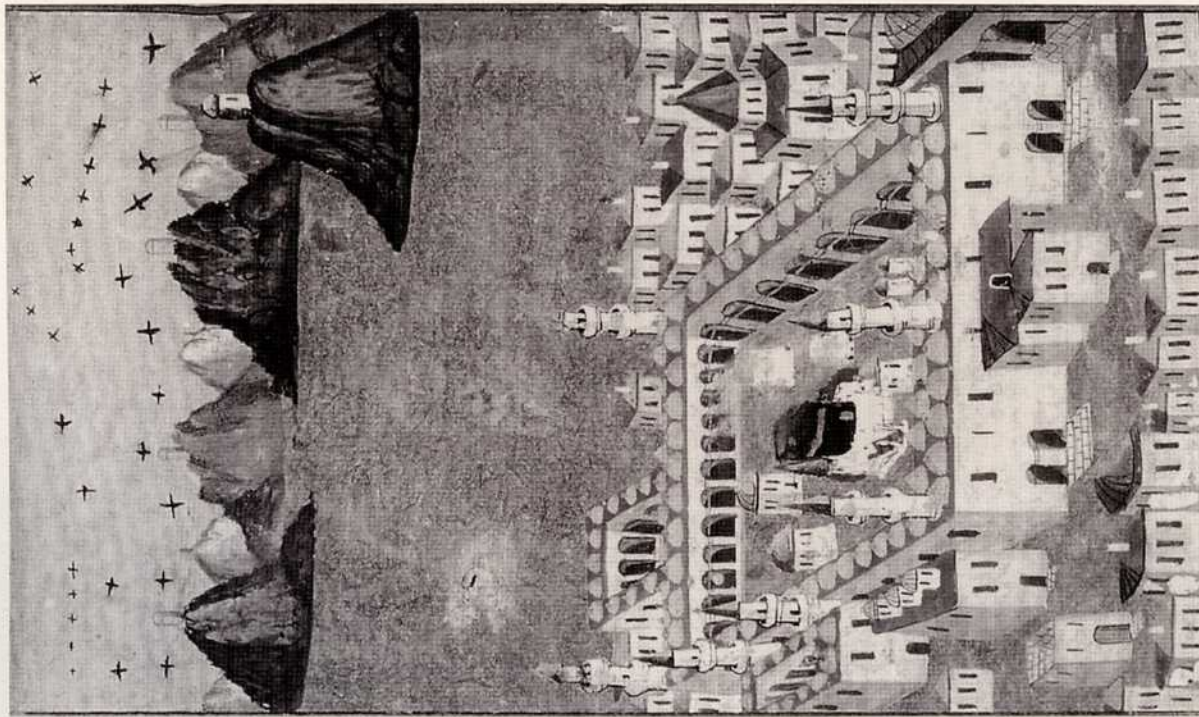




Following MUHAMMAD

*Rethinking Islam in the
Contemporary World*

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Union and its Communist allies; and the Third World, the poor and underdeveloped countries of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. It has been more than a decade since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet empire, so the Second World evidently no longer exists. How many worlds are left?

Conventional wisdom has it that, despite the demise of the USSR, there is still a confrontation of the West against the rest. The chief spokesperson for this viewpoint in recent years has been Samuel Huntington, whose provocative article "The Clash of Civilizations" became a widely read book.² His thesis, based on a superficial and tendentious reading of history, claimed that there are a given number of civilizations (up to eight, in theory) that will inevitably clash until one emerges triumphant. After eliminating the least important of these civilizations, he concludes by postulating an eventual death struggle between the progressive West and the retrograde Islamic world.

This argument was met with dismay and concern among intellectuals and political leaders in majority Muslim countries. Only a few years ago most of these countries lay under European colonial domination, the result of aggressive European military expansion in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia since the days of Napoleon. Would this argument be used to unleash new military adventures against the enemies of "the West"? Significant voices were raised to refute this confrontational position. President Khatami of Iran responded by proposing an alternate view, which he called the "dialogue of civilizations." The United Nations adopted the formula of dialogue of civilizations as a theme for worldwide discussions in 2001.

The fact is, as American Islamic studies specialist Marshall Hodgson pointed out long ago, there has not been a separate "Muslim world" for more than 200 years. Politically, economically, culturally, and of course militarily, the fates of majority Muslim countries have been closely tied to Europe and America



Islam as Part of the Contemporary World

For more than thirty years I have been convinced that the greatest contemporary gap in understanding lies between the majority of Americans and Europeans—the so-called West—and the rest of the world. As an American exposed to international experience early (I spent a year as an exchange student to Chile at age sixteen), I came to realize that despite their many virtues, Americans are not very good at understanding other cultures. This gap in understanding is largely a one-way affair. That is, in the process we now call globalization, the products of American and European culture are broadcast to every country in the world. As a result of the era of European colonialism, languages such as French, Spanish, English, Portuguese, and Russian are the most prestigious vehicles of education and mass communication throughout Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. In contrast, it is possible for educated Americans and Europeans to ignore Chinese, Hindi-Urdu, Arabic, Bengali, and Malay-Indonesian with perfect equanimity, even though more people today speak these non-European languages.¹ While American and European authors, artists, and actors are known throughout the world, it has been a rare occurrence for an Asian, Middle Easterner, or African to obtain this kind of status.

Although globalization has been seen as the defining process of our time, we seem to be uneasy and confused about what kind of world we actually live in. It used to be that we spoke of three worlds: the First World, consisting of economically and technologically developed nations, primarily the United States, Europe, and Japan; the Second World, mainly the former Soviet

throughout this period. International financial networks, multinational corporations, media conglomerates, and the Internet have now created a world in which it is impossible to keep one culture isolated from the rest. If one looks at the more than fifty nations that have a majority Muslim population today, one is forced to confront a bewildering diversity of languages, ethnic groups, and differing ideological and sectarian positions (though the flow of information can still be largely in one direction). In the heart of "the West," there are today at least 5 million American Muslims and 10 million European Muslims. So why do we continue speaking of "the Muslim world" in opposition to "the West," when such a concept is out of step with reality? Do we really wish to condone the notion that there are two violently opposed worlds struggling for global domination? The extraordinary mismatch between Euro-American ideas of Islam and the realities lived by Muslims will form a recurring theme throughout this book. There is no one simple or easy explanation, though one must look both at history and at contemporary political interests to see the larger patterns.³

To begin with, it may be helpful to ask how we define "the West," or "Western civilization," since this phrase has no obvious geographical meaning if it includes territories as far apart as North America, Europe, and possibly Japan. As an explanation, I would put forward an academic ritual in which I was involved some twenty years ago, when as a first-year professor at Pomona College in Claremont, California, I was asked to take part in the Ceremony of the Flame. The basic structure of this ceremony was simple: a series of individuals, beginning with the chairman of the Board of Trustees, enacted a flame-passing ritual, in which the flame of knowledge and enlightenment was transmitted to the college president, a senior faculty member, a new faculty member (me), a senior student, and finally a lowly first-year student (this was originally done with lit candles but, for

safety reasons, was now performed with battery-operated, candle-shaped lights). Meanwhile, an announcer read a short passage explaining the ceremony, starting with the phrase, "In the beginning, there was light." With obvious religious overtones referring to both Genesis and the Gospel of John, the narration went on to describe the gradual westward movement of this light of knowledge, until it ultimately reached its destination in the foothills of Southern California. Simultaneously, college officials symbolically passed this knowledge on to students.

Although the example may seem eccentric, it presents the essential outlines of the concept of Western civilization that is transmitted to millions of American students through history textbooks, and which is believed by many to be the essence of our culture and society. The typical sequence of this civilization's development begins briefly in Mesopotamia and Egypt before heading to Greece, where it really gets started. It is important to notice that, as civilization moves west, its preceding locations fall out and become irrelevant. After Greece declines, then comes Rome, followed by the gradual ascendancy of France, Germany, and possibly Spain. But (at least in American versions) the next destination is definitely England, followed ultimately by America as its ultimate goal. The special twist that makes California the apex of Western civilization is disputed, however, in places like New York.

Presented in this manner, the concept of Western civilization may appear ludicrous. More seriously, one might say that the defining characteristics of Western civilization are considered to derive from two sources: Israelite prophecy and revelation, on one hand, as a source of ethics and religion, and Greek philosophy and reasoning, on the other, as the basis of both science and democracy. As a straightforward historical description, this account of the origins of European civilization seems reasonably accurate. Nevertheless, if we attempt to come up with a parallel

definition for Islamic civilization, we are presented with a predicament. The Islamic tradition also claims to be based on the same two sources, the prophets of Israel and the philosophers of Greece. The Qur'an acknowledges a long line of prophets including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Greek philosophy and science, moreover, were subjects of intense study in the lands ruled by Muslim caliphs when they were barely known in Christian Europe; it was only due to translations from Arabic into Latin that Aristotle was rediscovered in Paris and Oxford. Philosophy continued to undergo significant development, particularly in Iran and India, up to modern times (although this has been largely unknown outside specialist circles). The European and American claim to exclusive ownership of the two main sources of civilization is therefore historically false. There were also important countertrends in the symbols of civilization that moved east instead of west. After Rome itself had fallen to barbarian conquest, Constantinople (also known as Byzantium) was the capital of the ongoing Roman Empire. When the Ottoman sultans conquered Constantinople in 1453, they themselves self-consciously took on the mantle of the Roman Empire; although Western Europeans knew them as Turks, to their Arab subjects in the Near East they were simply "the Romans" ("Rumi," or "Arwam" in the plural).

This kind of cultural myopia and chauvinism is not limited to Europeans, to be sure. Writing in North Africa in the late fourteenth century, the great Arab historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun observed that he had heard rumors that, among the northern Frankish barbarians (i.e., European Christians), there were some who were interested in philosophy, but he had never seen any proof of this. Doubtless this remark would have been highly offensive to European philosophers of the day, had they been able to read it. Today, in any case, it is no longer defensible to take refuge in ignorance as an excuse for making

exclusive claims to civilization. By excluding Muslims from Western civilization, Europeans and Americans are claiming a questionable identity. Excluding Muslims from European culture in general also runs counter to history. Despite the expulsion of the Moors and Jews from medieval Spain, and the nationalistic rejection of the "Turkish yoke" in southeastern Europe in the nineteenth century, Islam has been a defining factor in European culture for more than a thousand years.⁴

Ultimately, Huntington's clash of civilizations should be seen as a reversion to colonial doctrines of European supremacy. It lacks the overt dependence on racial theory that was fashionable in the nineteenth century, but it shares the basic prejudice of reserving true civilization for Europe, which is opposed by barbarism everywhere else. The technical edge that gave Europe military superiority over the rest of the world is mistaken for cultural superiority. The 1910 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* summed up this attitude perfectly in its article on Asia written by a British colonial official:

Asiatics stand on a higher level than the natives of Africa or America, but do not possess the special material civilization of western Europe. As far as any common mental characteristic can be assigned it is also somewhat negative, namely, that Asiatics have not the same sentiment of independence and freedom as Europeans. Individuals are thought of as members of a family, state or religion, rather than as entities with a destiny and rights of their own. This leads to autocracy in politics, fatalism in religion and conservatism in both.

While it might be conceded that most religions originated in Asia, Christian Europe had managed to cut itself clear of those origins:

Christianity, though Asiatic in its origin and essential ideas, has to a large extent taken its present form on European soil, and some of its most important manifestations — notably the Roman Church — are European reconstructions in which little of the Asiatic element remains. . . . Buddhism has never made much impression west of India, and Islam is clearly repugnant to Europeans. . . . Hence there is clearly a deep-seated difference between the religious feelings of the two continents.⁵

In its own day, this colonial rhetoric of European supremacy served as a justification for conquest and domination of the rest of the world. It is understandable that Huntington's similar thesis should cause alarm among those who are excluded from his vision of the West.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that there have been powerful voices from Muslim countries in recent years stridently proclaiming the eternal opposition of Islam and the West. What is the reason for these claims, and why should they not be given credence? My assumption throughout this book is that every claim about religion needs to be examined critically for its political implications. Religion is not a realm of facts, but a field in which every statement is contested and all claims are challenged. Religious language in the public sphere is not meant to convey information but to establish authority and legitimacy through assertion and persuasion. The Eurocentric prejudice against Islam needs to be understood as a historical justification for colonialism. In the same way, the recent use of Islamic religious language against the West should be seen as an ideological response against colonialism that deliberately uses the same language.

Religious language expressed on a mass scale is essentially rhetorical. Sweeping religious statements of extreme opposition

should not be accepted on face value, especially since they generally have immediate political consequences. One always has to ask the lawyer's question about this kind of language: Who benefits from it (*cui bono*)? In statements that attribute political differences to fundamental religious positions, the implicit conclusion is that there is no possibility of negotiation, because religious positions are eternal and unrelated to passing events. This is convenient to both extremes in a violent struggle. On one hand, extremist movements in opposition to the state can describe their struggle as a religious quest mandated by God. Even if the extremists are few, by making such absolute claims they can justify any action, no matter how violent, because their struggle is based on truth and the fight against evil. On the other hand, governments that wish to eradicate dissent find it convenient to label their opponents as religious fanatics; this relieves governments of the responsibility to deal with legitimate grievances, because their opponents may be dismissed as irrational and incapable of responding to reason. Examples of this kind of religious rhetoric can be found in many situations ranging from Israel and Egypt to Waco. Those who attribute conflict to religion, whether they speak as opposition figures or as state authorities, do not speak for the vast majority of religious people, and indeed they contradict the history of religion. But such is the power of the mass media that these violent messages of religious opposition are carried to every corner of the world, with a powerful and persuasive effect.

Historically, there are reasons why the religious language of Islam became a vehicle for political opposition. Over centuries of colonial rule, many Far Eastern countries enthusiastically converted to European doctrines, whether Catholicism in the Philippines under Spanish rule, Protestant Christianity in Korea, Marxism in China, or the doctrine of progress and modernization in Japan. The Hindu tradition of India was in a defensive

posture in the nineteenth century, under critique from British colonial administrators and Christian missionaries. Mohandas Gandhi's nonviolent nationalism, although it drew on Hindu teachings, embraced religious pluralism and a secular Indian government. Only in recent years has a Hindu fundamentalist identity emerged in India, in part as a deliberate response to Muslim fundamentalism as well as to Christian missionaries. Buddhism, though strong in certain national contexts like Sri Lanka and Tibet, was not as easily adapted to mass political movements. Apart from the Islamic tradition, one searches in vain for another indigenous symbolic resource that could furnish Asia or Africa with an easily adaptable ideology of resistance.

In some ways, the recent prominence of the word "Islam" indicates a momentous shift in religious thought, dating from the early nineteenth century. In the scale of values found in traditional theology, the Arabic term *islam* was of secondary importance. Meaning "submission (to God)," *islam* effectively denoted performing the minimum actions required in the community (generally defined as profession of faith, prayer, fasting during Ramadan, giving alms, and performing pilgrimage to Mecca). Much more important for religious identity was "faith" (*iman*), described as believing in God and everything revealed through the prophets, and all the debates of theologians revolved around how to define the faithful believer (*mu'min*). But the term "Muslim," meaning "one who has submitted (to God)," always had a corporate and social significance, indicating membership in a religious community. "Islam" therefore became practically useful as a political boundary term, both to outsiders and to insiders who wished to draw lines around themselves.

Historically, Europeans had used the term "Muhammadan" to refer to the religion of followers of the Prophet Muhammad, although Muslims regard that as an inappropriate label.⁶ The term "Islam" was introduced into European languages in the

early nineteenth century by Orientalists such as Edward Lane, as an explicit analogy with the modern Christian concept of religion; in this respect, "Islam" was just as much a newly invented European term as "Hinduism" and "Buddhism" were.⁷ The use of the term "Islam" by non-Muslim scholars coincides with its increasing frequency in the religious discourse of those who are now called Muslims. That is, the term "Islam" became more prominent in reformist and protofundamentalist circles at approximately the same time, or shortly after, it was popularized by European Orientalists. So in a sense, the concept of Islam in opposition to the West is just as much a product of European colonialism as it is a Muslim response to that European expansionism. Despite appeals to medieval history, it is really the past two centuries that set up the conditions for today's debates regarding Islam. Comprehending the process that led to this language of opposition is an essential task for understanding this single world that we all share.

Muslims. It means that Muslims have no history, and therefore others have no obligation to understand them. If all Muslims are violent fanatics, there is only one possible response to them: violent confrontation.

Both the assumptions and the conclusions of these anti-Muslim stereotypes are repugnant to reason and justice. Yet these negative stereotypes of Islam have a history that has been deeply embedded in the self-images of Euro-American societies. Islamophobia has succeeded anti-Semitism as a form of acceptable racial and religious prejudice.²¹ There are important political reasons for the existence of these stereotypes, and particular interests are served by their perpetuation. Yet if we are to construct a vision of the world in which multiple cultures exist together without confrontation or domination, it is necessary that non-Muslims should be able to understand the perspectives of Muslims.

Here one may be tempted to ask, Is it not also necessary that Muslims should understand the perspectives of non-Muslims? Fairness and reciprocity certainly demand that understanding be mutual. An important historical clarification focusing on the high point of European colonialism is necessary at this point. During this period, from Napoleon's invasion of Egypt (1798) to the end of World War I and the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, the main European powers (plus Russia and China) engaged in a systematic military conquest of Muslim countries. This process subjected nearly 90 percent of the world Muslim population to colonial control. The only countries that were not conquered outright were Arabia, Persia, Turkey, and Afghanistan. Two major conclusions may be drawn from the series of events. First, Muslims subjected to colonialism became intimately familiar with their non-Muslim rulers and the European culture they imposed. These Europeans overthrew native dynasties, dismantled traditional systems of education, en-

Avoiding Prejudice in Approaching Islam

It is a premise of this book that all Muslims are not the same. Like any other large cross section of humanity, they are affected by the major factors of life that influence us all: economic class, access to political power, ethnicity, gender, nationality, location, language, and history. To assume that Muslims, and Muslims alone, are driven to act exclusively by religion, apart from any of the other factors that shape our lives, is more than absurd. It dehumanizes Muslims and makes them into frightening monsters who are not only alien but also hostile. It means that there are no legitimate grievances that need to be considered by non-

forced centralized authoritarian rule, and trained new local elites in the new languages of power — English, French, Dutch, Italian, Portuguese, and Russian. Second, the process of violent conquest was undertaken by largely Christian powers, yet paradoxically it is the Muslims who are regarded as naturally violent. Again, this appears to be a kind of projection, but on a massive scale, suggesting that there is something seriously flawed in the self-understanding of Euro-Americans in relation to Muslims.

In order to approach an alternative to the negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims, it is necessary for the reader to take a journey not only through the main topics of the Islamic religion but also beyond religion. Religion never exists in a vacuum. It is always interwoven with multiple strands of culture and history that link it to particular locations. The rhetoric of religion must be put into a context, so that we know both the objectives and the opponents of particular spokespeople.

To take one example that will be expanded upon later, Islamic law has become a highly charged and controversial topic in a number of countries with majority Muslim populations. Certain ideologues (those whose theological positions require them to take power) have announced their aim as the establishment of pure Islamic law. They present themselves as returning to the standards established by the Prophet Muhammad 1,400 years ago, ruling society exclusively on the basis of the Qur'an. This audacious claim, which was never made before the twentieth century, reflects the very modern rhetoric of fundamentalism. It flies in the face of Islamic history, since every premodern political regime that we know of combined Islamic law with local custom, pre-Islamic structures, and administrative decrees. In addition, European powers dismantled the apparatus of Islamic law in the countries that they conquered, leaving only certain drastically modified sections applying to personal and family law. Therefore, at present, formerly colonized countries

(such as Egypt, India, or Algeria) have mixed legal codes primarily based on European law. Countries that claim to have purely Islamic systems, on closer scrutiny, look rather different. Saudi Arabia has a monarchy plus a considerable admixture of pre-Islamic Arabian tribal custom, and Iran has a modern constitutional government structure combined with clerical rule. In a much more extreme case, the Taliban government in Afghanistan, in forbidding women to be educated or to appear in public, distorted both custom and Islamic law to a level that is unprecedented and even pathological.

To present, therefore, a contextual understanding of Islam, it is necessary to continually take up particular examples and ask how symbols and concepts from the Islamic tradition are interpreted and reapplied in new situations. An important case is the concept of jihad, often mistranslated as "holy war." It would be more appropriate to explain this word as meaning "struggle for truth." Over the centuries this ethical ideal has been held up as the quest for virtue in a variety of forms. It has a secondary meaning of military struggle against evil opponents, and it was inevitably appropriated in a self-serving fashion by many royal dynasties seeking justification for their conquests. Thus, for example, the Persian shah and the Ottoman sultan did not hesitate to declare that each was waging a righteous "struggle for truth" against the other, when in practice one kingdom was simply battling another as usual. The subject of jihad will be explored in greater depth below, but the point is that religious symbols have no specific meaning in themselves apart from the people who deliberately employ them in specific ways.

To put the matter of historical context more bluntly, in every issue that has to do with Islam, the most important question revolves around who is authorized to interpret Islam. There is, after all, no Muslim pope. Should everyone accept the authority of the religious leaders in Saudi Arabia? Some Muslims reject

those scholars because they consider the puritanical Wahhabi doctrine to be extremist, and even the Saudi government has announced that edicts regarding Islamic law are only acceptable from officially recognized scholars. What about important figures such as Ayatollah Khomeini, the inspiration of the Iranian revolution? Although his opinions were considered binding by the minority of Muslims who are Shi'i, and despite the international admiration he attracted for his anti-imperialist stand, his religious authority had no currency for the majority of Muslims who consider themselves Sunni. Or should one listen to the authorities in Egypt's most ancient and prestigious theological academy, al-Azhar University? Here, too, there are many who reject the authority of these scholars on the grounds that they are overly dependent on the Egyptian government and all too likely to reproduce the official state perspective. In short, regardless of claims of absolute authority, there is no one perspective that is recognized throughout Muslim countries. Therefore, anyone who wants to avoid being gullible needs to exercise some critical judgment regarding any comprehensive statement about Islam, particularly when it is presented as "the Islamic view on . . ."

In approaching Islamic texts and religious concepts, one must stand aside from the attitude of missionary competition that underlies the modern concept of religion. That is, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of using isolated quotations of scripture or law as "proof texts" to determine the acceptability or unacceptability of an entire religion. There are cheap debater's tricks of this type that are easily abused by those who have an ax to grind, but it is much easier to detect unfair citations when you are already familiar with the tradition. Thus one could take a passage from the New Testament, like St. Paul's insistence (in I Corinthians) that women should cover their hair and keep silent in church; reading this, readers with feminist inclinations might conclude that any religion containing such a

rule is unacceptable. Such a single-issue approach based on current orthodoxies tends to limit, at the very least, one's ability to understand the meaning and significance of this verse in its own time and place. Contemporary Christians might reply that it was a custom for respectable married women to wear head coverings at that time. They might also argue that there are other verses about the equality of the sexes that are statements of principle and therefore more important than this acknowledgment of contemporary fashion. Regardless of the details of this example, it is important to engage in a certain amount of patient questioning when confronted with things that seem strange to contemporary sensibilities.

In the same way, those who are intent on finding proof texts to demonstrate the necessarily evil intentions of Muslims should be aware that they themselves are using the methods and arguments of fundamentalism. For instance, one can find texts from the Qur'an proclaiming war against the pagan Arabs of Mecca, who were engaged in a bitter struggle against Muhammad, and these have been used as evidence that Muslims are perennially engaged in warfare against all non-Muslims. Yet few would hold that the more bloodthirsty passages of the Hebrew Bible require all Jews and Christians to emulate verses like the following: "If I whet my glittering sword, and my hand takes hold on judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries, and will requite those who hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh—with the blood of the slain and the captives, from the long-haired heads of the enemy" (Deut. 32:41–42). One can also find places in the New Testament where Jesus uses alarming language: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). While there may be fundamentalists who insist on the unlimited applicability of every verse of this type, most Jews and Christians would assert that such sayings reflect

particular historical situations and are limited to those contexts. They would further argue that there are overriding moral themes and principles in the Bible that take precedence over individual verses, or that metaphorical or allegorical language is being used in certain cases. It would seem only reasonable that, instead of leaping to the most alarming conclusions, we allow Muslims the opportunity to interpret their own scripture. Yet few outsiders have bothered to discover the history of Qur'anic interpretation among Muslims, especially since only fundamentalist versions of Islam have come to the attention of the mass media.

It is also important to recall that a number of significant features of modern society have come into existence relatively recently. Slavery, for instance, is accepted in the Bible as a normal part of life; American slave owners used the Bible both to justify slavery and to convince slaves to accept their lot as God's will. Democracy, human rights, and women's rights are not mentioned in any ancient scriptures. Religious tolerance is a secular attitude stemming from the Enlightenment's resentment against the abuse of religious authority. Thus many typical features of modern life are recent historical developments that owe little to traditional religion. Yet these undeniable advances for humanity have recently been accepted, for the most part, in major religious traditions. It is very easy to assume that our contemporary society is the norm, and then if we encounter something markedly different, there is a tendency to reject it with a smug sense of superiority. An example would be the well-known punishment of theft in Islamic law by cutting off the hand. It would be a standard modern reaction to be repulsed and call it barbaric, as bad as the harsh criminal punishments that were prevalent in most of Europe 300 years ago, though we tend to be anthropologically blind to examples so close at hand.

Yet this simple recitation of what is supposed to be Islamic

law leaves out several extremely important factors from the history of its practice: the tendency to restrict the application of punishments of this category, the high standard of evidence demanded (including unimpeachable eyewitnesses), the acceptability of plausible excuses, and a strong reluctance to apply this punishment if there were mitigating circumstances such as poverty or sincere repentance. Modern readers would assume this is an inflexible legal code, but in fact Muslim judges had considerable independence in how they interpreted and applied the law; the history of the application of this law in different regions and times would reveal much about changes in the role of Islamic law in those societies. The situation is entirely changed, however, when zealous self-taught ideologues make amputation of the hand the standard punishment for every case of theft or prosecute rape victims on charges of adultery (classical law required the testimony of four adult male eyewitnesses to the act of adultery, an unlikely possibility). The extreme application of these punishments is, for some, an outstanding credential of the authentic Islamic state, even though it stands traditional doctrine and practice on its head. As one scholar observes, "When Islamic law is reduced to excessive manifestations, it becomes, for its adamant advocates, a provocative tool against the rest of the world, and the West in particular (this is primarily what sets us apart, and it must be emphasized), and a weapon of intolerance in their own societies (whoever opposes us over the sacred law is an apostate). Islamic law becomes, in this approach, the focus of the impending clash of civilizations."²² This ideological imposition of *shari'a*, with none of the safeguards of the Islamic legal tradition, is rightly seen as a travesty.

All this is to indicate that no religious concept, symbol, or practice is self-evident; in every case, one needs to ask about the situation in which a particular aspect of Islam is being invoked. Likewise, in the proliferation of online texts that characterizes

the contemporary information age, it is especially important to read critically the controversial material that appears on Internet sites attacking and condemning opposed points of view.²³ Since anyone with a few hours to spare can create a website that looks reasonably impressive, it is possible for any extremist or eccentric to present one-sided and distorting material in a way that makes it look acceptable. In the culture of the Internet, religious advocacy websites, as a category, are closer to advertising websites than any other kind. One needs to ask questions about the purposes of such websites and about the identities of their authors in order to distinguish missionaries and partisans from neutral sources of information. In light of the long history of negative portrayals and distortions of Islam by hostile outside critics, it is particularly necessary to question contemporary material that plays into this extraordinarily strong anti-Islamic bias. Just as in the case of racial prejudice against blacks or anti-Semitism against Jews, the gross negative stereotyping of centuries of religious thought and hundreds of millions of people should be treated as a contemptible form of bigotry.