

CRCE Briefing Paper

# **The Roots of Islamist Ideology**

By

Robert R Reilly

Introduction by Ljubo Sirc CBE

**February 2006**

**First Website Publication: May 2012**

The Constitution of the CRCE requires that its Trustees and Advisers dissociate themselves from the analysis contained in its publications but it is hoped that readers will find this study of value and interest.

The CRCE is grateful to Kristin Annexstad and Tom Grieder for their help in transcribing this paper.

First published February 2006  
First published on [crce.org.uk](http://crce.org.uk) May 2012

© Robert R Reilly  
&  
Centre for Research into Post-Communist Economies  
All rights reserved

Centre for Research into Post-Communist Economies  
57 Tufton St  
London SW1P 3QL  
[crce@trident-net.co.uk](mailto:crce@trident-net.co.uk)

## Introduction

by Ljubo Sirc

Robert Reilly's effort to disentangle the psychology behind the Islamist aggression is most instructive. The closest I have come to having any thoughts on the influence a religion can possibly have on political behaviour was when I was writing my first doctorate thesis (never completed) on the Nuremberg Trials. The problem arose on how to explain the non-application of the legal principle *nulla poena sine lege* to the National Socialist leaders and their crimes, since no punishment had ever been decreed for those starting a war or killing people because of their race.

The European Convention on Human Rights has resolved this problem by providing in Article 7, paragraph 2, that the prohibition of punishment without law 'shall not prejudice the trial and punishment of any person for any act or omission which, at the time when it was committed, was criminal according to general principles of law recognised by civilised nations'. To put it briefly, punishment of crimes is allowed without written law if that crime is condemned by morals. This was my initial deduction but then I ended up in a court myself and was forced to reflect on punishment without law (even against law) in my own case.

In other words, I was confronted with the question of whether law has to be in accordance with morals and further what was the nature of morals (either supporting law or valid without it). My conclusion was that morals must necessarily be based on reason and that religious morals had a moral-logical quality with which quality Kant's categorical imperative can easily be aligned.

After having escaped communist Yugoslavia, I no longer pursued the problems of the Nuremberg Trials, but continued to be interested in the relationship between moral teachings in different surroundings. It so happens that I landed up at the University in Dhaka in the early 1960s. Not that I had time to go into details of morals as adhered to in Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, but I was in daily contact with people, primarily students and lecturers, belonging to these religions, and I never encountered behaviour (or statements for that matter), which could be considered different from what I believed with my Christian background. When it came to precepts of practical behaviour, to me all religions were in agreement.

One could not expect any agreement with rational morals in the political movement of National Socialism. This movement was dominated by *der Wille zur Macht* (the will for power, the will to command), for people who considered themselves superior to others on the basis of their alleged racial origin. Without denying that human beings differ from one other in many ways, there is no perceptible difference that elevates one human being above another. Any pretension to this effect must make the perpetrator, particularly if the perpetrator pretends to have power over the next person's (his 'neighbour') life, deserving of punishment if his immoral pretence is put into practice.

What attracts attention is Lenin's – and Leninists – assumption that they possess knowledge, which entitles them to consider themselves superior to those who do not possess this knowledge or refuse to accept it. While reason, knowledge, deserves respect and acceptance, as far as it goes, there are certainly parts of the world and life that we do not understand and which we may not be able to encompass at all. From this incomprehension it follows that life, as it is, imposes humility on humans and respect for one's neighbours. To pretend that one's

## Introduction

---

understanding of this world is superior to the understanding of others, so he should actually eliminate dissenters must certainly be deemed a crime if implemented.

The surprise is that the condemnation of racialism is almost general, while the pretence to exclusive knowledge is not. This attitude is the more astonishing, as the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe proves that Marxist Leninist ideas are at least dubious, if not entirely wrong. Yet, their apologists say that the intentions of Marxist-Leninist perpetrators were good although their practice was criminal. Even disregarding for the moment the old wisdom that *finis non sanctificat media*, wanting too much good, desiring Utopia, may not be human. Part of our limited rationality must be caution: do not seek better solutions if you cannot be certain that they will be better. Moderation is an important principle in view of our limited rationality. The problem is not just a limited rationality, it is wrong that we can never be entirely certain of knowing all the premises when trying to reach conclusions.

Because Marxists-Leninists have thrown moderation and caution to the winds, their initial aim actually was to achieve a better world. When it became clear that their doctrine did not help to achieve this they still continued this pretence. If one rejects the myth of good intentions and the pretension to some kind of Marxist perfect knowledge, what remains is simply the will to power, the will to dominate.

While racialism and communism are being worn down, a new threat has made its appearance. It is Islamism, a distortion of the Muslim religion, which Robert Reilly explains in theological terms. Islamists proclaim that God's ways cannot be known because God is not bound by any reason or sentiment, but is a Will requiring meek human submission.

The question arises: Will for what? The apparent answer is: God's will as expressed in the Koran. But any text, including the Koran, requires interpretation and interpretation is by necessity based on reason and logic, here excluded so that we are left with a pure Will. Worse, this pure Will can change so that submission can be expressed by a human being only by killing oneself and as many others as possible.

The Islamist leaders, of course, do not themselves go and kill. For them the will to unlimited power is contained in their ability to order the killing by others and of others. It would seem that such an interpretation of religion is immoral and criminal and requires that all people of goodwill, whatever their beliefs, unite their strength to defeat such distortions.

The distortion may be expected as a consequence of one-sidedness, approaching life only from the aspect of the will. Surely, the will in human beings has to be continued with our capacity to reason as limited as that may be: in order to set aims for actions driven by will. And even reason has to be checked by human sentiments such as moderation and tolerance; in religious terms "love for our neighbour". Human actions, hence, require the engagement of the whole human being to become reliable.

It follows that the will in combination with reason and sentiment must not be rejected. Its role is to help moral precepts to prevail and to defend human achievements. It will not do to allow crime to succeed. This struggle never ends.

## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

“Dost thou not know that God has the power to will anything?” – Qur’an 2:106

“Wherever I go in the Islamic world, it’s the same problem: cause and effect; cause and effect.” – Fouad Ajami, 2005

The ideas animating terrorist acts from 9/11 to the 7/7 London bombings and beyond have been loudly proclaimed by their perpetrators and their many sympathizers in every form of media. We know what they think; they tell us every day. However, questions arise concerning the provenance of their ideas, which they claim are Islamic. Are they something new or a resurgence of something from the past? How much of this is Islam and how much is Islamism?\* Is Islamism a deformation of Islam? If so, in what way and from where has it come? And why is Islam susceptible to this kind of deformation?

Quite some time ago, an answer to the first question was proffered by the famous British author, Hilaire Belloc. In *The Great Heresies*, published in 1938, he predicted the resurgence of Islam in the following way: “Since religion is at the root of all political movements and changes and since we have here a very great religion physically paralysed but morally intensely alive, we are in the presence of an unstable equilibrium which cannot remain permanently unstable.” A few pages later Belloc wrote: “That [Islamic] culture happens to have fallen back in material applications; there is no reason whatever why it should not learn its new lesson and become our equal in all those temporal things which now *alone* gives us our superiority over it -- whereas in *Faith* we have fallen inferior to it.”

Belloc saw the coming resurgence of Islam within the context of Islamic history from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, at the end of which the Turks were stopped for the second and final time outside the gates of Vienna. A revived Islam, he seemed to say, would be more of the same, yet now equipped with modern technology. It would be an even more lethal foe against a West weakened by its loss of faith.

As prescient as Belloc may seem, can one adequately understand what is happening today in the terms he suggested? The centuries-long expansion of Islam came from the center of an extraordinary dynamic that thrust out to the boundaries of its potential, but then slowly subsided into quiescence. The Islamic world was jolted out of its several centuries of torpor only by intrusions from the West. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the West had demonstrated such a decisive superiority over Islamic culture that Islam’s defensive attempts to recover from its influences have been indelibly marked by the very things against which Muslims were reacting. To resist the West, they became, in a way, Western. As Raphael Patai pointed out in *The Arab Mind*, the

---

\* Islamism is used here as a form of shorthand for Muslim totalitarian ideology. It is in some ways an unsatisfactory term as there are self-proclaimed Islamists who would not subscribe to this meaning of the term.

## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

---

very standards by which Muslims measure their own progress are Western. In a final irony, the most rabid ideological reactions against this state of affairs in the Muslim world are also infused with Western ideology. Islamists practice a perverse kind of homeopathy which uses the very disease from which they are suffering to combat it, but with dosages that are lethal. Belloc did not foresee this.

Islamist authors cannot be accurately understood in the terms of Islam simply, but only within the perspective of the 20th-century Western ideologies that they have assimilated, most especially those of Nietzsche and Marx. The seminal thinkers in Islamism, like Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, were very well versed in Western philosophy and literature. Qutb went to the United States for several years of post-graduate studies (1949-50). He was completely repelled by what he saw as a materialist culture. For example, he thought that the way Americans cared for their lawns was a sign of materialism and that the parish dances he witnessed were examples of sexual degeneracy. His exposure to the West intensified his hatred of it. The solution to what he diagnosed as Western alienation was Islam. Islam could overcome the relativism and the moral degeneracy that he had observed. Islam would save the West as well as the East. In order to do this, Qutb said that Muslims must emulate the behaviour of the companions of the Prophet to prepare for the struggle ahead. He used Leninist terms and means, espousing a “vanguard” of the faithful which would lead the restoration of the Caliphate. (In fact, Qutb was the Muslim Brotherhood’s liaison to the communist party in Egypt and to the Communist International.) Because of his opposition to the Egyptian government, Qutb was hanged by Nasser in 1966. He is said to have gone to the gallows smiling, leaving that iconic image to inspire his followers today.

The highly heterogeneous world of Islam stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Morocco to the southern Philippines. There are very few things that one can say about the Muslim world that are true in all these places. Of the 44 predominantly Muslim countries in the world, 24 do not use Islamic law as their primary source of laws. While Muslims everywhere observe the five pillars of Islam, they are culturally very different in, say, Indonesia and the Arab world. However, this highly heterogeneous character is in danger of being homogenised. The engine for the homogenisation is Qutb’s Islamist ideology, which has demonstrated tremendous cross-cultural appeal. Qutb’s writings are considered the new writ, along with those of Sayyid Maududi and Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Qutb’s teachings are at the foundation of, for instance, the Justice and Prosperity Party, which is the fastest-growing and only dues-paying party in Indonesia. It was the first on the scene with aid after the tsunami. The Hizb ut-Tahrir organisation, which is banned in most Muslim countries, has had quite an impact in Central Asia and Western Europe. The foundation of its ideology is also Sayyid Qutb. The people at whom Hizb ut-Tahrir aims are the intelligentsia and the upper middle-class across the Islamic world. Hizb ut-Tahrir does not explicitly advocate violence and terrorism, but prepares the intellectual foundations for it by using Qutb’s teachings. On the other hand, Al Qaeda, also spawned by Qutb’s ideology, explicitly promotes violence in the 50 some nations in which it has a presence. Qutb’s brother, Muhammad, taught Osama bin Laden at Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah. Islamic Jihad in Palestine, another Qutb clone, advocates violence. Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, translated substantial parts of Qutb’s works into Farsi, demonstrating the impact of Qutb’s thought across the Sunni-Shiite divide. In other words, this is not a local phenomenon. The cross-cultural appeal of this ideology reflects a deeper crisis within Islam itself. It is in its most exacerbated form in the Arab world, but it exists everywhere in the Muslim universe or Umma.

## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

---

Why is Qutb so popular and influential? There is a two-fold answer. Part of the explanation comes from the abiding sense of grievance and humiliation within Islam to which Qutb's ideology plays. Another part comes from the outcome of an ancient struggle within Islam over the primacy of power as against the primacy of reason in its theology and philosophy. First, it is essential to understand the magnitude of this sense of grievance, which comes from and is exacerbated by Islam's exposure to the West. Because of it, Muslims have to find some way to explain the last several centuries of senescence.

A somewhat similar situation existed in Germany after World War I, which Adolph Hitler was able to exploit. In fact, there are striking parallels to this sense of grievance that can be found in *Mein Kampf*. The comparison is not adventitious. There were associations between the Nazis and the early Islamists going back to the 1930s, when Hassan Al Banna modelled the Muslim Brotherhood on the Brownshirts. The German sense of grievance came from defeat in World War I and the metaphysical shock of the collapse of the Second Reich. This loss was inconceivable to them. The world had somehow been turned upside down. To comprehend the loss, Hitler and his companions explained it in terms of, first, the internal enemy and then the external enemy. Germany was stabbed in the back. Where was the rot in German society from which this betrayal came? The racist Nazi answer was the Jew. Germany must expunge the Jew and purify itself for the battle against the external enemy in order to bring about our millenarian vision of the Third Reich.

A similar narrative of grievance and recovery exists among the Islamists who are still in a state of shock over the abolition of the Caliphate by Kemal Atatürk in 1924. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the Caliphate was but a shell of itself. Nevertheless, its abandonment left some people completely adrift. It was as if the Vatican had abjured its authority to represent the Church. How could the abandonment of the Caliphate be explained? Islamists began looking for the internal enemy and then the external enemy.

Islamists try to focus the widely-shared sense of grievance and humiliation in the Muslim world on the loss of the Caliphate because they wish to restore it. While most Muslims may not share in the Islamist mythology regarding the Caliphate, which did not exist continuously from the time of Mohammed, they nonetheless do require an explanation for the decline of their civilization. The need is particularly acute because Islam mandates the success of the kingdom here for its validation. Mohammed did not arrive and say that Allah had told him that God's kingdom is only in the next world. Allah said, establish my kingdom here and everywhere. In order to be true, Islam must have power. The Dar al-Harb, the "land of war," meaning the non-Muslim world, must be made part of the Dar al-Islam, the "land of peace." The astonishing success of Islam in its first centuries confirmed the prophecy for its believers.

This began to change in 1798, when Napoleon defeated the Egyptian armies at the Battle of the Pyramids (or perhaps before, when the Ottoman Empire was forced to sign the Treaty of Kucuk Kaynarca in 1774 with Russia). As Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti observed at the time, the proper order of things as divinely ordained had been overturned. The Muslim world began to experience enormous theological, philosophical, and political confusion. How could this defeat possibly have happened in the lands of Islam? Failure is particularly galling when there is a theological imperative to succeed. Loss of power is egregious because Islam is driven by a theology of power. Things got much worse after World War I, with the collapse of

## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

---

the Caliphate in 1924, the secularisation of Turkey, and the almost complete colonisation of the Levant and the Maghreb. There was the old enemy, the West, ruling over Muslims. In strict Muslim teaching, a non-Muslim is not allowed political office in a Muslim country. It is a scandal for an infidel to rule over a believer. Suddenly, a huge part of the Islamic world was being ruled by the West. How could this be understood within the tenets of the faith?

The answer must be that this was a rebuke from Allah because Muslims have not followed his ways. Just as success is a validation of faith, failure is a personal rebuke. Within their theological viewpoint, defeat by a superior power must be interpreted as a judgment from Allah that Muslims have deviated from his path. The model for success is, of course, the Companions to the Prophet. So, said Qutb, Muslims have to remove the accretions of the ages and within the history of Islam, and go back to that original community, model themselves on the Companions and prepare to do what they did -- to retake the world, and to re-establish the Caliphate. The instrument for doing this, depending on which Islamist you talk to, is a combination of persuasion and jihad, or simply jihad. Qutb blamed the Jews in Istanbul for conspiring in the collapse of the Caliphate ("The Jews have always been the prime movers in the war declared on all fronts against the advocates of Islamic revival throughout the world."), and labelled impious Muslims as the internal enemy, who must be vanquished so that the infidel West could be confronted and overcome.

The infection of Western millenarian ideological thought would not have made Islamism the attraction it is unless Islamism was not also able to claim legitimacy by drawing upon something within the traditions of Islam itself. For this, Islamist thinkers very selectively chose one, albeit a primary one, of the many theological and philosophical traditions within Islam's rich history. The Islamist use of this tradition needs to be understood within the broader perspective of a struggle that has taken place since Islam's inception over the status of reason and revelation. The outcome of this struggle decisively affected the character of the Islamic world in which Qutb could find such a ready audience for his ideology. The argument, already begun in the seventh and eighth centuries, was over the status of reason in relationship to God's omnipotence. This struggle had its roots in a profound disagreement over who God is. Ideas have consequences, and no idea is of greater consequence than the definition of God.

The Mu'tazilite school, composed of the Muslim rationalist theologians, fought for the primacy of reason. They held that God is not only power, he is also reason. Man's reason is a gift from God, who expects man to use it to come to know him. Through reason, man is able to understand God's reason as manifested in his creation. God's laws are the laws of nature, which are also manifested in the Sharia. Since reason is an attribute of God, his revealed words in the Qur'an are decipherable by man's reason. This means that the Qur'an is open to interpretation.

The Qur'an is open to interpretation because it was revealed in history at certain time to a certain people under certain circumstances. To understand what is meant in the Qur'an, the Mu'tazilites said, we have to interpret it because, today, we are living in different circumstances, at a different time in history. Therefore, we must have an historical understanding of what was meant at that time in order to apply Qur'anic principles to our time.



## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

---

The Mu'tazilites succeeded to the extent of having the teaching of a created Qur'an enshrined as a state doctrine, proclaimed in 827 under Caliph Al-Ma'mun. The Mu'tazilites had to fight for the primacy of reason and actually required religious judges to swear an oath that the Qur'an had been created. Those who believed in the primacy of power and the uncreated Qur'an could be and were punished and imprisoned. However, after the reign of Harun al-Watiq, the tables were turned on the Mu'tazilites by Caliph Ja'afar al-Mutawakkil (847-861), who made holding the Mu'tazilite doctrine a crime punishable by death. The Mu'tazilites were forcibly suppressed. This did not end the Mu'tazilite school of thought (some fled to the more hospitable Shia areas) nor prevent the flourishing of the Greek-influenced *faylasuf* (philosophers) who followed them, such as Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes. However, the long process of ossification had begun. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it had reached a stage that led Arnold Toynbee to say of the greatest Islamic thinker at that time that "the loneliness of Ibn Khaldun's star is as striking as its brilliance."

An apt symbol of the tension between reason and revelation in Islam was the famous library of Cordoba. It was one of the glories of the Moorish civilization. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the library contained some 400,000 volumes – more books than were in France and quite possibly all of Western Europe at that time – with some five hundred attendants. However, Muslims not only built it, they also destroyed it (although, according to Arab historian Ibn Sa'id (1214-1286), this was done by Berbers, not Arabs in 1013). There is a much earlier apocryphal story of Caliph Omar ordering the destruction of what was left of the library of Alexandria in 638. The story is spurious (as the library did not exist at that time), but he is supposed to have said, "These books either contain what is in the Qur'an or something else. In either case, they are superfluous." More recently, however, the Taliban literally followed a similar injunction and ordered the destruction of all books in Afghanistan except the Qur'an.

Doctrinally, the anti-Mu'tazilite school held that the Qur'an was not created in time; the Qur'an has co-existed with Allah from eternity in Arabic, as it exists today. Therefore, there is no need to interpret it; it is not open to interpretation, or *ijtihad*. It is proclaimed in the same way at every time to all peoples, who simply need to apply it (according to its explication by the four Sunni legal schools). This shuts the door to *ijtihad*. That is how decisively the Mu'tazilites lost. *Ijtihad* is over (at least, for the Sunnis); there's no more interpretation. It has all been said. All must now obey, or submit. When Mohammed Ali as-Sanusi (1787-1859), known as the Grand Sanusi, attempted to reopen the gates to *ijtihad* in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, he was rebuked in a *fatwa* by the Mufti of Cairo, who said, "For no one denies the fact that the dignity of *ijtihad* has long disappeared and that at the present time no man has attained this degree of learning. He who believed himself to be a *mujtahid* (a scholar qualified to exercise *ijtihad*) would be under the influence of his hallucinations and of the devil."

This victorious view developed a theological basis for the primacy of power by claiming that the revelation of Mohammed emphasizes most particularly, and above all, one attribute of God, and that is his omnipotence. All monotheistic religions hold that, in order to be one, God must be omnipotent. However, this argument reduced God to his omnipotence by concentrating exclusively on his unlimited power, as against his reason. God's "reasons" are unknowable by man. God rules as he pleases. He is pure will. There is no rational order invested in the universe upon which one can rely, only the second-to-second manifestation of God's will.

## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

---

God is so powerful that every instant is the equivalent of a miracle. Nothing intervenes or has independent or even semi-autonomous existence. In philosophical language, this view holds that God is the primary cause of everything and there are no secondary causes. Therefore, what may seem to be “natural laws,” such as the laws of physics, gravity, etc., are really nothing more than God's customs, which he is at complete liberty to break or change at any moment.

The consequences of this view are momentous. If creation exists simply as a succession of miraculous moments, it cannot be apprehended by reason. Other religions, including Christianity, recognize miracles. But they recognize them precisely as temporary and extraordinary suspensions of the natural law. In fact, that is what defines them as miracles. One admits to the possibility of a miracle only after discounting every possible explanation of its occurrence by natural causes. In this type of Islamic thought, there are no natural causes to discount. As a result, reality becomes incomprehensible. If unlimited will is the exclusive constituent of reality, there is really nothing left to reason about. One has simply to accept it. Likewise, the word of God in the Qur'an is not to be understood, but obeyed.

The early-10<sup>th</sup> century thinker Abu al-Hasan al-Ashari elaborated a metaphysics for the anti-rational view by using early Greek atomistic philosophy to assert that reality is composed of atoms. The configuration of these atoms at any given moment makes things what they are. In *Islam In the World*, British analyst Malise Ruthven explains that: “The Asharis rationalised God's omnipotence within an atomistic theory of creation, according to which the world was made up of the discrete points in space and time whose only connection was the will of God, which created them anew at every moment.” For example, there is a collection of atoms which is a plant. Does the plant remain a plant as you are reading this line because it has the nature of a plant, or because Allah wishes it to be a plant from this moment to the next? The Asharites said, yes, it is only a plant for the moment. For the plant to remain a plant depends on the will of Allah, and if you say it has to remain a plant because it has the nature of plant, this is *shirk* – blasphemy (in the form of polytheism). For al-Ashari's disciple, Abu Bakr al-Baqalani (d. 1013), the atomistic discontinuity of created things itself proves the absolute transcendence of Allah as the sole agent. If creation is a group of free-floating atoms in space and time, then only Allah can make them what they are at any given time in any given way.

The catastrophic result of this view is the denial of the relationship between cause and effect. In *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), who vehemently rejected Plato and Aristotle, insisted that God is not bound by any order and that there is, therefore, no “natural” sequence of cause and effect, as in fire burning cotton or, more colourfully, as in “the purging of the bowels and the using of a purgative.” There are only juxtapositions of discrete events that make it appear that the fire is burning the cotton, but God could just as well do otherwise. In other words, there is no continuous narrative of cause and effect tying these moments together in a comprehensible way. “In reality,” wrote al-Ghazali, “there is no other cause but God.”

Carrying this teaching into the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Muhammad Yusuf as-Sanusi wrote, “You become aware of the impossibility of anything in the world producing any effect whatsoever, because that entails the removal of that effect from the power and will of our majestic and mighty Protector. . . For that matter, food has no effect on satiety, nor water on moistening the land. . . nor fire on burning... know that it is from God

## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

---

from the start, without the other accompanying things having any intermediacy or effect on it, neither by their nature, nor by a power or peculiarity placed in it by God, as many ignorant people think. . . . Whoever holds that those things produce an effect by their nature is an unbeliever.”

Equally as damaging to the status of reason, al-Ghazali wrote in *Moderation in Belief* that reason is so infected by man’s self-interest that it cannot know moral principles; they can only be known through revelation. Since reason is not a source of moral truth, concludes al-Ghazali, “no obligations flow from reason but from the Sharia.” In other words, moral philosophy, as in Aristotle’s *The Ethics*, is impossible.

There is also a metaphysical reason for the exclusive authority of revelation in moral matters. Things or acts are not good or bad in themselves, according to their nature. They have no nature. Allah does not forbid something because it is bad; it is bad because he forbids it. Likewise, he does not command certain behaviour because it is good; it is good because he commands it. As the Qur’an states: “it may be that you dislike a thing that is good for you and like a thing that is bad for you. Allah knows but you do not know.” (2:216) Therefore, one can only know what is good or bad through the Qur’an or the Sharia.

As-Sanusi showed how consistently this view was held when he restated it in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century: “It is impossible for the Most High to determine an act as obligatory or forbidden . . . for the sake of any objective, since all acts are equal in that they are his creation and production. Therefore the specification of certain acts as obligatory and other as forbidden or with any other determination takes place by his pure choice, which has no cause. Intelligibility has no place at all in it rather it can be known only by revealed law sharia.”

In attacking the Mu’tazilites, the Asharites, in the words of Muhammed Khair, wished “to free God’s saving power from the shackles of causality.” The price for this liberation was the loss of rationality, which, in turn, produces irrational behaviour. Modern manifestations of the resulting confusion are many. Fr. Stanley Jaki has pointed out that, several years ago, an Imam in Pakistan instructed physicists there that they could not consider the principle of cause and effect in their work. Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy, a Pakistani physicist and professor at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad, said, according to *The New York Times* (10/30/2001), that “it was not Islamic to say that combining hydrogen and oxygen makes water. ‘You were supposed to say that when you bring hydrogen and oxygen together then by the will of Allah water was created.’” There are people in Saudi Arabia today who still do not believe man has been on the moon. This is not because they are ignorant; it is because accepting the fact that man was on the moon would mean also accepting the chain of causal relationships that put him there. That is simply theologically unacceptable to them.

In the place of reasonable explanations – or of explanations subject to reason – conspiracy theories reign. The Islamic press is rife with them. Conspiracy theories are the intellectual currency in an irrational world. One account of the Tsunami blamed alleged underground nuclear testing by the US. On television, Shaykh Salih Fawzan al-Fawzan, a high functionary of the Saudi regime, opined that “It happened at Christmas, when fornicators and corrupt people from all over the world come to commit fornication and sexual perversion. That’s when this tragedy took place, striking them all and destroyed everything.”

## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

---

When Hurricane Katrina hit the southern United States, a typical report in the Arab press announced that “Katrina is a wind of torment and evil from Allah sent to this American empire” (Muhammad Yousef Al-Mlaifi, *Al-Siyassa*, 8/31/2005) or that “the only reason for this disaster is that Allah is angry at them” (Dr. Khaled Al-Khaledi, *Al-Haqaeq*). Most Americans see this as just crude propaganda without realizing it stems from a theological perspective that requires an understanding of the event as the result of a first cause. It is the necessary view of people who have to interpret it in exactly that way because their philosophy does not allow for the existence of secondary causes.

What is true for nature is also true for man within this anti-rational perspective. Other than as manifestations of Allah’s will in man’s actions of the moment, how is man’s story to be told? The Qur’an is no help here because it is not in a narrative form. History requires a rational sequence of causal relationships. The Asharite view so permeated Middle Eastern consciousness that it ultimately affected the Arab sense of time (no clocks on mosques), leading to an indifference to dates and a certain impetuosity of character, and subverted the Arabs’ interest in their own history, which was minimal until Western historians provoked it by writing that history first.

To outsiders, this capricious dimension of Islam was clear as long ago as the Middle Ages when the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135-1204) spoke of his experiences in Cairo to illustrate the way some Muslims think. Every morning the Caliph rides through Cairo and every morning he takes the same route. However, said Maimonides, tomorrow he could take a different route. Why? Because he is the Caliph and he can do as he wills. Every morning the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. It has happened for years; it happened today. But tomorrow it might rise in the south and set in the north. That depends on the will of Allah and there is no saying that it will not. (In fact, some Islamic apocalyptic literature predicts the sun will rise in the west.) Maimonides concluded that “the thing which exists with certain constant and permanent forms, dimensions, and properties (in nature) only follows the direction of habit . . . on this foundation their whole fabric is constructed.”

Maimonides was not the only one to have noticed that this is a problem. In *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel observed that, in this version of Islam, “the activity of God is represented as perfectly devoid of reason.” In *The Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler wrote that “Islam is precisely the *impossibility of an I as a free power vis-à-vis the divine*. . . . In the entire cosmic cave there is only one cause which is the immediate ground of all visible effects: the deity, which itself has no longer any reasons for its acts.”

This aspect of Allah was also remarked upon by Sayyid Qutb in *The Shadow of the Qur’an*: “Every time the Qur’an states a definite promise or constant law, it follows it with a statement implying that the Divine will is free of all limitations and restrictions, even those based on a promise from Allah or a law of His. For His will is absolute beyond any promise of law.” A Qur’anic passage (5:64) that Qutb might have been referring to states: “The Jews say: ‘Allah’s hand is tied up.’ Be their hands tied up and be they accursed for the (blasphemy) they utter. . . He gives and spends (of His bounty) as He pleases.” Likewise, earlier in the surah, it states: “He forgiveth whom He will, and chastiseth whom He will.” (5:18)

This conception of God directed man’s relationship to the Almighty in a specific way. A God who has no reasons cannot be known by reason. This view can and did, in this

## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

---

form of Islam, lead to a rich vein of mysticism, but it also presents a problem. How should one behave toward an unreasoning God? Ibyn Taymiyya (1263-1328), a medieval Muslim thinker, who profoundly influenced the founder of Wahhabism and who has been resuscitated by the Islamists today, answered: man's task is not to know God; God is unknowable; do not even try to know God. Man's job is not to love God. Man cannot love what he does not know. Man's job is to obey. Submit. Reason plays no role and free will is denigrated. In his attack on philosophy, entitled *Kuzari*, Judah ha-Levi, a Jewish follower of al-Ghazali, reached the logical conclusion as to how man ought to approach the revelations of such a deity: "I consider him to have attained the highest degree of perfection who is convinced of religious truths without having scrutinized them and reasoned over them." (How, one wonders, does one become "convinced" of something without having thought about it?) There could hardly be a more radical assertion of the unintelligibility of revealed religion or rejection of the reasonableness of faith. The notion of God as pure will ineluctably leads to the elevation of incomprehensibility as a virtue.

Compare this relationship to the standard definition of a Christian vocation, which is expressed in this logical order: to know, to love, and to serve God. First, knowledge of God is required. How can one love what one does not know? Of course, it is assumed that a finite creature such as man can only comprehend a small part of an infinite God, but can know enough to inspire love. God is knowable. If one knows God, then one loves him. In turn, the obligation of that love is to serve. One is naturally drawn to serve what one loves. The expression of this vocation is internally coherent and logically ordered. It is based upon a certain view of who God is and how man is capable of freely responding to him through the use of his reason and free will.

To understand the ultimate significance of the Asharite teaching of an unreasoning God, it may also be helpful to contrast it to the Christian teaching that was similarly tempted to such extremes, but resisted them. Why, for instance, did this exclusive preoccupation with God's omnipotence not afflict Christianity, which is, after all, also monotheistic? Christianity holds that God is omnipotent and the primary cause of all things, as well. In fact, there were strong tendencies within Christianity to move in the very same direction as the Asharites. The early Christian thinker Tertullian questioned what possible relevance reason could have to Christian revelation in his famous remark: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" The anti-rational view was violently manifested in the millenarian movements of the Middle Ages, and somewhat within the movement that was known as fideism – faith alone, *sola scriptura*. In its most radical form, this school held that the scriptures are enough. Forget reason, Greek philosophy, and Thomas Aquinas. However, the anti-rationalist view in its more extreme forms has never predominated in Christianity, and was considered broadly heretical.

The reason Christianity was insulated from an obsession with God's omnipotence was the revelation of Christ as Logos in the Gospel of St. John. If Christ is Logos, if God introduces himself as *ratio*, then God is not only all-powerful, he *is* reason. While the Mu'tazilites claimed something similar, they had little scriptural authority to confirm their position, while their opponents had a great deal to oppose it.

Also, Christian revelation claims that everything was created through Christ as Logos. Since it was through Logos that all things were created, creation carries the imprint of its creator as reason. Nature bespeaks an intelligibility that derives from a transcendent source. Benedict XVI often speaks of this point as when he referred to

## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

---

the “world as a product of creative reason” or said that “at the origin of everything is the creative reason of God.” This view constitutes an open invitation to examine the rules and laws of creation in order to know the Creator, an invitation very familiar from the Old Testament (Book of Wisdom, 13:1-6). In *Romans I*, St. Paul reiterated it by saying, “ever since the creation of the world, the invisible existence of God and his everlasting power have been clearly seen by the mind’s understanding of created things.” The laws of nature are not a challenge to God’s authority but an expression of it. As Thomas Aquinas said, the reason we are able to apprehend created things with our minds is that they were first “thought” by God. Reason and Christian revelation are compatible. The tension between Athens and Jerusalem was reconciled in Rome.

Ultimately, this theological view developed into the realist metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas, which then became the foundation for modern science, as Fr. Stanley Jaki, a Hungarian theologian and physicist, has explained in his voluminous writings on the origins of modern science. He has, as well, laid out the reasons modern science was stillborn in the Muslim world after what seemed to be its real start (see his extraordinary monograph, *Jesus, Islam, Science* – Real View Books). No one offers a more profound understanding of the consequences of the view of God as pure will than Jaki has.

The metaphysical support for natural law not only laid the foundations for modern science, but also provided the basis for the gradual development of constitutional government. The primacy of power in Islamic thought undermined a similar prospect. If one does not allow for the existence of secondary causes, one cannot develop natural law. If one cannot develop natural law, one cannot conceive of a constitutional political order in which man, through his reason, creates laws to govern himself and behave freely.

If man lives in a world of which he can make no sense, a world that is a plaything of the gods or of God, an irrational world, he can choose only to surrender to fate or to despair. Reason and freedom become irrelevant. If man is not a political creature endowed with reason in a world accessible to his mind, why attempt to order political life based upon deliberation and representation? In such circumstances, man will not go about writing constitutions, for constitutions by their very nature imply a belief in a stable external order, in man's reasonability, and in his ability to formulate and establish a rational mode of government, grounded in a rational creation. Law is reason, as John Courtney Murray said, which is why we discuss reasons for laws. Ultimately, law is reason because God is Logos.

The anti-rational view not only makes democratic, constitutional order superfluous, it renders it inimical to Islamists as the form of blasphemy they fear the most. Al Qaeda author Yussuf al-Ayyeri (killed in a gun battle in Riyadh, June, 2003) wrote in his last book, *The Future of Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula after the Fall of Baghdad*: “It is not the American war machine that should be of the utmost concern to Muslims. What threatens the future of Islam, in fact its very survival, is American Democracy.” Because democracies base their political order on reason and free will, and leave in play questions radical Islamists believe have been definitively settled by revelation, radical Islamists regard democracies as their natural and fatal enemies. This is why Sayyid Qutb declared in *Milestones* that “Whoever says that legislation is the right of the people is not a Muslim.”

## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

---

The demotion of reason at the theological level is Islamism's connection with modern secular ideology and its denigration of reason, and the subsequent celebration of the use of force. Modern ideology also asserts that the primary constituent of reality is will. This is at the heart of Nietzsche, of course, and his analysis of Socrates and Greek philosophy. Philosophy is simply a rationalization, an assertion of the will, the will to dominate, the will to power. Nietzsche set up a metaphysical project to make everything the object of the will. The political vulgarisation of this project was the Nazi Party. (As Hans Friedrich Blonk, president of the Reich's Chamber of Literature, put in 1939: "this government [was] born out of opposition to rationalism.") The same demotion of reason took place in Marxism-Leninism. Marx said that reason is an excrescence of material forces. It has no legitimacy. One does not argue with man; one does not persuade people. In order to change man, one must get hold of all the forces of production, change them, and then change man's thinking. Ineluctably, if will and power are the primary constituents of reality, one will, in a series of deductive steps, conclude to a totalitarian regime. There is no other way out of it.

The curious thing is that it does not matter whether one's view of reality as pure will has its origin in a deformed theology or in a totally secular ideology, such as Hegel's or Hobbes'; the political consequences are the same. As Fr. James Schall has shown, the notion of pure will as the basis of reality results in tyrannical rule. Disordered will, unfettered by right reason, is *the* political problem.

As mentioned earlier, when facing the challenge from the West, many Muslims sought to imitate it. Why, of all things, did they choose as their models the worst of what the West had to offer, fascism and communism? Why, with few exceptions, did they not try to imitate a constitutional democratic order? In *The Middle East* (pg. 371), Bernard Lewis suggested it was because these ideologies were anti-Western, but also because "the ideologies and social strategies that were being offered corresponded in many ways much more closely to both the realities and the traditions of the region." However, he does not spell out what that correspondence is, beyond saying the West is "individualistic" in orientation and the Middle East "collective." The answer is that they were naturally drawn to fascism and communism as more compatible with what they already believed because these models are based upon the primacy of the will and the denigration of reason, and are not polluted by Christianity, to which they are openly hostile. A political order that presumes the primacy of reason and has its origins in Judeo-Christian thought did not appeal.

Neither communism nor fascism has worked for the Arabs – because they have not worked for anyone – but the Islamists have ingested their totalitarian programs and mixed them with their Asharite interpretation of Islam. That is why one can compare the features of these ideologies and even some of the language they use almost exactly. In remarking upon the abolition of the personal and private after a successful "universal all-embracing revolution," Maulana Maududi admitted that, "considered from this aspect, the Islamic state bears a kind of resemblance to the Fascist and Communist states." Islamism is inevitably on the march, proclaims Sudan's Hasan al-Turabi, because, much as communism used to be, "it's a wave of history."

Like these 20<sup>th</sup> century ideologies, Islamism places the burden of salvation upon politics, a total politics that, only through its control every aspect of life, can bring about God's kingdom on earth. As Maududi wrote, "Islam is a revolutionary doctrine and system that overturns governments. It seeks to overturn the whole universal social

## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

---

order . . . and establish its structure anew. . . Islam seeks the world.” So long as some part of the world eludes this control, conflict continues – with the Dar al Harb – just as perpetual revolution was proclaimed by Marxists until the complete overthrow of the bourgeois order. Since total control is never achieved, an excuse is always available for why the kingdom has not arrived, just as it was with the ever-receding prospects of a classless society for the Marxists.

It is important to understand that the radical Islamist desire to destroy the United States, as the leader of the West, is not simply a political goal, but a metaphysical requirement for the transformation of reality. Within Islamism, this is as metaphysically necessary as was the destruction of the bourgeoisie for the Marxists and inferior races for the Nazis for their respective millenarian projects to remake reality at that level. Like these 20th-century totalitarians, radical Islamists use their view of reality to dehumanize large portions of mankind, justifying their slaughter—albeit in their case as “infidels,” rather than as non-Aryans or bourgeoisie. Through Islamism, as through communism or Nazism, one loses one’s ability to recognize another person as a human being. In this respect, radical Islamism is a form of neo-barbarism. As Nazism was based on race hatred and communism upon class hatred, radical Islamism is based upon hatred of the infidel – to include any Muslim who does not conform to its version of Islam.

Like both the communists and the Nazis, Islamists also see force as *necessary* to affect the transformation that they desire. Reason is impotent; therefore, force is the only instrument for fundamental change. As Bin Laden’s deputy, Ayman Al Zawahiri, announced, “Reform can only take place through Jihad for the sake of Allah, and any call for reform that is not through Jihad is doomed to death and failure. We must understand the nature of the battle and conflict.” (Note Zawahiri’s frequent references in his correspondence with Zarqawi in Iraq to his colleagues as good “Asharis.”) On November 30, 2005, an Al Qaeda tape asked rhetorically, “How can we impose this religion? Can we do that through peace? Can we do it through logic? Can we do it by suggestions and ballots?” Then, the voice answered: “The only way we can do it is by the sword.”

Radical Islamists translate their version of God’s omnipotence into a politics of unlimited power. As God’s instruments, they are channels for this power. In his 1998 fatwa, Osama bin Laden gave a good example of this transference of divine authority in his issuance of the ruling “to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military” by claiming it was “Allah’s order to kill the Americans.” Once the primacy of force is posited, terrorism becomes the next logical step to power, as it did in the 20th-century secular ideologies of power, Nazism and Marxism-Leninism. This is what led Osama bin Laden to embrace the astonishing statement of his spiritual godfather, Abdullah Azzam, which Osama quoted in the November 2001 video, released after 9/11: “Terrorism is an obligation in Allah’s religion.”

This announcement is news to most Muslims, who find terrorism morally repugnant and alien to Islam’s core teachings, especially in regard to suicide killings of civilians. Islamism within Islam may be roughly analogous to the development of liberation theology within Christianity. Especially in Latin America, Catholicism was infected with Marxist ideology by way of Christianity’s preferential option for the poor. According to liberation theology, it is not enough to help the poor through charity. One must root out the institutions that purportedly cause poverty. This includes property and other aspects of capitalism. Within this teaching, the Christian part was



## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

---

soon subsumed by the Marxist part and its promotion of the necessity of violence. Priests picked up machine guns and grenades, and joined the revolution. In the ensuing struggle against this totalitarian infestation, the pope, John Paul II, won. In an exhortation that could have come from a liberation theologian, Muhammad Navab-Safavi called on his fellow Shiites: “Throw away your worry beads and buy a gun. For worry beads keep you silent, while guns silence the enemies of Islam.”

The problem today is that the side of reason in Islam lost, and therefore its natural anti-bodies to this totalitarian infection are weak. What we are witnessing today are the ultimate consequences of the rejection of human reason and the loss of causality as they are played out across the Muslim world. It is not that the side of reason is not still there – there are some extraordinarily intelligent Muslim scholars who would like to see a neo-Mu'tazilite movement within Islam, a restoration of the primacy of reason so that they can re-open the doors to *ijtihad* and develop some kind of natural law foundation for humane, political, constitutional rule. In fact, this work was already begun in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by thinkers such as Ahmed Khan in India. In certain places in the Islamic world, however, if one dares to say that the Qur'an is not coeternal with Allah, one had better have protection. There are Muslims who will say this, but many of them are in the West. Unfortunately, many of the neo-Mu'tazilites, the ones who want to resuscitate the great tradition of Muslim philosophy, are in the West as well.

The great crisis that has seized the Islamic world poses the question to Muslims: “Can we enter the modern world and also retain our faith?” One answer has been provided by the Islamists and by Osama Bin-Laden. The answer is no: we must destroy modernity and re-establish the Caliphate. The answer of Islamism reveals a spiritual pathology based upon a theological deformation that has produced a dysfunctional culture.

Therefore, the problem must be addressed at the level at which it exists. To say that the West needs to go in and improve the economic conditions in the Middle East in order to drain the swamp of terrorism is, by itself, profoundly mistaken. Terrorists are produced by a totalitarian ideology justifying terrorism. That is its “root cause.” If someone had suggested that in order to deal with Nazism one first had to overcome the problem of poverty in Germany, they would be laughed out of school. Yet this kind of thinking is taken seriously today.

The Middle East is poor because of this dysfunctional culture based upon a deformed theology and, unless it can be reformed at that level, economic engineering or the development of constitutional political order will not succeed. If one lives in a society that ascribes everything to first causes, one is not going to look around the world and try to figure out how it works or how to improve it. One will submit and do one's duty as one is told to do it. Allah is in charge of everything. To think that the only obstacles to democracy in such cultures are the autocracies that rule them is delusional. It is no accident that the embraced view of a tyrannical god produces tyrannical political orders. Syrian poet Ali Ahmad Sa'id, known as Adonis, sarcastically characterized this connection as follows: “If we are slaves, we can be content and not have to deal with anything. Just as Allah solves all our problems, the dictator will solve all our problems.” (MEMRI – Dubai TV, March 11, 2006) Without a different theology, can one have democracy? Iranian philosopher, Dr. Abdulkarim Soroush, explicitly answered this question: “You need some philosophical underpinning, even theological underpinning in order to have a real

## The Roots of Islamist Ideology

---

democratic system. Your God cannot be a despotic God anymore. A despotic God would not be compatible with a democratic rule, with the idea of rights. So you even have to change your idea of God.” Elsewhere, Dr. Soroush wrote, “some of the understandings that exist in our society today of the Imams or of the Mahdaviyat (Shia belief in the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam’s return) or even of the concept of God are not particularly compatible with an accountable state and do not allow society to grow and develop in the modern-day sense.”

Inside the Islamist understanding of revelation, is one authorised at any point to state the fundamental principle of democracy: that all people are created equal? A Nazi cannot say it; a communist cannot say it and, if one speaks only as a radical Muslim, one cannot say it either, because it is not part of the revelation. All Muslims are created equal (except women), but what about the non-Muslims? Those are the dhimmi; they are ruled in a different way. If there is no principle of equality, there is no philosophical foundation for democracy. According to Raphael Patai, a revealing proverb from the Levant states: “Nothing humiliates a man like being subject to somebody else’s authority.” This is so when there is no rational basis upon which to give one’s assent to the authority of another because that authority itself is not based upon reason. It is not based upon reason because there is no recognition of the principle of equality.

As stated at the beginning, the Islamic world is very rich; it is highly variegated.\* Is there a constituency within the Muslim world that can elaborate a theology that allows modernity? The past glories of Islamic civilization show that it was once able to progress. That progress was based upon a different set of ideas, antithetical to those of the Islamists, who would have been considered heretical then. Today, there are many Muslims (as in Turkey and in the developing democracies of Indonesia and Malaysia, to say nothing of the democratic life followed by the huge Muslim population in India) who want to, and think they can, enter the modern world, which means modern science, modern political institutions, and also keep their faith. Unfortunately, the ideas gaining traction today are not theirs. That is the crisis. The answer that is sweeping the Islamic world today does not come from people like these. It is from the al-Qaedaists and the neo-Kharijites. As described by analyst Tony Corn (Policy Review, Jan 06), “In the past 30 years, one particular brand – pan-Islamic Salafism – has been allowed to fill the vacuum left by the failure of pan-Arab Socialism and, in the process, to marginalize the more enlightened forms of Islam to the point where Salafism now occupies a quasi-hegemonic position in the Muslim world.” Alas, Qutb is everywhere. And little is being done to counter this trend.

The transmogrification of Islam into Islamism is bad news not only for the West, but also for the majority of Muslims who have no desire to live in totalitarian theocracies. In their case, numbers may not matter, any more than they did for the hapless peoples of the Russian Empire who suddenly found themselves ruled by a tiny, violent clique of Leninists in 1917. The small, tightly organized, highly disciplined and well-funded groups of Islamists seek to emulate the Leninist success with similar tactics of propaganda and violence. The worse things get, especially in the Arab world, the more appealing the Islamist message becomes as an explanation for the predicament and a program of action to overcome it. For this reason, it is in the Islamists’ self-interest that the situation gets worse. In fact, they can help insure that it does.

It is not inevitable that the Islamists should succeed, except in the absence of any strategy to counter them. Muslim leaders like the former president of Indonesia,

## **The Roots of Islamist Ideology**

---

Abdurrahman Wahid, have called for a counter-strategy (“Right Islam vs. Wrong Islam,” WSJ, 12/30/2005) that would include offering “a compelling alternative vision of Islam, one that banishes the fanatical ideology of hatred to the darkness from which it emerged.” He advocates a partnership with the non-Muslim world in a massively resourced effort to uphold human dignity, freedom of conscience, religious freedom, and the benefits of modernity before the juggernaut of Islamist ideology swamps the Muslim world. It is a compelling summons. It has yet to be answered.

---

\*It has been outside the scope of this paper to treat this richness in its Sunni and Shiite varieties, in the mystical Sufi tradition, or in the eight major legal schools of Islam, but to deal rather with the strains within Islam that helped to lay the basis for Islamism.

---

The author does not pretend to originality concerning the ideas presented in this essay, though only he is responsible for the way in which they have been synthesized. He particularly recommends, and has drawn upon, the works of Malise Ruthven (*Islam in the World; A Fury for God*); Fr. Stanley Jaki (*Jesus, Islam, Science*); Barry Cooper (*New Political Religions*) and Fr. James Schall (in a number of articles available on his web site and in interviews with him on the Claremont Institute website).