Islam in Europe

Jack Goody
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To Robert Hinde,
Partha Dasgupta,
compagnons de route,
and to all those other Fellows
of St John’s who have
helped with my enquiries
ISLAM IN EUROPE

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Preface

This short book has a number of origins. The Near East has long had an interest for me, ever since I found myself as a young man in the midst of Arab–Israeli and Greek–Turkish conflicts in the 1940s, conflicts that were partly suppressed at that time in the context of the wider struggle with the Axis powers. Returning to Cyprus many years later, in the company of Paul Sant Cassia, I was, like all other visitors, struck by the greater divide that now existed between the Muslim Turks and the Christian Greeks, in which it seemed that religion played a much stronger part than most social scientists allowed. That also seemed to be the case in the Balkans and was obviously so in Israel/Palestine. As a result of writing about this situation, I was asked to give a talk on Islam in Europe to a Socialist History Group in London, no doubt because their own approach saw religious differences as much less important than class ones, just as others saw them as ‘expressions’ of ‘ethnicity’ or ‘identity’. That effort at explanation led to my trying to clarify, in a simple and all too brief essay, the contacts and influences that Islam had had with Europe. Finding that religion generally and Islam in particular had been down-played, I wanted to show something of the nature of the interactions between Islam and Europe, taking seriously the actors’ view of the situation.
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That desire was reinforced in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, when Islam was increasingly seen as the enemy Other. I aimed to show that it was also part and parcel of the European past and present. And to do so from a generalist's standpoint, for a non-specialist audience.

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Introduction

'A spectre is haunting Europe.' This is not the spectre of communism to which Marx and Engels were referring but rather the spectre of Islam and Islamic 'terrorism'. With Marx and Engels we can say that 'All the Powers of Old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police spies.' We can easily translate the latter into their modern equivalents and add the USA, Russia, China, India and elsewhere. But is the comprehension of the spectre any greater? I wrote what I present here as a contribution to an understanding of the place of Islam in Europe's past and present around the time of the attack on the Twin Towers in New York. Islam and Muslims had generally had a bad press in the West well before that time, but that tragedy has dramatically worsened the situation.

The American president, George Bush, is notorious for having used the word 'crusade' in relation to the 'war against terrorism', thus defining it as a war of the Cross against the Crescent, of Christianity, or in his case of Judaeo-Christian civilization, against Islam. As such it becomes a 'holy war' (jihad), at least metaphorically, reverting to medieval and early modern perceptions. Terrorism, Islamic terrorism, is something to be eradicated at all costs, even at the expense
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of a war pursued if ‘necessary’ outside the rules of war and of the United Nations (by ‘pre-emptive strikes’), since the existence of ‘terrorism’ is a threat to America. In the USA early in 2002 one was constantly being handed flags to display, often on one’s car, or else badges of the Stars and Stripes to wear in one’s lapel. On the rear window of many private cars appeared banners with the words ‘God Bless America’. As in the early days of the colony, God was seen to be firmly on the side of the Americans, helping them to defeat the Indians so the latter would become civilized and Christian. The notion of Christianizing the heathen has been given up as a political strategy, no doubt in view of the fact that Islam shows no sign of retreating – quite the contrary. Nevertheless Bush is constantly calling upon God to back the United States in pursuit of her foreign policy. Religion is constantly brought into the picture.

There is an idea abroad that, of the world’s major religions, only Islam persists in the idea of a holy war. It is true that, with the increasing secularization that followed the Renaissance, much of Europe has been more tolerant about religion. Nevertheless the wars and struggles between Catholics and Protestants were frighteningly savage. Following the Enlightenment the situation changed. But much of the ideology behind the extensive colonial expansion of that continent was Christian in tone and was accompanied by hordes of missionaries penetrating into every corner of the world. With the backing of the colonial powers and their armies, they had no need to use force themselves. The conquest had already been done for them. In Islam, on the other hand, leadership of the state and the religion are ideally combined in one person, so all wars are religious wars.

The USA suffered a severe blow on 11 September 2001, a blow that literally came out of the blue, unexpected, unpredicted, unprecedented, in a country that sees itself as far removed from the front line. But the use of the term ‘terrorist’ seemed to suggest an enemy whose only purpose was the use of violence for undiscernible ends. That usage distracted attention from the question of whether there was
any political, social or religious aim behind the acts, and whether the perpetrators saw themselves as having alternative means of pursuing them. It distracted attention from the way that a good part of the rest of the world contemplates the situation of a single superpower which possesses an immense preponderance of military and economic might, so that one way or another it can command, assert or impose its will on other parts of the world. Such preponderance of unequal resources inevitably encourages resistance and opposition. The positioning of troops in the Near East, especially in Arabia, the support given to its satellite Israel, the scramble for oil, these are particular foci of resentment. And while in most cases that resentment does not issue in active forms, it can always do so, leading to a violence which employs similar notions of ‘holy war’ to that implicit, and often explicit, in the actions of the West, though there the sacred aims are phrased in terms of liberty, democracy, the free market, rarely in terms of equality or fraternity. If this analysis is remotely correct, it means that, while ‘the war on terrorism’ may undoubtedly gain its local victories, the resistance itself will emerge again and again. A defeat in Afghanistan is followed by a devastating blast in Bali, a mass kidnapping in Moscow, perhaps even a sniper in Washington. Hydra-headed, it will emerge in one form or another while the problem exists, the problem that rarely receives an adequately comprehensive analysis and that demands a socio-political solution, rather than armed conflict or the raising of cries of terrorism among all the non-Islamic powers, Europe, Russia, India and China, as well as the United States. All states wish to control resentful minorities.

In America, it has been held that the attacks of 11 September had nothing to do with its policy towards Israel. That is plainly wrong, as Bin Laden has made clear. Other attacks against Western powers, not apparently associated with al-Qaeda, have given as justification the same reason. ‘Terrorism’ of this kind will persist as long as the situation does. Until the West adopts different attitudes towards the desires of many Muslims regarding penetration into the Near East,
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attacks will continue. The war on terrorism will never end and occupation of countries in the area such as Iraq can only aggravate the tensions, not eliminate them. The comparison between post-war Germany and Japan is quite misleading; Islam is not a form of fascism, whatever its tactics. You have to come to terms with a movement of this kind, just as whites had to come to terms with blacks in South Africa and in the American South.

A commentator on the Iranian revolution recently wrote: ‘All through the twentieth century the modern world has wanted to bury religion at the level of an individual’s private life. Now, for some decades, one has seen a return in strength of ostentatious religions, which threaten the public space they occupy, break with society and are in a struggle against it’ (Khosrokhavar 2002: 7). That revolution has had its impact far and wide, for it is seen as being of global significance not simply for Islam but in the effort to combat globalization especially in its American form, represented for them by the alliance of petrol companies, of rulers (like the Shah) and of American interests. Here ‘petro-Islam’ is the key; it is not accidental that the Islamic revolution should have taken place in petrol-rich Iran or that the leader of al-Qaeda should be a child of a petrol economy. The irony is that the Western world, with its vast consumption of energy, requires Middle Eastern oil, a demand that makes those countries (or their leaders) rich and creates conditions for political interference to maintain the supplies without which their dominating economies would collapse. In other words, economically as well as politically they provide the background for Islamic (and particularly Arab) resistance and ‘terrorism’. One of the complaints against the regimes of these countries was that the rulers make little attempt to distribute their wealth to poorer members of the faith, in accord with the Qur’an. The great disparities of wealth, the attachment to consumerism, the American political and military domination in the Holy Lands, above all their support of an invading Israel in the Near East, these were and are greatly contentious issues, which have their repercussions in
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the cities of Europe. Iran and al-Qaeda are often seen as standing bravely against those influences (which they can do with their access to petrol-dollars). While the USA regards them as part of ‘an axis of evil’, they regard the USA as ‘the evil empire’.

The swift characterization of Islamic groups as ‘terrorist’ led to a neglect of their political and social agenda, whether this was a struggle for independence in Palestine and Kashmir or the attempt to force Western powers out of the oil-rich Arabian peninsula sacred to Islam. These struggles were carried out under conditions of devastating military inferiority (for example, while Israel has nuclear weapons and the latest aircraft, the Islamic powers of the Near East do not).\(^2\) This inferiority in weaponry is accompanied by a deep sense of injustice. In the course of the Arab revolt in the First World War, the Arabs, encouraged by among others T. E. Lawrence, looked forward to their own nationhood, whereas they had previously been submerged under the Turkish empire. The Arabs maintain that the independence of Palestine was included in the promises embodied in the exchange of correspondence in July to October 1915 between Sir Henry McMahon, High Commissioner of Egypt, and Husayn ibn Ali, the Emir of Mecca. In 1917, as a result of the declaration by Lord Balfour to Lord Rothschild, Palestine was declared to be ‘a national home for Jewish people’ with the proviso that nothing be done to prejudice the rights of the other inhabitants, of which in 1914 there were some 605,000 compared with 85,000 Jews. Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, signed in June 1919, recognized ‘the provisional independence’ of the former Ottoman provinces, subject to the assistance of the mandatory power. For the conquering Western powers, Britain and France, had arranged for Palestine, the Lebanon and Syria to become mandated territories allocated to them by the League of Nations so that they could monitor their interests in the Near East and above all over the Suez Canal. Britain then permitted a certain level of Jewish immigration, which later greatly increased during the Nazi pogroms of the 1930s and
the genocide of the 1940s. However, the majority of the population never accepted this situation and the Syrian Congress of 1920 had decisively rejected the Balfour Declaration and elected Faysal king of a united Syria that included Palestine. That initiative was stopped when, at the San Remo conference in the same year, the victorious allies divided up those Ottoman territories as quasi-colonial mandates, forcing Faysal to give up Syria to the French. And in that very year Palestinian riots against the Jewish settlers were attributed to the disappointment of the Arabs over their failure to achieve independence.

The penetration of Israel into the Near East can be seen as a newer version of the Crusades, carried out on behalf of the European Jewish community. It could not have happened if the Christian powers, specifically Britain, had not taken over part of the region as 'mandated' territory after the First World War. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 enabled the Jews to fulfil the longstanding dream of exiles: 'Next year in Jerusalem', or at least in Tel Aviv.

Under the British mandate Jewish immigration and land purchases continued, heavily financed from abroad. So too did inter-communal conflicts. In 1935 the British authorities tried to introduce certain 'democratic' institutions, in which the Arabs would have fourteen seats, the Jews eight, but this proposal was rejected by the latter even though the proportions were highly favourable to them; for they feared that majority rule might inhibit migration and hence their future dominance. Only after that was achieved did they become 'democratic'. Another fully fledged Arab revolt began the following year which was attributed to their fear of the country becoming a Jewish national home. As a result of the Peel enquiry into the causes of this revolt, partition was proposed, a solution that was adopted in principle by the League of Nations, suggesting an independent Arab state within ten years. But the two parties themselves disagreed, each wanting all or nothing. By 1939 the Jews formed 30 per cent of the population, much to the Arabs' resentment. At the end of the Second World War the UK and the USA
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proposed provincial autonomy for the two sides, while the new United Nations actually favoured partition together with the internationalization of Jerusalem.

The demand for Palestinian statehood is therefore nothing new; it had been talked about for some eighty years. The talks had always proved frustrating to the Palestinians, partly because the Israelis had strong outside support from the very beginning, and that included military provisions; they were better organized for violence, later by the new state of Israel, earlier of the ‘terrorist’ kind. They were also seen as interlopers in the Near East, as were the French and British mandates, together with the further European penetration in search of oil. The Israelis played football with Europe (not Asia), joined in the European song contest and were treated (and saw themselves) as a democratic European power as well as an American dependency. Meanwhile Islam was the other, the enemy, always the disturbing faction.

That view of Islam picks up on earlier attitudes. The Crusades had been seen by the West as completely legitimate, while jihadis were a form of reprehensible violence directed against us as the infidel. Both were holy wars. Each party was inevitably the other’s unbeliever, lacking the true faith, a situation that persists today in discussions of who is a terrorist. But is there anything more terrorizing than aerial bombardment which kills thousands of civilians, including women and children? In addition to its addiction to terrorism, Islam is viewed as being socio-culturally backward, though it has the same roots as Judaism and Christianity, from whose company it is often excluded by the widespread concept of the uniqueness of Judaeo-Christian civilization. Economically backward Islamic countries may be in contrast to Europe after the changes in modes of production embodied in the Industrial Revolution, or even after the changes in the modes of communication following the introduction to the West of the printing press. But, at an earlier stage, Europe had had a lot to learn from Islamic science, technology and even from aspects of its arts. Even Muslim iconoclasm, recently much condemned in the imagistic West, had its
roots in the common scriptures of the Near Eastern religions (chapter 4).

The direction of this book is unlikely to find much favour in the ruling circles of the great powers, all of whom have struggled with Muslim groups over recent years, the USA because of the over-riding support it has given to the establishment of the (Jewish) state of Israel on what for 1500 years had been Muslim lands, Russia and China because of the influence that Islam had had over the centuries in southern Russia and in north-west China and that has produced many hidden tensions and open conflicts. My thesis here is, yes, Islam is a different religion, with its own preoccupations, but, while it is often excluded from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, it is in fact essentially intrinsic to it - hence the perpetual problem of Jerusalem claimed by all three creeds, now and in the past. But even without the recent immigrants to Europe from Pakistan (in the UK), from North Africa (in France) and from Turkey (in Germany) that supply such an important part of the labour force, the role of Islam has been of great importance not only to but in Europe itself ever since the eighth century, in terms of its political, military and religious presence as well as for what it has contributed to technology, architecture, classical scholarship, mathematics, chemistry, agriculture, the use of water, philosophy, political science, travel literature and indeed literature more generally.

In this context I wanted to remind the Europeans that, whatever the problems with Islam, they were not only to be seen as attached to the 'backward' other. Islam has played a significant role in Europe since its advent in Spain and the Mediterranean in the eighth century, followed by its advance into Eastern Europe in the fourteenth and its movement into the northern steppes soon afterwards. Today all Western nations include literally millions of Muslims. To damp down potential conflict we need to understand something of the past and present of this religion, as well as of its politico-religious agenda. We need to suspend our disbelief, whether in Islam or in religions generally, in order to be able to assess
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the aims and implications of this highly successful world-wide creed and to treat its practitioners as one of the Peoples of the Book as well as of Europe itself.

Jack Goody
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