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Islam: A Primer

A Conversation with Roy Mottahedeh and Jay Tolson

In January 2002 a group of journalists gathered at the Pier House in Key West, Florida, at the invitation of the Ethics and Public Policy Center for a two-day seminar. Its purpose was to enhance journalistic understanding of current religious and cultural issues. The session from which this "Conversation" is drawn featured Harvard historian Roy Mottahedeh, with a response by journalist Jay Tolson. Their remarks here are followed by an edited version of the ensuing general discussion, moderated by Center vice president Michael Cromartie. A seminar session featuring Samuel P. Huntington appeared as "Center Conversation" 14, and a session with Bruce Hoffman is forthcoming. These seminars for journalists are made possible by a generous grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Michael Cromartie: When I was looking for someone to give us an overview of Islam, people I consulted kept raising Dr. Mottahedeh's name. Roy Mottahedeh is professor of Islamic history at Harvard University. He is the author of *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (1980) and of *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (1985).

ROY MOTTAHEDEH

By and large, Muslims view Islam not as a human religion but as the most perfect revelation of God that has come to mankind. All human society needed revelation, and therefore the very first human being, Adam, had to be a prophet because he couldn't live without the guidance of revelation.

The word "Muslims" in the Koran often means, simply, "believers." In some cases "Muslims" includes other "people of the Book"—Christians and Jews—as well as followers of the Koran, and sometimes it seems to mean simply followers of the Koran. Most Muslims do not believe in natural law (although the Shiites, who make up maybe 15 per cent of the Muslim population, do). But Muslims do believe that human beings have an inner nature that is religious, and because of this, Muslims through the ages have believed that there *is* salvation outside of Islam (though some would say this is rare). They believe that human beings can discover some of the moral law by examining this inner human nature.

Muslims see themselves as following the ultimate monotheism. Of course, both Islam and Christianity are, in a way, derivatives of Judaism, and they are both ways of universalizing monotheism. But Muslims believe that their monotheism is the more perfect, the ultimate monotheism.

Now, the next thing to understand about Islam is that Muhammad is not Christ. The self-revelation of God in Jesus is a concept that Muslims do not accept. And the Koran is not the Bible; maybe it corresponds to the Torah, but it is definitely not the Bible. Muslims believe that the entirety of the Koran is a perfect, unerring revelation of God. And just as the New Testament relates the things that Jesus said and did, there's a great deal in Islam about the sayings and doings of Muhammad. These are the famous *Hadith*. It is a huge body of material—some tens of thousands of sayings are considered somewhat more authentic than 500,000 other sayings. It allows you to construct almost any kind of Islam you want. And it is somewhat like the New Testament in that it shows the perfect exemplar of the religion.

Another basic fact is that there is no sacramental function in Islam. *Ulama* are the learned people, the religious authorities; they are not priests. Every Muslim can do everything necessary for personal salvation by himself or herself. This is important to understand, because people keep saying, "Why don't the Muslim clergy speak

out for this or that?" Well, they speak out for everything! One man's clergyman is simply another man's kosher butcher. To understand Islam one has to set aside the perception of religion that is based on Christianity and look to a different model. Of course, there are some Muslim systems that are slightly more hierarchical than others. One is the system of the "Twelver" Shiites, the kind of clergy the Iranians have. But even they are absolutely incapable of keeping order among and within the clergy. There is great debate over who has the right to determine the meaning of scripture.

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The Arabs make up only a minority of Muslims—200 million out of more than a billion. And, of course, a significant number of Arabs are Christians. But although Arabs constitute less than 20 percent of Muslims, people often claim to be talking about the Muslim world when what they are really describing is the Arab world. That error will hamper any ability to conceptualize what is happening among the Muslims.

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam honors Abraham as a patriarch of the faith; he is considered an ancestor of the Prophet. There are some questions common to all the Abrahamic faiths. First, does anyone have more authority than anyone else to interpret revelation? Second, are God's commandments for the construction of the physical and moral world necessary? That is, was God in a sense constrained by logic? Or are these arrangements arbitrary? As logicians would say, is logic inherently logical, or is it in fact something that has been *constructed* to describe things? I think this is a fundamental difficulty of all human thought. And it turns out to be a central theological problem for Islam.

A third problem area is: How much, if at all, has God ceded to humans the responsibility to figure out his moral intentions for the world? Cardinal Ratzinger made this point in saying (and I may not be quoting exactly here): "It is quite within God's power to concede no control of the moral world to mankind; it is within God's power to instruct mankind for every action; but we accept that there is a sphere in which he has ceded to man the power to solve problems and puzzles by himself." Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all wonder where that sphere is. A corollary is that both Judaism and Islam have a certain amount of law in their scripture—there are certainly more commandments in the Old Testament and in the Koran than in the New Testament—but this does not mean that Jews and Muslims believe all actions in this life are religiously determined. It's simply a matter of looking at scripture to find out how to behave.

Christianity emphasizes the need for God's grace in order for human beings to be saved. In Islam, righteousness is counted by intent. A famous saying is, "If you intend to do the right act, and it turns into a wrong act, it counts to your credit in God's acceptance of your deeds." And there is great individual responsibility to God. At least three times the Koran says, "Let nobody bear the burden of another," meaning that you yourself have responsibility for your actions and for your salvation. There is an interesting word in Arabic that means to do good or to make something beautiful. A typical verse in the Koran on the subject reads, "Vie with one another, hastening to the way which leads to forgiveness from your Lord, and to a garden whose breadth is the heavens and the earth, prepared for the pious, those who spend in charity in times of both ease and adversity and who restrain their anger and pardon other human beings. God loves those who do what is beautiful [or, what is good]."

Now we come to my real discipline, which is not the theology of Islam but its history. A whole series of things had happened within the Islamic world by A.D.1000, the middle of the period in which I have specialized. Muhammad died in 632. By 1000 it is clear that the experiment of a single Muslim ruler—the caliph—has failed. And a class of religious experts—the *ulama*—has divided itself (though not to everybody's satisfaction) into certain discrete schools of law. In their development of a kind of scholastic learning, the *ulama* represent the unity of Islam. The high scholastic tradition that existed among the *ulama* in the Middle Ages was centrifugal; people wrote referencing one another's works. A famous book written refuting philosophy as it developed in the area of Baghdad was called *The Collapse of the Philosophers*. Then in the next century the Spanish philosopher Averroes, who was a great medieval thinker and quite influential on European scholasticism, wrote an attack on that book, calling his *The Collapse of the Collapse*. It is a world in which at that high scholastic level there is continuous conversation.

In what way are Muslims a united community otherwise? Mainly in ritual observation. Now, there is some variation in that area as well. But the prayer is fairly uniform, as is the practice of the pilgrimage. However, as for the Koran and what it means for life: nobody is quite sure. And therefore, in a sense, the Muslim world today is only one very specific instance of Koranic observance. Now, I feel that Muslims throughout the ages have a great deal of sympathy for one another and are worried about the plight of fellow Muslims. They recognize the community of people who share the same ritual observation. But beyond that, I don't think the terms "Islamic world"

and "Muslim world" are useful units of reference. There are not enough commonalities for that.

Anyway, by the year 1000 the *ulama* represent the unity of Islam. By the end of that century, around 1095, the theological schools called *madrasahs* have been established with huge dormitories, enormous pious endowments, great stipends, abundant supplies of ink and paper, and the like. So the scholastic system developed through patronage for its particular kind of learning.

By the year 1000, it had become clear that law was the queen of the sciences, the most important subject. That doesn't mean that students in the *madrasahs* didn't study algebra, astronomy, and other subjects; but always these subjects were given an Islamic wash. In studying Islamic thinkers, it is extremely difficult to distinguish a kind of Islamic patina from something that goes very deep and is really Islamic. The Koran is the first lengthy piece of Arabic prose we have, and it really establishes Arabic. There was only poetry before. Aside from letters and little bits of translation of the Gospels, Arabic prose of any length did not exist before the Koran. As a result, the language of the Koran permeates Arabic in a way that I think the language of the King James Version of the Bible permeated English in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But that is an imperfect parallel, and there is nothing recent in English that gives you any sense of the way a foundational document can permeate a language.

Anyway, many things considered "Islamic" have no real connection with Islam. They appear to be Islamic because that is the baseline on which their language and thought exist.

Although law became the queen of sciences, Islamic law is staggeringly unspecific about public matters. The Ayatollah Khamani, the president of Iran, has written a book about the poverty of Islamic political thought. I do not think that he's right about political thought as a whole, because a lot of that discussion was carried on outside the *madrasah*. But in *madrasah* circles, it is absolutely true. The lawbooks merely say that the community should have a totally just ruler. They say it in many different ways—the ruler should be kind, he should be merciful, he should be just, he should not be swayed by the people around him. However, they leave out the whole matter of public law.

"Islamic law is staggeringly unspecific about public matters. . . . The lawbooks merely say that the community should have a totally just ruler."

Khamani, who was a mullah [religious teacher] himself, blames his predecessors for the weakness of Islamic public law. There is no question that they did it by design. They were very clever people. But why? Because they decided it was too hot to handle. By the year 1000 the caliphate had disappeared, and nobody had really decided what Islamic government is. I said earlier that there are specific commands and prohibitions in the Koran. But there are at most five hundred verses of lawmaking—much less than in, for example, Leviticus.

Also by 1000, Sufism had developed. This is a kind of mystical Islam that emphasizes individual spiritual development. Rumi, the best-selling Islamic poet in the United States, is an example of the Sufi tradition. Sufism is an extremely appealing interpretation of Islam, and it became the most important way of spreading the religion throughout Central Asia, India, Indonesia, and elsewhere.

By the year 1000, people had come to realize that they were being ruled by governments that had come to power simply by deposing other regimes. The word *sultan* means "power," and by the year 1000 "Mr. Power" was beginning to be the name of the ruler. These rulers had imposed themselves on states. The *ulama* tended to say, "Okay, as long as the rulers prevent anarchy, they are acceptable." There's a famous line of al-Ghazali, a great scholastic and a great Sufi, who died in 1111: "Better sixty years of oppression than one day of disorder." So a lot of the *ulama* were incredibly quietistic. But they demanded certain things from the government—mainly patronage for themselves, which they got, and the defense of Islamic society against outside attacks.

"There was a kind of understanding that the 'ulama' [religious experts] would not endorse any regimes. But neither would they fight a regime as long as it allowed Muslims to do the things necessary for their own salvation."

In Egypt, the Mamluk dynasty ruled from 1250 to 1517. They were of slave origin; in fact, the whole dynasty was a group of slaves, succeeding one another as sultan. What did they do? Well, they kicked out the last Crusaders, and they defended the Muslims against the invading Mongols. They patronized learned Muslims; for example, they built *madrasahs*. As long as they allowed Muslims to do what they needed to do for their own salvation, such as praying and fasting, their regimes were considered more or less acceptable. There was a kind of understanding that the *ulama* would not endorse any specific regimes, but neither would they fight a regime as long as it allowed Muslims to do the things necessary for their own salvation.

Correspondingly, the Muslim learned tradition is concerned with orthopraxis—that is, behaving as a Muslim—as a standard for who is a Muslim. There's a verse in the Koran that is translated, "Do not say to anyone who offers you peace, 'You are not a believer.'" Mus-

lims do not call one another "unbelievers." Only in the direst circumstances would you charge anybody with failing to be a Muslim.

So there was a de facto secular sphere. People think that in Islam, religion and government are one. Yes, on a hypothetical level; people dreamed that it should be that way. But in reality it wasn't. Almost from the beginning it was not that way.

Now I will try to sketch the ideological genealogy of Osama Bin Laden. In the seventh century, a law school was founded by someone named Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, whose followers are known as the Hanbalis. The founder was very much a literalist in his interpretations of scripture. He wanted to restore Islam to the purity of the faith as it was elucidated during the time of the Prophet and the Prophet's Companions, those who were close to him during his lifetime. Hanbal's followers were much more ready than anybody else to call people "unbeliever." The Hanbalis and their law school, which is still the smallest law school in Islam, started to develop a kind of rigorist Islam that, in the hands of some of its interpreters, rejected, interestingly, even logic.

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The middle of the thirteenth century brought the Mongol invasion, and the last caliph, who was only a shadowy figure, was killed. People speak about the Crusades as the great offense of the West, but the Mongols were much worse. They were pagans who conquered at least half of the Muslims around the world in their time. They had strange habits such as not washing because they believed that water was sacred and shouldn't be put on the human body. This was deeply offensive to Muslims, for whom washing is ritually important. They were altogether terrifying, strange, pagan, anti-Muslim people who suddenly ruled over half of the Muslims.

In the seventeenth century the Ottoman Empire was doing pretty well. But in the eighteenth century it became glaringly obvious that European power and prosperity were far surpassing theirs. Muslim states, though not yet subjected to direct colonialism, knew that they were lagging behind the European states. Two things happened: (1) Muslims developed a longing to discover the secret of European power, and (2) movements that were excessively concerned with purity arose.

In the mid-eighteenth century, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab founded a rigorous, anti-Sufi system that came to be called Wahhabism. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was ready to apply the term "unbeliever" to anybody who was not a true monotheist according to his very narrow definition. Most later followers of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab were not so ready to reject other Muslims. But from the rigorist thinkers of the eighteenth century, there was a succession of people leading up to Osama Bin Laden, who expanded the idea that people could be called non-Muslim and said that entire existing governments in Islamic countries could be declared non-Muslim.

Part of this trend had to do with the creation of an educated secular elite that, while intensely religious, doesn't believe that the *ulama*, the traditional scholastics, are the real interpreters of scripture. They say, "To hell with them—we can go to scripture and derive its meaning ourselves. We don't care about fourteen centuries of exegesis." Some of them, like the militant Takfir wal Hijra movement, believe in migration to the edge of sinful society, where you purify yourself. They are very similar to the Zealots, and remember what happened to the Zealots after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 71: they disappeared completely.

Part of my conclusion is, in fact, that this Islamic militancy is a self-defeating movement. It has already lost national boundaries. Its first aim had been to overthrow national governments. For instance, earlier pronouncements by Osama Bin Laden were all about overthrowing the Saudi Arabian government, but later ones rambled all over the world and talked about Hiroshima and the Palestinian situation. In a national context the militants are almost always defeated; in fact, in certain countries, like Egypt, public sentiment has already turned against them. The massacre at the Tomb of Queen Hatshapsut in Luxor in 1997 was a kind of crest of the Islamic wave. Fifty-eight foreign tourists and four Egyptians were brutally slain, and Egyptians were horrified. The Islamic militant wave had crested, and so these Muslim militants went off to the wildest, least controlled country in the world: Afghanistan.

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Conclusions: First, the future belongs to the moderates. They do not have their voice now, partly because many of them are stifled by autocratic governments. But they are in the majority. In the long term, at least for the next twenty years, the moderates will be by and large followers of the reformist thinkers of Islam, of whom a significant number are in the Islamic diaspora. Remember how many Muslims are living in nations that are not majority Muslim.

A second conclusion: U.S. action against Iraq or Iran would be really ill advised. I think it would drive many Muslims for whom the Islamic militant wave has crested back into sympathy with the militants. There is a saying to the effect that the liberator—the freedom fighter—moves through the people as the fish swims through the ocean. One of our most important aims is to dry it up that ocean. It had begun to dry up before September 11. We will not help that process by attacking Muslim-majority nations.

My third conclusion is this: I would like to see a Fulbright plan to provide a better and more rounded education in these countries. A lot of young Muslims go through engineering school but don't learn about how you argue about history, about subjects that by their very nature are uncertain, like the social sciences. We should sponsor and help schools, not the American University in Cairo or Beirut but schools in the vernacular languages—Arabic, Pushtu, Urdu, whatever. This would not only create the human capital that is essential for the development of these countries, but would also indigenize a certain way of conducting debate. It would give these people more understanding of their interlocutors in the West. Such a plan would also make the civil society—particularly the NGOs that exist in these countries—more powerful, in that the people who lead them would not seem to be all Western-educated people like Saadeedin Ibrahim, who after coming back from the University of Indiana had a long, distinguished career as a sociologist in Egypt. Then he was thrown in prison. The Egyptian intellectuals are not so sympathetic to somebody who is completely financed and educated by outsiders.

Michael Cromartie: Thank you, Roy. Jay Tolson, a former editor of *The Wilson Quarterly* and a biographer of Walker Percy, is a senior writer at *U.S. News & World Report*. He has written several stories on Islam and has read widely in the literature. Jay will give a brief response to Roy Mottahedeh's remarks before we get into a general discussion.

JAY TOLSON

I'd like to start with another person's story. An anthropologist named Dale Eikelman, who has spent a lot of time in Islamic places such as Morocco and Oman, tells about going to a small oasis town in Oman. This was more than twenty years ago—let's say 1980. At that time the town was in transition. It was getting schools. It was starting to have a more developed hydroelectric system, which allowed it to expand its agricultural areas. Government buildings were spreading beyond the old perimeter marked by watchtowers. But it was still very much a traditional town defined by religious practices: the five daily prayers and the men's weekly prayer gathering at the mosque. When Dale Eikelman didn't get up in the morning for the first prayer, one of the village leaders came in and poked him with a gun because it was considered impolite to touch somebody directly. "Are you coming to prayers?" he asked. "No, I can't," said Eikelman. "I don't pray that way." People in the village had almost no idea of what a Christian was.

About ten years later Dale Eikelman came back to the same town. More kids in the village were educated. The people had television and other forms of contact with the wider world. The nephew of the village sheik came up to Eikelman and said, "The people of the village are ignorant of Islam, and they behave like animals. Sure, they pray and fast, but they can't understand why Muslims must explain their beliefs." Eikelman was astonished by this comment. He started looking around and seeing other changes in the village. People used to get most of their information about the wider world from the sheik, who would get the gossip and have weekly gatherings with the village elders to tell them what was going on. Now people were getting their information directly from television and other news sources. They were starting to see TV reports of events in Israel and other parts of the world.

"What is similar about these two reformations is the driving material fact of a revolution in communications and an increase in literacy."

Eikelman saw this as part of a wider phenomenon within the Islamic world that he has called a "reformation." Admittedly it's a tricky term, he said, because it suggests parallels with the sixteenth-century Christian Reformation, and there might be more differences than similarities between the two. But what is similar about these two reformations is the driving material fact of a revolution in communications and an increase in literacy. In Oman in 1975–76, twenty-two students graduated from high school. In 1987–88, well over thirteen thousand students graduated from high school, and by 1995–96, there were sixty thousand secondary-school graduates in the country. Thirty-five hundred were attending universities that had opened in Oman in 1986. This was a tremendous jump in education. That increase and the new sources of communication with the outside world were breaking down the old lines of authority, including religious authority, and enabling young Muslims to start learning about Islam on their own.

Now, I think Dale Eikelman joins Roy Mottahedeh in his optimism about what this will ultimately mean. Eikelman points to a number of quite influential writers,

thinkers, and public figures. One example is Syria's Muhammad Shahrur, whose *The Book and the Koran: A Contemporary Reading* appeared in the 1990s and sold tens of thousands of copies, not just in Syria but throughout the Middle East. He points to people like Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm, another liberal who has debated conservative clerics. Some of them are in their home countries; others have had to leave. I think they represent the hopeful side of this possible reformation.

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The other side, the dangerous side, is that this reformation enables more and more readers to pick up scary little books with titles like *The Terror of the Grave* or *What Follows Death*. These Islamic books give lurid descriptions of the kind of end that awaits you if you don't follow a very rigid religious discipline. This presentation of an extremely puritanical Islam, either through literature or through videocassettes—and Bin Laden is an acknowledged genius of the cassette medium who has produced some amazing pieces that play throughout the Middle East—is circulating widely. Why? It is because of huge amounts of financial backing from Saudi Arabia, the biggest sponsor of this form of puritanical Islam.

What is going on in Saudi Arabia is a complicated story, but roughly speaking, it's a kind of deal. The royal family, which from its conception has been tied up with Wahhabism, essentially buys off an aggressive, virulent religious community that sponsors things like the Muslim World League. The League is a highly influential Islamic equivalent of the United States Information Agency that tries to influence publishing houses and broadcasters throughout the Middle East.

Ten years ago I commissioned an article about influences for diversity within Islam. In a response to that piece, Martin Kramer, an Israeli scholar of Islam, said something like this: "Yes, all that is wonderful. Yes, you can point to Indonesia and to the Pakistanis and to these other varieties of Islam. But they are on the decline." As was pointed out earlier, only about two hundred million of the billion or more members of the Islamic world are Arabs. But the Arab Muslims, and particularly the Wahhabi Muslims, have the microphone, and they are projecting their vision of Islam on more and more of the Islamic world. So more than ever before there is an ideal of homogeneity of Islamic practice and belief throughout the Islamic world, an ideal that has reached into the United States and Western Europe. This is a remarkably well-orchestrated, well-funded campaign. Now, I hope that you are right to be optimistic, Professor Mottahedeh, but it does seem to me that the wealthiest and best orchestrated element of radical, militant Islam is still in the ascendancy. I don't think the elimination of Osama Bin Laden and al Qaeda would spell the end of that development. This is a much broader movement than Bin Laden himself.

Roy Mottahedeh made the point that one of the movements that the Wahhabists are most determined to crush is Sufism. Sufism has been one of the great forces within the world of Islam, particularly in Central Asia, but an amazing number of Western scholars have almost marginalized it. Knowingly or not, they have bought the Wahhabi line that Sufis are not true Muslims, that they are guilty of *bid'ah*, of introducing practices and beliefs not present in early and true Islam. The Muslim World League will not hesitate to tell you that Sufis are incorrect believers. In the Koran the Prophet quotes the divine saying that there will be hundreds of versions of the faith, and in the end only God will determine which is true. It is a violation of the law itself for someone to say that you are or are not a correct believer. An incorrect believer is outside the faith. And someone outside the faith is vulnerable to any kind of attack, since a believer is within his rights to kill a non-believer. This is a great advantage if extremist Muslims want to carry out a campaign against other Muslims whom they consider heretics.

I don't mean to say that I see nothing but darkness; I tend to think the moderates will eventually prevail. But I think we have to overcome a certain starry-eyed view about how wonderful all religions are. There are some very evil strains within religions. This extremist strain in Islam is tremendously powerful. It has had a major influence on debates about many things in the Middle East, including Israel. I think we need to think about how extremist Islam has aggravated the tensions between Palestinians and Israelis. Anti-Israeli passion has been fostered throughout the Middle East by regimes well aware that this is the only way to siphon off discontent against their failed regimes. I think we in America are a bit naïve in accepting the explanation that the repression of Palestinians is the primary cause of those tensions.

DISCUSSION

Michael Cromartie: Thank you, Jay. Now everyone else is invited to join the conversation. [All participants will be identified at the end.]

E. J. Dionne: I have so many questions; let me throw out a couple, Professor Mottahedeh. First, some of us were talking earlier about a strange thing that has developed: Ottoman nostalgia. We're now looking back on the Ottoman Empire as a time of great pluralism and toleration. Is this a correct perception? A second question: How did the Arab world move so quickly from secular Arab nationalism or Arab socialism—or perhaps in Saddam's case, Arab national socialism—to the dominance of Islamic ideologies? This has occurred over a very short period of time, probably less than fifty years.

Roy Mottahedeh: Nostalgia about the Ottomans: yes, it's unhistorical. Mark Cohen, a former student of mine who is now a professor at Princeton, wrote a fine book called *Judaism Under Crescent and Cross.* Jews were much more at home in Muslim-majority lands than in Christian-majority lands in the medieval and early modern periods. In the seventeenth century Sephardic Jews from Spain fled to Istanbul for refuge. But the toleration began breaking down, and in the nineteenth century Western liberalism moved to a point where it accepted Christians and Jews on an equal footing to a degree unmatched in the Islamic world. Still, you have to realize how gradual that was.

I think that part of the explanation for the speed with which Islamic ideology has come to the fore is what Jay was talking about: the education of the masses. I'm sure that in the Algerian war of independence, the average Algerian was fighting for Islamic territory against occupation by an alien power, a Christian power—namely, France. But that's not what the leaders felt. As these people became educated, they entered the political process—and their default identity was Muslim, not Algerian, say, or Egyptian. That default identity came colossally to the fore as these people began to enter politics.

Kenneth Woodward: I want to mention two things I hope you will elaborate on and then ask a question. First, the question of reformation and the analogy to the Protestant Reformation: I have real problems with that. Second, the idea of jihad. I recall reading about a Muslim country in Africa in which the religious authorities found the government insufficiently Muslim and therefore declared jihad against it. It seems to me that this term means war, whether it's internal against your own people or external; it is much more vigorous than some have made it out to be.

My question is this. I was struck by your emphasis on law as the queen of the sciences. I am not at all optimistic about the possibilities of a moderate Islam any time soon. It seems to me that a moderate Islam can take hold only where there is an institution to support it: namely, independent schools of law, where moderation can become enshrined through deliberation by people who are respected. It seems to me that none of the legal scholars are respected by the people, because they are government appointees and as such suspect because the governments are suspect. Do you think this is a precondition for the development of any kind of moderate Islam?

Roy Mottahedeh: Among Sunni Muslims, there is the idea that questions of law that are up in the air are decided by consensus. When smoking was introduced from the new world, there was terrific debate: was it analogous to drinking and therefore forbidden? The smokers became so numerous in the early seventeenth century that the leading sheik of the Ottoman Empire said: The majority of people now accept smoking as being different from drinking; it's decided by consensus. Are there voices calling for a moderate understanding of the law that are respected today? Yes, absolutely. For example, Abd al-Karim Soroush of Iran achieved considerable recognition there. Two of his books have sold more than 100,000 each. Altogether, his book sales have exceeded half a million. He's not a marginal figure.

Franklin Foer: This matter of reformation seems like the key question. I know Robin Wright, John Esposito, and others have popularized the idea that Islam is in the midst of some sort of reformation, that it has a school of thinkers who believe in Islamic civil society, in some form of democracy. But Martin Kramer seems to say in his book, Look, when you examine their writings a lot of these guys are Islamists. They're not fundamentally liberal people.

Roy Mottahedeh: I'm not sure that Marty Kramer can read Persian, so he's dependent on translation. Most of these Islamic reformers are talking about something that we recognize in European government, a religion recognized by the state; they are not calling for the application of Islamic law to everybody. And in fact, Kamal Abul Magd, who was just appointed by the Arab League to promote dialogue, actually drafted a sample Islamic constitution. This constitution should be translated

into English; it's widely respected by the Muslim Brothers in Egypt. The kind of government it calls for is one that you would not feel uncomfortable with in Western Europe.

Kenneth Woodward: You mentioned something about consensus of the community. Well, where is the community? Is it a town? A village? The nation?

Jay Tolson: Is it the *ulama*?

Roy Mottahedeh: What I am trying to say is that there is *no* authoritative voice because of the lack of clergy. The most respected of the *ulama* in Syria, Sheik Wahbah az-Zuhayli, wrote a book on jihad—this was back in the 1980s—that says plainly: "In modern times we all live in the world of treaty, not in the world of war and Islam." At the end of this very long and complex book he concludes: "What does jihad mean in the modern world? Jihad means the struggle against the distortion of Islam." So it is jihad by word, by proselytizing. The majority of the *ulama* are of that opinion. And where do the common people stand on that issue? All over the place.

David Shribman: Our own history takes two hundred and twenty-five years to unfold. The history of Islam goes back twenty centuries. I guess my question is, In the twentieth-century span of Islamic history, how important a figure is Osama Bin Laden? Is he an original and important voice (which I think many of us can agree George W. Bush is not)? Is he a voice of enduring significance? Is he a Ronald Reagan type, or is he merely a clever but irritating figure like Newt Gingrich?

Roy Mottahedeh: He's not original. It's interesting: Bin Laden's Arabic is eloquent, but it is also archaizing. For instance, he uses a word for military encampment that has not been used in ordinary Arabic speech since maybe the eighth or early ninth century. You might say he is romantically medieval modern. He talks about the people and the government, which is an equation that doesn't exist in premodern political discourse. But at the same time he's not original.

Judith Shulevitz: You stopped your lecture basically at the nineteenth century. I'm particularly interested in the twentieth-century roots of Osama Bin Laden. Would you take us briefly through the Muslim Brothers and other such groups and show us how they have influenced Bin Laden? It seems a long way from Wahhabi to Osama.

Roy Mottahedeh: I think the three essential twentieth-century figures are Abul Ala Maududi, who lived under the British raj and ended up in Pakistan; Sayyid Qutb; and Ayatollah Khomeini. They were not necessarily the brightest, but they had the most influence.

Qutb is quite an amazing character. He was an exchange student to the United States who became an essayist. He wrote a huge commentary on the Koran, an exciting document written with great enthusiasm. One of the things he took from Maududi, who is slightly older, is that in the verses in the Koran that are about judging—it says that anyone who judges unjustly shall have the most awful punishment—the verb in Arabic can mean also "to rule." And so he transferred the meaning of these verses to rulers. When he came back from the United States he joined the Muslim Brothers, who were playing footsie with King Farouk. Then Nasser came to power. As you know, the Muslim Brothers tried to assassinate Nasser, and a lot of them were thrown in prison. Qutb was in prison for ten years and was made to watch other people being brutally tortured by the Egyptian secret police. And he himself was also tortured. He came out determined to form a cell among the Muslim Brothers of people who were going to do harm to the government. He died in 1966.

Maududi in India is a much deeper thinker than Qutb, and he says, Let's face it: Islamic law says there has to be a caliphate, so we're going to create a new caliphate. The Muslim people must form a universal Muslim nation. It must have a caliph, and the caliph should be elected. That's quite an amazing aspect of the whole thing. Maududi is not for armed struggle. Historically, Islam is not as theocratic as people think.

Then, Ayatollah Khomeini. From the Shiite point of view, no jihad can be declared except by the imam, the spiritual leader of the community. The Shiites believe that the so-called Hidden Imam occulted himself in the ninth century and will reappear only at the end of time, like the return of Jesus. Khomeini just dumps the entire Shiite tradition and says that the most learned jurist is the stand-in for any ruler until the return of the Imam.

Jay Tolson: I think it would help us if you said a few words about *shari'a* and about the fact that the modern Islamists offer an extremely rigid notion of the law. This is truly the most romantic and utopian aspect of their thinking, that you can go back and extract from a literal but always selective reading of the Koran all the principles you need to create and run a just society. The tradition within Shiism is that, in fact, the law is open to further discussion and can still be applied to different situations, but that interpretation itself closed around A.D. 1000. A lot of the modernists say that this restricted body of laws that constitute *shari'a* is sufficient to create an ideal society.

Roy Mottahedeh: *Shari'a* really means "the path." It is the perfect

path for human conduct as understood in the mind of God. Turning that into a political platform is the fantasy of the modern Islamists. They start saying that *shari'a* covers everything and is very clear and immutable. One party in Egypt used to say, "Our constitution is the Koran." Excuse me? What could that possibly mean? Our *scripture* is the Koran! It's not a constitution! The constitution is a way of deciding differences.

Dan Morgan: Going back to the question of reformation: Would a better word be "awakening"? That seems to be a broader term that can apply to a whole range of issues, not just religious ones. There was a wonderful piece in the *New York Times* magazine about a street in Peshawar. These are the people who work twelve hours a day for $1.25 an hour. There's deep economic oppression in their lives, and no hope. The only place where they feel they have a voice is the mosque. Would you address that in terms of a less optimistic scenario than Jay was suggesting?

Roy Mottahedeh: Yes, recent developments do constitute an awakening. What I said before I really believe. The Islamist movements have been the introduction to politics for enormous numbers of people. They might have been in village politics before, but they expected the landlord and the local prayer leader to speak on their behalf in the larger world. These representatives spoke for them to more powerful people, who spoke to the central government. Now these people are drawn into the political process more directly, or at least they want to be. Let me say parenthetically that I think the sentiment for popular sovereignty in most Islamic countries—maybe not Saudi Arabia—is very strong, but sentiment for individual liberties is not developed.

A lot of the Islamist voices actually act upon the obligation of charity to the poor, organization, education, and so on. And it's no surprise that the guys who have the books to distribute and the organization to do these things for the people get the inside track. The big question is, how can you move beyond a very simplistic idea like "the Koran is our constitution" and bring these people into a process that includes popular sovereignty?

Paul Richter: The economic side is one we haven't talked about.

Roy Mottahedeh: The economic side is part of the appeal of the Islamists. They get help to disaster victims. When there was an earthquake in Cairo, the Islamists got there first! This was noticed by everyone. They are better organized.

David Brooks: You said that in the eighteenth century, acknowledgment of European political and economic superiority generated this bifurcated reaction, with some people seeking secrets of success, others seeking purity of religion. Are you implying that this is still a central dynamic in Islamic reaction? Also, is there a difference in that dynamic between Arab Muslims and non-Arab Muslims? It seems stronger in Arab Muslims.

Roy Mottahedeh: One of the factors working to the detriment of the Arab people is the conflict between pan-Arabism and national identity. I think building inside the national unit really is the way ahead at this point. Pan-Arabism has created immense amounts of sentiment with almost nothing to show for it. I just don't think it has proven its worth. Other Muslim-majority societies do have a form of democracy; there are elections that sometimes bring surprising people to power. Egyptians have no consciousness of their pre-Islamic past, but Iran has never lost that consciousness. The people kept their language. For all its Islamic rhetoric, Iran has turned into a very nationalistic operation.

Iran is a case of a country that went right into its Islamist experience and did so by its own choice. But the leaders discovered that they didn't have any idea what an Islamist government is. The Iranian constitution is basically the constitution of the Fifth Republic with a lot of passionate Islamic language and various references to the sovereignty belonging either to the people or to God—it contradicts itself about that. It gives certain powers of veto to the clerics, which of course is what all the struggle is about now. But it's actually not a bad constitution. It just shows that in the face of reality, when you start establishing your own Islamic society, you realize that there is no Islamic law to cover many basic aspects.

At the beginning, Khomeini had been dead-against the enfranchisement of women. In 1964, when the Shah enfranchised women, Khomeini was famously against it. But he didn't dare disenfranchise women when he came to power, because, for one thing, women were an important part of his movement. They were an extremely important part of the millions of people who came on the street. And secondly, even some women who are members of his own family wanted to run for parliament!

Khomeini adopted what is a minority point of view among Sunnis, that Islam was against birth control, and the population zoomed up much faster than Iranians ever expected. The minute Khomeini died, the mullahs got together and said, "Oh, we looked at scripture carefully, and it's quite clear that Islam is in favor of birth control." Similarly, they first said, "We're going to adopt the classical tax system of the jurists of the ninth century." But within months after the foundation of the Islamic

Republic, they went back to the tax system that existed under the Shah. The other one was unworkable. This Islamist experiment need not end in a radical, pre-modern society. I believe that of all the societies in the Middle East, Iran will be the one where in the long run the overwhelming mass of people believe in democracy.

David Brooks: How strongly are the Islamists driven by resentment that the West, including Israel, is much more powerful?

Roy Mottahedeh: It's often said that there's resentment of Israel for being richer. I don't see that. But they do resent Israel for being more powerful. First of all, I want to say that the second intifada has caused a resurgence of resentment among all Muslims. Practically every major Muslim singer has made a song about the boy who was caught on TV being killed by Israeli gunfire. Through media coverage the second intifada has had an incredible emotional impact. It has contributed to Osama Bin Laden's success. As for power: a lot of people realize that having a scientific establishment that contributes research and progress to a society is not a matter of just buying the machines; you must create your own technocrats.

Franklin Foer: I was wondering if you could talk about Muslim anti-Semitism. It's striking that in the course of just a hundred years, maybe less, Muslim societies went from being markedly tolerant toward Jews to being markedly intolerant toward them. In Christianity, from the start, anti-Semitism was prevalent because the religion was defined in opposition to Judaism. Did anything similar to that exist within Islam?

Roy Mottahedeh: In classical Islamic law there are three absolute differences of status: Muslim and non-Muslim, male and female, and—in former times—free and slave. The law recognizes those absolute differences; it doesn't deprive any of these groups of the protection of the law, but it does uphold those distinctions. For instance, twice as many female witnesses as male witnesses are required for some common kinds of court proceedings. And the same applies to non-Muslims. The Jews in some places were hated more than the Christians. In French North Africa more than in eastern Arab lands, I think there were people who despised the Jews. The Nazis encouraged this sentiment, of course, and claimed that they were the true allies of the Arabs.

Franklin Foer: So would it be fair to say that the virulent twentieth-century anti-Semitism that you see in a lot of Arab countries is essentially a Western import?

Roy Mottahedeh: Oh yes! It's been documented as such.

Paul West: I wonder if you could add to your primer a brief chapter on the afterlife and martyrdom and the extent to which those concepts are or are not central. One thing that made me think about that was the comment made earlier that the swift U.S.-led operation in Afghanistan was having an impact on public opinion in the Arab street. I think I'm quoting Professor Huntington correctly—he said, "Nobody wants to get on the bandwagon of a loser." [See "Religion, Culture, and International Conflict: A Conversation with Samuel P. Huntington," Center Conversation 14.]

Roy Mottahedeh: First of all, the Arab street is not quite so easy to gauge. About twenty minutes after the September 11 attack, CNN called me up and asked, "How are the Muslim masses reacting?" From my study in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I have no way of knowing that!

About the afterlife: yes, Muslims believe in the afterlife. The Koran speaks about it. But I think the connection between this and the suicide attacks has been greatly exaggerated. It's true that fighting in jihad is supposed to erase the possibility of being "killed" in any ordinary sense. Unlike any other Muslim, who has to be washed ceremonially before being buried, the soldier is buried in the clothes he wore when he was killed. The idea is that at the resurrection he stands before God with these clothes to prove his sacrifice. But that's a different thing from suicide attacks. An interesting thing is that most of the suicide bombers have been concerned almost exclusively with their own political community. There was an interview with would-be suicide attackers in which they were asked if they would do this for any cause outside of Palestine, and most of them said, "No."

Suicide is forbidden in Islam very strongly, so there has been a dispute among the *ulama*. The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia way back in April [2001] said that suicide bombing is wrong. Nevertheless, Osama Bin Laden develops the theory that we have reached the stage in which not only are the majority of Muslims not really Muslims, but true Muslims are in hand-to-hand combat with all of them. The Koran says that if somebody is assailing you, you have a right to fight back, and Bin Laden said that this is the condition of every true Muslim today.

Duncan Moon: Isn't this something that will continue to grow as long as there is a growing group of young, angry, displaced men?

Roy Mottahedeh: There is a difference between the Palestinian case and others. I am not talking about the

Palestinian case. With, say, Egyptians in Saudi Arabia, I think that these young men are more recruits for the Islamist vision of bringing about a just society by creating Islamic government in their own country than they are fodder for some kind of militancy. Muslim Brothers, in my opinion, would settle for being part of the political system. It's a great mistake that we allow the Egyptian government to keep excluding them. They do get elected to parliament by making alliances with other parties. I don't think—and this is from a fair amount of discussion with Muslim Brothers—I don't think they believe they should immediately take over and create a monolithic Islamic state. They would like to change the laws to *shari'a*, but they are trying to back away from the violent stuff. Of course, there are always fringe people.

Jeffrey Goldberg: Is the Islamic division between the Dar al-Harb and the Dar al-Islam, the House of War and the House of Islam, still considered relevant? If you listen to different clerics, those who lean on the moderate side say, This is an archaic notion; we don't see the world so black and white. But obviously there are still many who do see it like that.

Roy Mottahedeh: The concept, in my view—and I think a lot of scholars would agree with me—of Islam or the sword was almost completely directed at the pagan government in Arabia. And then this amazing thing called the Islamic conquest, or Arab conquest, happened. The conquest really deepened Islam. It also really deepened the jihad concept and the idea that victory in war was a good way to spread Islam. There are anti-jihad voices, but jihad nevertheless remains in the law. In some law schools in the classic period, only defensive jihad is praised. But offensive jihad is praised in a fair number of sources—no whitewashing it.

The Arabs suffered their first major defeats in A.D. 720–30, and there began to be an attempt to stabilize the borders and have trade back and forth. So the lawyers began to codify the idea that, yes, there is the abode of Islam and the abode of war, but there is also the abode of treaty, because they wanted treaties with the nations with whom they traded. This idea means something aggressive for militant Muslims. For liberal Muslims, the abode of Islam means, at most, the Muslim-majority countries in contrast to non-Muslim-majority countries.

Jeffrey Goldberg: Let's say Islamists somehow managed to take over Egypt or Algeria. Would they revert to that "Islam or the sword" approach? Six or eight months ago the Mufti of Jerusalem, who's sponsored by the Palestinian Authority, gave a sermon in which he talked about the tragedy of Andalucia, which Bin Laden talks about also. These guys seem to want to get back what Islam had centuries ago. I'm wondering how deeply felt those ideas are.

Roy Mottahedeh: The loss of Andalucia in the fifteenth century is felt by Osama Bin Laden and a few other romantics. The average Muslim is not worried about it. Iran is a pure Islamist experiment, and Iran is now knocking at the door of the international community, begging to come in.

Hillel Fradkin: In Muslim populations around the world, on the one hand there seems to be a kind of opening for people away from traditional life and away from having to rely on the authorities for their information. But this also means they have access to the extremely abstract ideas and fantasies of the radical Muslims. I want to try to contrast that with the healthy, pre-modern condition of Islam, where there was a sensible, moderate view. The various legal schools had their authority within their proper sphere. They might speak about governmental matters, but if they were allowed to regulate ordinary life they didn't really intrude themselves into the political system. That deal broke down. Can a similar deal be constructed?

Roy Mottahedeh: We need the Islamic New Deal!

Hillel Fradkin: It is now the situation as you described it: the lack of any functional politics fuels the Wahhabists. How could that healthy moderation be reconstructed?

Roy Mottahedeh: By allowing real public debate. If the United States will try to make greater freedom of expression a part of what comes out of this war, it will let off a lot of steam and promote vigorous debate. Muslims in non-Muslim societies realize that if they want to be treated well in those societies, then non-Muslims have to be treated well in Muslim societies. Some of these members of the Muslim disapora have written books about such matters, and their books should be circulated. Real discussion will do more towards creating a healthy moderation than anything else. I really believe that. It would eventually lead, I think, not exactly to the high wall between religion and politics that we have in America, but to something more like the post-Lockean idea of tolerance in England, with an established church.

Jay Tolson: I think there is one thing that America can and should do, particularly through some of our radio networks and Voice of America. We should give the mike to some of these alternative voices in Islam, to some of these Sufis, to traditional jurists who can talk about the juristic traditions, to people who can dis-

cuss the accomplishments of the Ottoman Empire, when there were real compromises worked out between public law and *shari'a*. I think we should encourage indigenous forms of that kind of discussion.

Hillel Fradkin: But we'd probably have to take the initiative on that, because many of those governments would be hostile to dissidents.

Nina Easton: Some say that the key to pluralism in the Arab-Muslim world is increasing the involvement of women. Would you reflect on what Islam says about women? There is so much contradictory information on this, generally depending on the political agenda of whoever is doing the analyzing.

Roy Mottahedeh: There is no question that traditionally Muslim males are the first-class citizens, and that women, non-Muslims, and slaves are second-class citizens, to different degrees in different areas. In some Muslim societies women were enfranchised in the 1930s, earlier than in several European countries. Women want to play a role in politics, and they are doing so. One Egyptian woman who is a friend of mine has been in parliament and is the leader of her party. In Iran, there are more educated women than men. Women make up over half of the university population. Women play an enormous role in the legislature. There are theorists who have embraced the full feminist argument, though this has not affected the masses.

I think there is hope for young women in the Islamic world who have heard about feminism and will demand things. But for a lot of the common people, a breakdown of family structure is the thing they are most worried about, and they believe that changing the status of women would cause that. It is unquestionably one of those areas in which the Muslim world is dragging behind. Change is occurring, but very slowly.

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