

## *Fundamentalism and the Lost Art of Islamic Hermeneutics*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to explore epistemological dispositions of Islamic fundamentalism and its ramifications. One major assumption of this paper is that there exists an epistemic stagnation among Muslims in general, exacerbated by an inflexibility of fundamentalists' epistemic stance. The latter two epistemic dispositions seem to slow down Islam's progress into the modern world in general, and scholarly and critical studies in Islam in particular. The idea of *ijtihad*, which has been abandoned by Sunnis and still being practiced in a half-hearted measure by Shiites, is used in this paper as both an exemplary epistemic practice and as a metaphor to formulate a conceptual epistemic plan for an open-ended and non-restrictive practice of religious interpretation and hermeneutics.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Islam does not belong to Muslims alone. It belongs to all humanity, which means we are all responsible to make sure its full radiance shines forth for all to see and benefit. This is also the case for all other religions, sciences, arts, and cultures of the world.

One of the assumptions of this paper is that Islam is now stagnated and Islamic fundamentalists exacerbate it even further. One way to understand the latter condition is to explore the epistemic dispositions and practices of Muslims in general and fundamentalists in particular. This paper suggests that the gates of scholarly investigation in all areas of Islam should be flung wide open and Muslims need to resist the fallacious arguments made by fundamentalists that scientific, historical, critical, anthropological, and psycho-sociological inquiries and scholarly work in and about Islam somehow diminishes the sacred nature of Islam and its verities.

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### **JIHAD AS A METAPHOR AND AN IDEAL EPISTEMIC DISPOSITION**

It is no easy task to determine one single criteria or one universal definition of who a fundamentalist is. One person's or one community's Muslim fundamentalist, for example, is another person's or another community's devout, obedient, observant, orthodox, or dedicated Muslim. One person suicidal bomber is another person's martyr. And most prominently, one person's atrocious violence is another person's just and necessary war against injustices committed by the "enemy". A common characteristics used by many writers define a fundamentalist in terms of her degree of irrationality. But this is not always the case. It is now clear that many jihadists are not irrational and some even believe in democracy, such as Hamas in Lebanon.

Perhaps fundamentalism is a matter of degree of certain common characteristics in a continuum dealing with various degrees and forms of beliefs and various resultant behaviors, one of which may be violence. Another way of making sense of religious fundamentalism may be in terms their goals, aspirations, and motivations.<sup>1</sup>

A jihadist may be motivated by revenge alone; another, by a pan-Arabist political aspirations; yet another, by hope bringing back the old glories of khalifat—the world-wide Islamic government and theocracy all wrapped in one; or another could be motivated by heavenly promises and honor she brings to her family and community.

For the purposes of this papers it suffices to consider a Muslim fundamentalist as one who has (a) an inflexible and at times arrogant epistemic disposition, (b) sees the world in black and white, (c) is quick to categorize the "other" who disagrees with her as her enemy, and (d)

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<sup>1</sup> Momen, Moojan, "Fundamentalism and Liberalism", 131-151.

may be prone to violence as a means of administering justice and promoting and spreading her ideals of Islam.

Demonization and dehumanization of the “other” as the enemy has a unifying and at times, an intoxicating affect even on sober-minded and objective believers. Fundamentalism comes in all colors and strips, even in unexpected places, such as in the recent secular-neo-atheist community. The current neo-atheist movement is spearheaded by a group of super smart and admirable scientists and thinkers such as, Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell: Religion As a Natural Phenomenon*), Sam Harris (*The End of Faith and Letter to a Christian Nation*), Victor Stenger (*God: The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does not Exist*), Christopher Hitchens (*God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*), and others. It is understandable that they are reacting to fundamentalists of all kinds from Taliban, to Ayatollahs, or to the rednecks in Mississippi. But the problem is that they think that that is all there is to religion. The wholesale rejection of religions and religious sentiments as juvenile or as the “opiate of the masses” can in itself become a fundamentalist sentiment. Considering all religions and their parishioners as dangerous and wishing them to go away is a light-hearted version of what some violent and radical fundamentalists believe.<sup>2</sup> Religions have to be viewed in much larger historical contexts. The above-mentioned neo-atheist present exquisite and powerful arguments but they are present and impoverished historical accounts of religions.

Years between sixth and thirteenth centuries are called the Golden Age of Islam for various good reasons. There existed a productive and

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Shweder, “Atheists Agnostics”, 2006, p. 1.

bustling interconnectedness of money, technology, people, and ideas between the vast Islamic empire and the rest of the world. Muslim's trustworthy and reliable commercial practices reached to all corners of the world. Baghdad was the heart of Islamic empire in where the first university was established and where Jews, Christians, and Muslims revived Greek philosophy, working and translating together side by side. In Cordoba, the Western rim of Islam's reach there existed also, an unmatched collaboration among the three Abrahamic religions in all manners intellectual, scientific, and philosophical, rivalling and analogous to those of modern day North America and Europe. There were as many as seventy libraries strewn throughout Cordoba alone. Adherents of all three faiths lived side by side, flourishing, thriving, and coexisting productively.<sup>3</sup>

For example, Moses ben Maimon who is known as Mainmonides was a Jewish philosopher, rabbi, physician, and ethicist who flourished under the Islamic rule, and produced exquisite writings, mostly in Arabic, except his codification of Jewish scripture and laws (Mishna Torah), which he wrote in Hebrew. He became a personal physician to Saladin, one of the greatest Muslim military heroes.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most important reasons why years between 750 and 1250 were considered the Golden Age of Islam was the spirit and practice open dialogue and inquiry, which allowed collaborative and productive scholarship among all religious scholars, fostered by a healthy degree of tolerance for diversity under the rule of Islam. This spirit of openness is close to concept of ijtiihad. The latter concept is the exercise of one's opinion in questions of law, interpretation of Koran, shariah, and

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<sup>3</sup> Michael H. Morgan, *Lost History*, 204, 120-25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 136-208.

hadith applied to “new circumstances” and “new situations,” and solve new problems according to new contexts and new era. The terms *ijtihad* and *jihad* are related. Both deal with effort, endeavor, struggle, and striving.<sup>5</sup>

*Ijtihad* refers strictly to intellectual and spiritual efforts such as the practice of exegeses of divine law, practice of religious jurisprudence, and nurturing of a spirit of critical, dialectic, scientific, literary, and artistic inquiry. *Ijtihad* is basically referring to the idea and practice of Islamic hermeneutics, strictly dealing with independent thinking and inquiry without any violent connotation whatsoever. However, Sunnis abandoned *ijtihad* during the third century and Twelve-imam Shiism continued to practice it, although the original spirit of the concept has been corrupted because the notion of independent thinking has been nearly abolished. Here is I am do not intend to investigate the historical nuances of the concept.

The original idea of *ijtihad* contained an almost modernistic, individualistic, and critical characteristic. For example, originally believers who engaged in *ijtihad* were discouraged to follow anyone else’s belief or conclusion but themselves. This is quite unique in Islam, at least in Shiism. But Sunnis too follow a very similar application of *ijtihad*, although they have supposedly abandoned it twelve hundred years ago.<sup>6</sup>

I will use the concept of *ijtihad* in this paper as an aid to suggest that in order for Islam to modernize itself; perhaps it needs an epistemic practice similar to *ijtihad*. Henceforth, my use of *ijtihad* is only a

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<sup>5</sup> Syyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 104-05.

<sup>6</sup> Moohan Momen, *An Introduction To Shi’i Islam*, 186.

conceptual or even a metaphorical device to refer to a critical, scientific, and historical methodology to describe and ideal Islamic hermeneutics. In short, I use the term and the concept of *ijtihad* as an art of Islamic hermeneutics, disregarding for the moment its complex and rich history and its present nuanced practices by some Islamic denominations.

Islam, however, is not a monolithic entity, despite Western and American media's impoverished and lopsided coverage, and despite fundamentalists' lopsided and inflexible interpretations. There are countless possible worlds of Islam. There are as many interpretations of Koran as there are Muslims around the globe (1.2 billion). At one extreme of the spectrum some Muslims view Koran as poetic, metaphoric creation of God's will, ready-made for diverse interpretations for diverse peoples and eras. The latter group cut-and-paste Koran for the most liberal reinterpretations such as, equality of rights of men and women, abolishing capital punishment, saving the environment, and even gay rights. On the other extreme there are Muslims, such as the Taliban and the hardliners in Iran who cut-and-paste Koran in ways that no light can either penetrate it, nor emanate from it.

The complexity of such diverse interpretations will no doubt increase in coming years, especially in the light of the fact that the Muslim/Arab world has a baby boom in its hand. Currently 60% of people in the Arab/Muslim world are under 25 years old. In Iran this number is as high as 75%. Half of the Arab youth surveyed said they want to move to the West<sup>7</sup>. And the West needs more workers and talented youths. What it doesn't need is more talented and educated Mohammad Attas with twisted anger and intentions.

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<sup>7</sup> Irshad Manji, *the Trouble with Islam Today*, 2003.

Arab governments have been, so far, woefully incompetent to fix their own economic and sociopolitical problems. Although sciences, arts, and literature are taught in most public schools in Arab countries, the fundamentalist-run provinces do not allow the practice of ijthihad when it comes to study of Islam in general and Koran, in particular. There are excessive and unnecessary numbers of curtains of sacredness drawn around studies of Islam, preventing students from critical and historical inquiry.

Since 2002 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has produced wonderfully honest, yet depressing reports about the state of the Arab/Muslim world entitled *The Arab Human Development Report*. By reviewing these yearly reports from 2002 to 2005, one finds clear and careful descriptions and explanations of multiple deficiencies, shortcomings, and difficulties Arabs and Muslims of the world face. Here is a sampling of such problems according to these UN reports:

- Israeli occupation of Palestine continues to impede human development and freedom
- The impact of the occupation of Iraq on human development
- Denial of individual freedom in Arab countries by Arab governments
- Exclusion from citizenship as a form of punishment by Some Arab countries
- Abusing minority rights
- Women doubly excluded
- Unmet economic and social rights
- Government structures impeding freedom
- Appropriating religion to perpetuate tyranny
- The trap of the one-off elections
- Constitutions granting rights and laws confiscating them (Constitutions that flatly violate Arab human right)
- The crisis of legitimacy

- Repression and political impoverishment (Vicious circle of repression and corruption)
- The chain that stifles individual freedom
- Authoritative government answerable to none.<sup>8</sup>

Sadly, these breathtakingly honest and penetrating critiques of the Arab/Muslim world and its governments lack a critique of Islamic fundamentalism as a contributing factor to the problem. In short, they miss mentioning, let alone promoting *ijtihad* as a fundamental educational policy and a crucial source of progress and health for Islam in general and for Muslims and Arabs in particular. UN's Arab Human Development Reports neglected to emphasize the need for a genuine spirit of critical inquiry in and about Islam, namely Koranic interpretation. However, to its credit, the reports mentions, albeit very briefly and succinctly, that limited and narrow-minded interpretations of Sharia (Islamic jurisprudence) have done plenty of damage to individual freedom and dignity in the Arab world.

*Ijtihad* forbids blind acceptance of someone else's interpretation. Questioning and critical examination are hallmarks of *Ijtihad*. These are exactly the reasons why *ijtihad* is now out of fashion among Muslim fundamentalist. *Ijtihad* in a real sense is forbidden among fundamentalist governments and societies, fearing that it may undermine Islam, fracturing it into many pieces. With or without *ijtihad* Islam is already fractured in many pieces. But *ijtihad* can mend differences and allow a peaceful coexistence not only among different Muslim denominations and sects but between Islam and the rest of the world. One of the reasons why the gates of *ijtihad* was closed shut in some Islamic denominations such as Sunni denomination, was the fear of "certain modernists. . . to

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations Development Program, Arab Human Development Report 2004: Toward Freedom in the Arab World, 2004.



reopen the gate of *ijtihad*, with the aim of incorporating modern practices into the Law and limiting the functioning of the Shariah to personal life.”<sup>9</sup>

### **TAFSIR**

While we try to understand the problem of religious fundamentalism, especially of the violent sort, we need to simultaneously look at the possibilities of making religion and religious sensibilities part and parcel of the solution.

Take for example, the British and French indictment against Muslim women’s religious head covering. England is against women wearing veils because of security purposes. And France is against schoolgirls wearing Islamic head scarf (“hair cover”) because it violates France’s secular culture (*laicite*).<sup>10</sup> But are these objections and policies necessary and even fair to Muslims in general? Instead of worrying about head covers, what the West can do is to study, understand, and appreciate the beauties and contributions of Islam as well as the causes of Arab and Muslim rage against the West. Here Reinhold Niebuhr’s advice is instructive: That in such cases we have to be humble and not to think that we know what evil is and that we can get rid of them by a unilateral declaration.

Islam (or any other religion for that matter) can be interpreted into a beautiful, life-affirming, useful, and magnificent ways with modern sensibilities. Or, conversely, it can be interpreted into a juvenile, menacing, useless, meaningless, nihilistic, death-and-destruction-affirming series of ways with Dark Age sensibilities. It’s both the

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<sup>9</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, 117.

<sup>10</sup> John Brown, *Why the French Don’t Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space*, 2007.

responsibility of the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds to help save the beauty and usefulness of Islam, which in reality belongs to all of humanity, not only to Muslims, or worse, to a mindless and violent fundamentalist minority. When one recognizes and experiences the beauties of Islam, she will want to be a Muslim, just as when one recognizes the beauties of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and so on, she wants to be a Christian, a Jew, a Buddhist, a Zoroastrian, and so on. In a sense we are all Muslims and we are all responsible to preserve its diversity, magnificence, and life-affirming precepts, just as we are responsible to preserve our other accomplishments such as mathematics, science, literature, arts, and our planet. And to preserve Islam's magnificence as a world cultural phenomenon is to excavate its original, liberating epistemic stance and practices, some similar to *ijtihad*.

One of the primary practices in *ijtihad* is *tafsir*, which means a private and a communitarian interpretation of the holy precepts of Islam. There are three kinds of *tafsirs*:

- *Koran to Koran tafsir*: attempt to analyze and understand Koranic versus by looking for clarifications and connections in other parts of Koran. In other words, what Koran has to say about Koran? Although this is a limited analysis, it's quite instructive to make sense and come up with some kind of understanding in regards to contradictory statement or statements that may no longer apply to the modern Muslim world.
- *Koran to hadith and shariah tafsir*: attempts to make sense of both Koran and collected sayings of Mohammad (it's called *hadith*) and Islamic laws and policies of jurisprudence (it is called *shariah*) by

going back and forth among Koran, hadith, and shariah for clarification and fuller understanding, especially in light of new cases and changes of circumstances.

- *Koran interpreted in contexts of generations of pious and learned views*: This is the richest and most challenging and rewarding of all tafsirs because in this process one includes not only the Koran, hadith, and shariah, but also, the previous and current analyses made by the learned, the wise, and the Islamic scholars throughout the centuries of collected exegetical and reflective analyses.

Koran to Koran tafsir is the most limited for it allows analyses only within the confines of Koran. The latter tafsir is insufficient to reconcile contradictory statements in Koran. Some of the Koranic verses are interpretable only in light of other classic and modern interpretations outside of Koran. Although some may consider Koran-to-Koran tafsir as the most authentic and the best kind of interpretation, it's actually the least helpful because it becomes intellectually insular and incestuous. Koran becomes vivid and palpable when it is read and interpreted in light of past, present, and future cultural demands. Every internal evaluation and assessment of Koran needs an external evaluation. Hadith, shariah, Islamic scholarly work, and even scholarly criticism of Islam are needed in order to see the strengths and beauty of Koranic teaching as well as its limitations.

Modern versions of Islamic tafsir use all of the above methods within modern sensibilities, critical analyses, skepticism and doubt, and the best historical and scientific method, all done with due respect to Koran, hadith, and the shariah. A wonderful modern source of Islamic tafsir is the website [altafsir.com](http://altafsir.com), which is the most comprehensive

interpretive source including all the old and new sources, with a mind-bugling array of exciting, interpretive and normative possibilities. Tafsir is an essential and can be a life-affirming process if and only if one enters the project with an open mind and a perpetual healthy skeptical disposition.

Tafsir is an exercise to search for truths of Islam within diverse contexts. For a Muslim the work of interpretation and search for truth is a never-ending process. Self-satisfaction and intellectual and spiritual complacency are never good options for a Muslim or any seeker of truth for that matter. Tafsir is the process of dialectic interpretation that one needs to exercise not only once in the while but rather on an ongoing basis—in casual dialogue, in scholarly work, and in elementary and secondary schools. Moderate Muslims wish to see it become a major educational policy in general, and in curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy in particular.

Tafsir is a means by which a Muslim gains intellectual, spiritual, and moral clarity. Ijtihad or the spirit of openness and clear thinking cannot proceed without a dialectic and pluralistic process of tafsir, which is the vehicle for ijthihad.

Koran commands the believers to “uphold the truth”. But truth doesn’t come along easily, nor is it always transparent as fundamentalist wants us to believe. It requires tafsir, ijthihad, and even an internal intellectual jihad. Furthermore, Islamic truths, like any other versions of truth, are perpetually refined, redefined, and modified with each era and in each encounter with and understanding of Koranic Scriptures. In this sense, epistemic fluidity and dynamism are needed for Muslims to perpetually construct their truths as they deepen themselves in the

Scriptures. Furthermore, truth of Islam is not the only “Truth” in the world. As a Syrian poet by the name of Abu al-Ala al-Maarri (993-1058) puts it, some Muslims have narrow-minded belief that God, the All Merciful, gives his light to only one source, viz., Prophet Mohammad. God’s light (knowledge and truth), al-Maarri contends, shines forth everywhere where God resides and to everyone whom God has created.

There are many who have the delusion of privileged access and they can be found in a continuum, from the most light-hearted to the most pathological. Delusions of privileged access are addictive and intoxicating. Very few are able to curb such temptations. Often times we all feel the sting of this epistemic omniscience. With a bit of humility, a good dose of skepticism, and a good sense of humor such claims of privileged access seems to be entirely harmless and in fact, useful. But devoid of humility and with a big dose of arrogance such feelings can be annoying at best and possibly dangerous as we have witnessed it in every human endeavor from religion to politics, to art, to human rights, and to morality. Philip Zimbardo’s classic “Prison Experiments” at Stanford University<sup>11</sup> and Stanley Milgram’s well known “Obedience Experiments”<sup>12</sup> show how vulnerable humans are when given the opportunity for a bit of delusion of grandeur and fantasies of omniscience.

Koran doesn’t explicitly endorse a class of Muslim clergies with privileged access to its truths. Koran, however, encourages the believers to respect and learn from the pious and the learned. It’s time for Muslims to come to their own and get rid of the middlemen and deal with Koran

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, Chs. 2-5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 267-76.

and Allah directly. The middlemen—mullahs, ayatollahs, imams and the like—are only guides, not objects of adorations or beholders of the truth. But who among the self-appointed ambassadors of Allah can resist fame and fortune, surrounded by adoring and obedient groupies?

Since according to Koran everyone has direct access to God and no Muslim has any privileged access neither to Allah, nor to the Prophet Muhammad's original intentions as he revealed the verses of Koran, then anyone with a claim of special, privileged epistemic access is either delusional or an outright charlatan. In order to check one's own over-exuberance about privileged epistemic access, a Muslim (or any believer of faith, for that matter) needs to exercise epistemic humility by adhering to a code of volitional act of skepticism. The latter epistemic disposition is a saving grace for a healthy, pluralistic Islam.

Epistemic humility simply means no one is perfect and no one ever hopes to know God and Her purpose fully and infallibly. All that a Muslim hopes to achieve is to perpetually strive to submit to the will of Allah, to strive to be open-minded (*ijtihad*), engage in variety of fruitful interpretations (*tafsir*), and never give up using the gift Allah has bestowed upon her—the gift of thoughtful analysis, investigation, and healthy criticism. In this formulation the light of truth may shine forth out of sparks generated by clash of ideas within one's own conscience, and within a thinking, questioning, vibrant, and loving, Islamic community. The latter possible world of Islam is not a panacea or a far-fetched pipe dream. There are already many such Muslim communities all around the world, not to mention that there were 500 years of Golden Age of Islam when *ijtihad* was the dominant epistemic disposition and policy of engagement.

One of the beauties of Islam (or Christianity or Judaism for that matter) is that it is a perpetually unfinished project because Islam needs to be made relevant, dialectic, and vibrant, constantly renovating itself from inside and from the outside throughout the ages—a never-ending process. In that sense, Islam, just like Judaism and Christianity, is “a world of open-ended possibilities.”<sup>13</sup> In such a world of epistemic possibilities every Muslim would be free to choose her own, custom-made Islam, not someone else’s prepackaged version of it forced upon her by intimidation and threats. Fundamentalists fear that a critical spirit may lead Islam to an uncontrollable path to relativism and ultimately to the destruction of Islam as a world religion. But a healthy and humble measure of Islamic relativism and subjectivism may accomplish exactly the opposite: An open and vibrant Muslim society.

An Islam that is open-ended, open-minded, and fluid is an inviting and invigorating spiritual space for all Muslims and non-Muslims to reside the fruits of 1,500 years of contributions and accomplishments. Koran puts the responsibility of one’s spiritual house-cleaning squarely on the shoulders of the individual Muslim.<sup>14</sup> A Muslim is not only responsible for daily prayer and other good deeds; she is also expected to engage in daily self-examination, reviewing her actions, beliefs, and knowledge in thoughtful and methodical ways. A Muslim’s self-examination, however, can’t be complete without a humble measure of self-doubt and a humble epistemic disposition. Excessive pride and arrogance toward oneself and one’s knowledge and skills are condemned by Koran. Irshad Manji suggests that Muslims have the duty to “think,

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<sup>13</sup> Irshad Manji, *The Trouble With Islam Today*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> The best explanation of these can be found in the concept of *ijtihad* as indicated earlier in Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s *Ideals and Realities of Islam and Moojan Momen’s And Introduction to Shi’i Islam*.

search, speak, exchange, discuss, challenge, be challenged, and rethink.”

<sup>15</sup> But exploration for best understanding and interpretation does not have to always be cognitive, analytic, or logical. She suggests that artistic media can come to the rescue here.

Artistic expressions can open the door to a wide range of possibilities. It can, for example, critique and self-examine Islam in constructive, delightful, and meaningful ways. A good example of this is the Canadian TV show called “Little Mosque on the Prairie”. It has drawn CBC’s largest audience in the last couple of decades. The show is supposedly done tastefully and sensitively. And of course, it is not without its critics, mainly a few Muslim leaders in Canada and elsewhere.

Artistic media for self-examination are viable and effective means for this purpose because it engages one’s intellect as well as one’s religious and moral emotions and imagination, stretching and expanding one’s capacity for self-examination and examination of one’s own community and its strengths and weaknesses. Intellectual and strictly theological analyses may not complete the job of religious self-examination. After all Mohammad Atta, the leader of 9/11 plot studied engineering and even engaged in postgraduate studies in Germany. More education does not necessarily mean more tolerance or well-roundedness. The medium of art may come to rescue here and fill in the gap where strict Islamic or even strict secular learning may not be able to fill. Furthermore, more intense Islamic studies in madrasahs or in mosques, or even in universities, may not lead to more open-mindedness. In fact it may exacerbate one’s willful blindness and narrow-mindedness. Islamic

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<sup>15</sup> Irshad Manji, *The Trouble With Islam Today*, p. 19.



Sufis and Muslim poets (Arabs and Persians alike) recognized the role of artistic exploration of Islam and found it indispensable in developing a more well-rounded Islamic sensibility.

### **PROBLEMS OF TAFSIR**

Sayyid Qutb—the intellectual father of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and of modern movements in jihadism, radicalism, and violent Islamism. The philosophy and basic tenets of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt revolves around Qutb’s troublesome interpretations. Osama bin Laden and his lieutenant, Ayman Alzawaheri are devout followers of Qutb’s teaching.

Qutb was an Egyptian writer of some talent. In his now classic book, *Milestones*<sup>16</sup> he proclaimed that the West was the enemy of Islam. He methodically made his case by selectively cherry-picking Koran for its maximum effect. What he did in his book is a masterly work of interpretation by cutting and pasting Koran and other sources for his personal end.

By concocting a twisted interpretation of Koran, Qutb argued for Jihad by describing in details various contexts in which jihad is not only appropriate but also obligatory.<sup>17</sup> He even argued that Muslims who buy into the West’s intoxicating “perversions” are no better than the Westerners themselves, and they too deserve the same fate because these “wayward” Muslims are infidels as well. Hence, he sanctioned Muslims killing Muslims when necessary. He chides Muslims who interpret Jihad as a “defensive” measure, which he thought is formula for “defeat.”<sup>18</sup> He advocates an offensive interpretation of jihad for the purpose, “which is to abolish all injustice from earth, to bring people to the worship of God

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<sup>16</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Milestone*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* See Chapter 4 entitled “Jihaad in the Cause of God”, 53-74.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

alone. . .”<sup>19</sup> His influential masterpiece, *Milestones*, has been and still is a guide and a balm to many frustrated Islamists. Basically, he believed the West and those Muslims who love the West are destroying Islam and Islamic countries and therefore, it’s legitimate to defend Islam and Muslims by any means necessary. Hence the justification of taking innocent lives for larger and more important cause.

Interpretations, such as Qutb’s, requires selective amnesia, omissions, editorials, embellishments, exaggerations, and a multitude of other subjective modifications in order to fit the text to the interpreter’s desired context based on her emotional, intellectual, and cultural needs and realities. Bernard Lewis suggests that extremist groups are “highly selective in their choice and interpretation of sacred texts.”<sup>20</sup> They conveniently discard aspects of Koran, hadith, and shariah that do not fit their theories and “accept or reject even sacred texts according to whether they support or contradict their own dogmatic and militant position.”<sup>21</sup> This kind of selective cut-and-paste interpretation becomes a sophistical game the extremists play with devastating consequences. Lewis observes that some extremists “revoke” certain chapters of Koran as “abrogated” chapters because these verses, which were “revealed during the early years of the Prophet’s mission may be superseded by the later, presumably more mature revelations.”<sup>22</sup> Such audacious interpretive move may be quite admissible and healthy if it was done with humility and if it was open to all Muslims. But extremists reserve this kind of bold moves only for themselves.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, 138.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, pp. 138-39.

A good example of such self-serving interpretation by extremists is Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's famous fatwa, on February 14, 1989, against Salmon Rushdie. Khomeini and many of his followers never read Rushdie's novel, *Satanic Verses*, but Khomeini goes on with his baseless fatwa:

“[A]ll the zealous Muslims of the world that the blood of the author of this book. . . which has been compiled, printed, and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet, and the Quran, as also of those involved in its publication that were aware of its contents, is hereby declared forfeit. I call on all zealous Muslims to dispatch them quickly, wherever they may be found, so that no one will dare to insult Islamic sanctities again. Anyone who is himself killed in this path will be deemed a martyr.”<sup>23</sup>

A reward was offered to the one who would succeed in killing Rushdie: \$170,000 reward for an Iranian murderer and \$1 million for a foreign killer.

Fatwas have been and still is being misinterpreted and misused all over the Islamic world. Fatwa is supposed to be a technical term in Islamic jurisprudence to issue legal opinion to clarify points of law. This is practiced in Shariah and it's analogous to “*responsa prudntium* in Roman law.”<sup>24</sup> Bernard Lewis contends,

“The Islamic jurisconsult who is authorized to issue a fatwa is called a mufti, an active participle from the same root, fatwa. In using a fatwa to pronounce a death sentence and recruit an assassin, the Ayatollah was deviating very considerably from standard of Islamic practice.”<sup>25</sup>

What Khomeini has done here sounds like a private vengeance, very much like what mobsters would do to put a contract out on a rival mobster. And that is a world apart from what fatwas were originally

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 139.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 140.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

supposed to accomplish in an Islamic jurisprudence, where “jurists devote a considerable attention to the definition of the offences, the rules of evidence, and appropriate punishment.”<sup>26</sup>

Holy Scriptures of all religions are riddled with incomprehensible and at times contradictory passages, which cannot be understood without carefully placing them in their historical and cultural contexts. Most Islamic literalists do not want to see these contradictions exposed because they consider such exposition an assault against Koran and Islam. However, moderate Muslims, and moderate Christians and Jews for that matter, have come to learn to live with contradictions in their respective Holy Scriptures. As Sam Harris observed, “Moderates in every faith are obliged to loosely interpret (or simply ignore) much of their cannons in the interest of living in the modern world.”<sup>27</sup>

A few courageous Koranic scholars have dealt with such contradictions and have given intelligent explanations within historical and socio-cultural contexts. For example, Christopher Luxenburg, Naguib Mahfouz, Suliman Bashear and others are the new revolutionaries of Koranic liberation. They attempt to make Koran more user-friendly and more palpable to modern Muslim reader. However, there is an understandable reluctance on the part of most Koranic scholars to tackle Koran historically, anthropologically, and from socio-psychological perspectives. Even American universities are reluctant to critically examine Koran and Islam. More respectful and serious critique of Koran is needed in order to bring it to the masses of urban cities and urban living with modern critical sensibilities.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, 27.

Christopher Luxemburg (a pseudonym) in her *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Quran: A Contribution to the Deciphering of Quranic Language*, and Gunther Luling in his *Der Ur-Qoran* examines the pre-canonical text of Koran and its large number of borrowed words mostly from Syriac. The linguistic basis of Koran is a fascinating and complicated study. Koran has evolved throughout its early reincarnations and it is proved to be far from a uniform, monolithic entity. Luxenberg created a stir among Koranic scholars when she published her article, "Quran and History: A Disputed Relationship: Some Reflections on Quranic History and History in the Quran."<sup>28</sup> She began to look at Koran as an important historic and literary artifact, which has influenced countless millions for around 1,500 years.

In a Derridian world no one knows what Koran, or any other text for that matter, is or says. The reader, according to Derrida, is the one who cooks up the text and give it meaning; not the author to the text.<sup>29</sup> To make Koran super-holy it means to make one's own interpretation of it super-holy. Koran, aside from the fact that it is a revealed book to many Muslims, it's also a magnificent piece of literature, and a guide for living well for all humanity, not only for Muslims.

Skeptical, historical, and scientific methods can be used to demystify and demythologize Koran or any other Holy Scripture. Unlike Koran, the New and the Old Testaments have gone through this purification by the baptism of Western-style of criticism. Islam and Koran can benefit enormously from such intellectual exercise, which can

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<sup>28</sup> Christopher Luxemburg, "Quran and History: A Disputed Relationship: Some Reflections on Quranic History and History in the Quran," 1-18.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 67-8.

explain, for example, the harsh treatment of the infidels or the stoning of woman adulteress and not her male counterpart.

There are many passages in Koran that sanction killing of infidels. The passage 4:135 says that when it comes to infidels, family members are fair game: “O, you who believe! Be upholders of justice, witness for Allah, even if it be against yourself, or your parents and kin. . .” Moderate Muslims say that we have to look at the above verses in light other verses in Koran such as the one that says, if you kill an innocent man, it’s as if you have killed all humanity. In other words, as the adage goes, killing one person diminishes us all.

Just to be fair to Koran, killing of infidels, including infidels in one’s own family members is also found in the Bible, and Mohammad may have simply repeated it in Koran. Below is a sampling of God’s sanctioning of Christians and Jews to kill infidels including infidels among their family members:

If your brother, the son of your father or of your mother, or your son or daughter, or the spouse whom you embrace, or ;your most intimate friend, tries to secretly seduce you, saying, “Let us go and serve other gods,” unknown to you or your ancestors before you, . . . you must not consent, you must not listen to him; you must kill him, your hand must strike the first blow in putting him to death and the hands of the rest of the people following. You must stone him to death since he has tried to divert you from Yahweh your God. . .”Deuteronomy 13:7-11

Killing of infidels seems to be a contradiction in Koran in light of other passages in which it exalts humans as God’s creation and that all God’s creation are “excellent”. The excellent creation of God, seem to be also in conflict with Koran’s denigration of women and homosexuals. Of course, Koran and the Bible exalt women and their station as mothers in variety of other contexts. Moderate religionists have come to live with

these contradictions successfully by simply engaging in pragmatic and creative interpretation of particular verses without discarding or discrediting the entire Koran or the Bible. Scientific and historical examination of Koran, done with utmost respect, can actually help the believer to reconcile among these contradictory ideas. Critical study of and respect for Koran are not mutually exclusive.

### **CRITICAL AND SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY AND THE PROBLEM OF THE SACRED**

Islam, unlike Christianity and Judaism, has not gone through sociological, psychological, anthropological, and critical analyses. Such analyses can benefit Islam enormously they finally can help to usher Islam into the twenty first century. At the same time it can expose fundamentalists' stifling interpretations and policies.

Psycho-anthropological studies such as the ones found in Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade's classic works<sup>30</sup> help us understand the enigmatic and at times, obsessive and even pathological devotion to the sacred and the holy. Even neuropsychological studies of religious feelings can inform us on all aspect of religious experiences including the bodily experiences in the context of religious ecstasy. There are already numerous studies in neurophysiology of variety of religious and spiritual ecstasies, such as glossalalia (speaking in tongue), shaker's ecstatic practices, Voodoo, shamanic trances, whirling dervishes, Sufi ecstasies, and transcendent meditation<sup>31</sup>.

Socio-political and cultural studies of religion also needed to explain religious experiences, especially fundamentalist and extreme

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<sup>30</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*; Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 29.

religious experiences, interpretations, and practices. For example, we cannot begin to understand the complexities of the neo-Islamic jihadist movements around the world within the limited analysis of Islamic interpretation, such as Koran-to-Koran tafsir. Jihadists frame their grievances strictly within the confine of Islam and Koranic paradigms. But majority of Islamic scholars and moderate non-scholar Muslims believe that such restrictive analyses are incomplete until Jihadists' grievances are viewed in light of Western colonization practices and their insatiable thirst for Middle East oil reserves at any cost. CIA's interventions in overthrowing "undesirable governments" in Middle-East and installation of puppet kings and rulers, for example, are a good starting point for such analysis. Thousands of pages of earlier classified CIA documents, which is dubbed as "Family Jewels" have been unclassified and released to the public, are now unclassified and open for public viewing. These documents reveal Western powers' massive intrusions in the political life of Middle East and callous disregard for interest and welfare of masses of Arab and Muslim population in those regions.

In a similar vein Muslims themselves, need to loosen their restriction on Islamic scholars, allowing them to painstakingly and methodically examine all aspects of Islam from critical, analytic, interpretive, normative, and historical perspectives. For example, these kinds of investigations and analyses in regards to socio-political causes of jihadism should cover all sides of the problem, e.g., atrocities committed against Arab/Muslim countries by the West and Israel; atrocities committed by Muslim extremists against moderate Muslims; atrocities committed by jihadists against innocent people in the West and Israel. Muslim fundamentalists just like their Western counterparts,



usually offer inadequate and simplistic answers to these complex problems and are unwilling to look beyond their narrow epistemic confines and their flawed quick fixes.

An important but unexplored area of investigation in epistemology and pedagogy of religious zealotry and martyrdom is the emotion of hatred and desire for revenge dressed as justice. These emotions within the context of Islamic militancy are in need of explanation and exploration. Aaron Ben-Ze'ev's work deals with these emotions and begins his investigation by asking pertinent question at the outset. For example, he asks why some people feel "happy" for others' misfortune or why someone takes "pleasure" in others' suffering and pain. Is there a moral justification in such negative empathies?

As an extension to Ben-Ze'ev's question we can ask, Where does a suicide-bomber's feeling of anger, hate, disgust, and contempt come from<sup>32</sup> and how is it possible for a jihadist to commit suicide knowing full well that in the process of sacrificing her life she would also murder, maim, and decapitate innocent people all the while she is invoking and chanting the name of Allah—"Allah'u' Akbar"? Are people in general and Muslim extremists in particular, morally justified to experience and demonstrate feelings of jubilation for unimaginable suffering of others? These negative empathies and sympathies are not, of course, limited to Muslims. Everyone may experience bits and bouts of these strange feelings in various degrees of intensity in various contexts. And of course, the same kind of questions have to be asked of the West about their mindless use of Middle East oil at the expenses of millions of Arabs and Muslims suffering under the cruel and incompetent Arab and Muslim

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<sup>32</sup> Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, *The Subtlety of Emotion*, Chs. 12-13.

dictators, whom the West financed and supported, e.g., Saudi Kings and Shah of Iran. Israelis, too, need to ask themselves questions regarding displacing millions of innocent Palestinians, inflicting the same kind of injustices against them as was inflicted against Jews themselves throughout their history. What lessons did Jews learn from their own unimaginable suffering they experienced throughout the ages?

### **MISUSE OF THE SACRED AND THE PROBLEM OF THE SUPER HOLY**

The problems of Islam are imposed both from outside and from inside, and sometimes it is difficult to figure out the source. One such problem is the phenomena of the super holy and the uber sacred. The degree of profaneness attributed to a phenomenon is very much bound up with the degree of sacredness or holiness attributed to it. The higher the bars of sacredness, the lower the bars of profaneness. The super-sacred entities, such as the Prophet Mohammad himself, the Koran, the personages of twelve Imams in Shiite sect, holy shrines, and others have been cordoned off from historical and critical studies because it has been argued, albeit fallaciously, that such studies and investigations would profane these sacred objects. In some sense these senseless restrictions by themselves may be considered to be profane because they deprive Muslims and non-Muslims of the world from realizing the true nature of Islam in historical, scientific, and artistic contexts.

The sacredness of Koran should not be used as an excuse to prevent scholarly investigation of it. Montgomery Watt gives an extensive, exemplary history of “the Collection of Quran” with a sober minded accuracy and appropriate skepticism.<sup>33</sup>

In Montgomery’s view Koran, which means “reading” in Arabic,

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<sup>33</sup> Montgomery Watt, Introduction to Quran. See specially Chapter 6 and especially Chapter 6.

is believed by Muslims to have been revealed to Prophet Muhammad in a couple of major bouts of revelation in Mecca, where he was born, and in Medina where he and his followers were ultimately settled down. The actual canonical text was edited and finalized by Uthman, the third Caliph after Muhammad's death. During 651 and 652 A.D. Uthman, continuing on a project which had started by his predecessor, Omar, ordered the collection of all the various available anthologies of Muhammad's revealed words. And then he ordered all these collections destroyed except the one Zaid ibn Thabit, Muhammad's secretary, had collected. Uthman promoted the latter copy as the official edited anthology, and apparently that is the version of Koran we now have. According to most historians this was done for an expedient political reason to unify the Islamic world and to prevent its possible fragmentations caused by having various versions of Koran in circulation. But fragmentation occurred just the same because people simply interpreted the one official Koran in a wide variety of ways, from the most liberal interpretation, such as Sufis who consider Koran nothing but a collection of beautiful metaphors, all the way to the militant jihadists' literalist interpretation, which is done by cherry picking Koran, hadith, and shariah to paint their own version of Islam. For example, some fundamentalists forbade the translation of Koran from Arabic to other languages. But fortunately, the pragmatic needs of non-Arab Muslims exposed the absurdity of the latter interpretation and policy and have allowed a wide array of translations for the benefits of millions of Muslims and non-Muslims all around the world who cannot read and understand Arabic. In this sense translating Koran in hundreds of different languages can be considered an invaluable and sacred gift to the people of the world.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 40-44.

However, in the process of a scholarly study of Koran one may need to raise the following legitimate questions:

- Is the entire Koran authentically Muhammad's own revelations? If yes, what are the evidences for this belief?
- Uthman trusted Zaid ibn Thbit's version of Koran because the latter was Mohammad's personal secretary. But what are the evidences that Zaid's recordings have been faithful to what Mohammad really revealed?
- How do we know that Zaid didn't tamper with his own anthology of Mohammad's revelations?
- What about all the alternative copies Uthman destroyed? How different were they from the Zaid's "official" version? How did Uthman come to the conclusion that with certainty there were not any additional revelations of Mohammad in the destroyed copies worthy of inclusion in Zaid's final and official copy?
- How do we know that Zaid's copy was the best or most faithful to what Muhammad has revealed? Is it possible that one of those copies destroyed by Uthman would have been more faithful and more complete version of Koran than Zaid's version?

These questions can only be answered by scholars who painstakingly, methodically, and patiently sift through debris of historical evidences, employing all scientific method at her disposal. But these kinds of questions are considered blasphemous to many Muslim fundamentalists. They rather see the door of inquiry to such legitimate questions closed shut for ever, which would be a devastating blow to Islam's health and evolution to modernity. Fundamentalists fallaciously conclude that questioning, critiquing, and scholarly work in Islamic studies are acts of profanation, insulting, and disrespecting the holiness of Islam. They believe that such inquiries are concocted by the enemies of Islam, viz., the West, to discredit and even destroy Islam.

However, there is a dire need to humanize the idea of the holy, the sacred, and the profane in Islam. That is, to allow a healthy dose of

scientific skepticism in investigating the historical, cultural, and socio-psychological contexts of Islam in general and of Koran in particular. It's instructive to look at the idea of the holy from an anthropological perspective in order to wrap our minds around it. Treating Koran in the latter way allows it to become a living document rather than an antiquated, untouchable relic with no relevance to modern Muslim man and woman.

Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*<sup>35</sup> should be a required reading for all Muslims, especially those who think their particular brand of holiness supersedes all others. Otto believed religion is a system of "morality touched by emotion," similar to Freud's notion of "uncanny", which gives the believer the feeling of "awe" or "reverence" and the thrill of religious rapture and exaltation, which may produce a feeling of "impotence or nothingness" all of which are non-rational feelings. Otto analyzes all these phenomena in light of two other related phenomena he calls, *Tremendum* (the feelings of "awfulness", "overpoweringness", and "urgency")<sup>36</sup> and *Mysterium* (the feeling of "fascination" with the "wholly other").<sup>37</sup> These psycho-anthropological perspectives give one the freedom to explore religion in multi-dimensional way. Furthermore, interpreting Koran and Islam in the latter ways by no means diminish the values of Koran and Islam as phenomena revealed by God. A Muslim (or a Christian or a Jew for that matter) does not have to give up their faith in the holiness of her holy scripture in order to investigate her religion from all other rich

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<sup>35</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of Holy: An Inquiry Into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 12-25.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 25-41.

perspectives, including scientific investigation.

Another helpful analysis of Islamic super sensitivity to the notions of the sacred and the profane can be found in Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion*.<sup>38</sup> He goes beyond Otto's analysis of the idea of the holy and traces various manifestations of the profane and the sacred within anthropological and historical contexts, presenting ample examples from primitive to modern times, in terms of "sacred spaces", myths of "sacred times," "the sacredness of nature" and "the cosmos". He contends that the evolution of the sacred originates from legends and myth, which are not confirmable with historical, geographical, or scientific facts. For example, Kaaba is the holiest place on earth for Muslims. It's Kaaba to where all Muslims turn when they perform their daily, obligatory prayers (five times a day). Eliade argues that Kaaba's holiness is accentuated by the myth perpetuated by Islamic tradition that Kaaba is "the highest place on Earth" and that "Pole Star bears witness that it faces the center of Heaven."<sup>39</sup> There is no doubt that Muslims consider Kaaba the center of their spiritual world and the most sacred place on earth, but certainly it has no special geographical or geological significance. Furthermore, it has no special spiritual value for the non-Muslims of the world.

### **ISLAM IN NEED OF CPR**

According to cognitive sciences to perceive anything in the world, abstract or concrete, one has to "cook" it up according to one's own cognitive, cultural, psychological schemata. In other words, no information is perceived one mind in a raw form, in itself. Emanuel Kant's explication of the notions of noumena and phenomena may be instructive here. Noumena, according to

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<sup>38</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 38.

Kant, are the raw materials of the world in themselves, inaccessible to human consciousness. Phenomena, on the other hand, are what we perceive from noumena, the raw materials of the world. Phenomena, according to Kant, are the only accessible realities of the world.<sup>40</sup> The latter is in line with Derrida's view that the reader of a text or a listener in a conversation would only be able to make sense of the text within her own concocted contextual framework.<sup>41</sup> That is, according to Derrida, there is no text other than context. Kant and Derrida's views are useful when it comes to interpreting Holy Scriptures, i.e., Koran. I translate Kant and Derrida's views as the process of cutting, pasting, and reinterpreting (CPR).

Cutting is an important interpretive and normative act in the process of CPR. It is needed because there are things that contextually and historically no longer useful, e.g., killing the infidels in the Abrahamic holy scriptures or sanctioning marrying four wives in Islam, which no Islamic government in the world openly dares to sanction although it is still clearly stated in Koran, in black of white and in an unambiguous terms for everyone to see. Selective amnesia is another way of cutting contradictory or harmful teachings. No religion can survive without cutting.

Pasting is another interpretive-normative act everyone engages, knowingly or unknowingly. We paste one part of Koran (or Bible) to the next for a variety of purposes: For better understanding, for contextualization, for getting rid of contradictory concepts, for richer meaning and interpretation, and for self-serving reasons. For example, usury or interests on loans are forbidden in Islam but no Muslim country can function without their banking systems, which function solely on

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<sup>40</sup> Emanuel Kant, e.g., Critique of Pure Reason, 265-66.

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida, Limited Inc. Chapter 1, 1-23.

interests on loans. Therefore, creative cutting and pasting have allowed all Muslim countries to institute elaborate and modern banking systems.

Cutting and pasting, however, will not do the job entirely. What makes a difference here is an active, deliberate, and ongoing reinterpretation. In other words, cutting and pasting has to be done for political, spiritual, expedient purposes. Cutting and pasting without a purpose does not make sense. So now it's clear that fundamentalists on one end to the CPR spectrum and Sufis on the other end of it, engage in CPR for present their own plans, aspirations, and policies. Sufis engage in CPR in widest possible sense, by reading Koran entirely metaphorically. They are the masters of CPR. Karen Strong suggests that Sufis look for truth everywhere, not only in Koran:

“Where establishment Islam was becoming less tolerant, seeing the Quran as the only valid scripture and Muhammad’s religion as the one true faith, Sufis went back to the spirit of the Quran in their appreciation of other religious tradition. Some, for example, were especially devoted to Jesus, whom they saw as the ideal Sufi since he had preached a gospel of love.”<sup>42</sup>

According to cognitive theorists we engage in CPR as a cognitive necessity, consciously and unconsciously, in order to make sense of the world. This is especially the case when it comes to Holy Scriptures, which are replete with metaphors, parables, and mythologies in need of radical CPR. Even fundamentalists who believe they are engaged in literalist interpretations by necessity engage in CPR. Cognitive theories of learning and perception suggest that it is impossible to perceive and comprehend anything without CPR. By extension then, it is impossible to read and comprehend Koran or the Bible without CPR. The literalists’ denial of CPR is in itself an act of CPR. In this sense, there is no “literal”

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<sup>42</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, 74.



or “pure” Koran (or the Bible for that matter) to be perceived “literally” by any human mind. According to Derrida “The author is dead.” By that I think he means that no one will ever know what the “original” meaning of any text is and no hope of knowing what the author’s original intention, whether she is alive or dead. After all the author herself has produced her text by necessity within a given contexts and by engaging in her own version of CPR. In short, to repeat Derrida’s self-contradictory but enlightening aphorism, “there is no text other than context.”<sup>43</sup> As abhorrent the following two aphorisms may seem to fundamentalists, they may reveal the inescapable human condition, especially when it comes to CPR.

*Esse es percipi* (To be is to be perceived)--George Berkley

*Homo mensura* (man is the measure)--Protagoras

One may legitimately criticize my notion of CPR as an inane and inconsequential project. It neither solves the problem of fundamentalism, nor eases the complexities of interpretation. I have to agree. What I hoped to accomplish with CPR is to expose the mechanics of interpretation in general and of fundamentalism in particular.

Even if a Muslim (or any believer of any religion for that matter) engages in CPR actively, deliberately, conscientiously, and in an ongoing manner, she may still slip into a semi-mindless fundamentalism with delusions of epistemic privilege. After all, fundamentalism can be viewed as CPR gone awry. That is, they have engaged in CPR of their own and believe that their version of CPR represent the true Islam. Therefore, it seems that other criteria are needed to transform fundamentalist CRP into an inclusive and beneficial one.

Religions are never static, but Muslim fundamentalists

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<sup>43</sup> Jacque Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 157-64.

unsuccessfully try to keep Islam static and unresponsive to modernity and postmodern realities. However, in reality in the process of keeping Islam static, they are still holding on to something new, albeit something narrow and diminished and most importantly, something unexamined by a pluralistic and diverse community of examiners. Karen Armstrong proposes that “despite the convictions of many of the faithful in any tradition, who are convinced that religion never changes and that their beliefs and practices are identical with those of the founders of their faith, religion must change in order to survive. . . [I]t is never possible to go back in time.”<sup>44</sup> She considers “any reformation, however conservative its intention,” to be always a new evolution and a “new departure” to adjust to the new times and new contexts.<sup>45</sup>

Insular and solipsistic interpretation of Koran by fundamentalists has spawned narrow mindedness and xenophobia in Islam, even among those jihadists who were educated in the West. Mohammad Atta, the leader of 9/11 attack had an engineering degree with postgraduate work in Germany. Khalid Sheik Mohammad, the alleged mastermind of 9/11 who is now incarcerated in Gitmo, and who most recently proudly confessed to beheading of Daniel Pearl in Pakistan, graduated with a degree in engineering from North Carolina Agriculture State University. Western education did not turn these violent fundamentalists into liberated, vibrant Muslims. And most recently, the London and Glasgow bombers in 2007 were apparently all were well-educated doctors and medical professionals. Their insular circle of extremists did them in. We need something more than CPR to break this insularity.

My suggested CPR is a decent start but incomplete because it is

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<sup>44</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, 76.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

insufficient. CPRs can be used for good or for evil. These possibilities are not exclusive to Islam but in all human endeavors, especially in religious and political contexts.

However, to prevent mischief done in the name of Allah, I believer CPRs have to go through a purgatory of examination similar to what scientific communities go through. The following are the additional steps needed to transform fundamentalism into a vibrant and dynamic entity:

1. All CPRs, attempted by fundamentalists or others, have to be made transparent and exposed for all Muslims and non-Muslims to see. Their historical, cultural, and especially their political motives should be exposed and explored, and their positive and negative impacts on Islam and the world should be examined.
2. CPRs should be engaged on a constant basis; not occasionally, especially when it is self-serving or expedient.
3. The purposes of CPR are:
  - a) To expose Islam's dynamism, aesthetics, usefulness, and its inherent goodness.
  - b) Equally, to expose its complexities, contradictions, and incongruities with the modern world.
  - c) To expose areas of misuse by Islamic fundamentalism.
  - d) To make Koran and Islam responsive to diversity of modern life and diversity of people of the world.
4. CPRs should be done for the benefit of all the peoples of the world, not only for Muslims of the world, or worse, only for a few insular groups of fundamentalist Muslims.
5. Every CPR should be put to the test of an open and public scrutiny and examination, in a purposefully pluralistic, diverse, and democratic manner, as it is done routinely in the fields of mathematics, sciences, arts, and literature. The wider and the more diverse the community of examiners, the healthier and the more trustworthy the resultant CPR.
6. The diversity of the examining communities has to be purposeful and deliberate. The reason for this criterion is that Islam is a world religion

and it has the whole world's responsibility on its shoulder. Since a diverse and pluralistic examining body is not always available or easily concocted, Muslims (or any other people of faith for that matter) have to go out of their ways to make sure that examining bodies are as diverse as possible, thus preventing the resultant CPRs detrainning and decaying into closed and insular CPRs. Hence the terms "deliberate, purposeful, pluralistic, diversified, and democratic".

7. In examining CRPs in purposefully pluralistic, diverse, and democratic contexts, the examining groups should use all means of investigation and all epistemic methods such as, mathematical/logical, scientific/empirical, testimonial, literary, artistic, common sense, and any other reliable method that helps to make sense of our CPRs in existence and CPRs in the making.

### **THE CASE OF *DARABA* IN 4:34**

The famous verse 4:34 in Koran refers to the right of a man to beat his wife if she refuses to obey him. The term in question--*daraba*, in Sura 4 (Chapter 4), aya 34 (verse 34) is usually translated similar to the following translation:

"Men have authority over women on account of the qualities with which God hath caused the one of them to excel the other and for what they spend of their property; therefore the righteous women are obedient, guarding the unseen that which God hath guarded; and as those [wives] whose perverseness ye fear, admonish them and avoid them in beds and beat them; and if they obey you, then seek not a way against them; verily, God is Ever-High, Ever-Great." [My emphasis]<sup>46</sup>

Another translation of *daraba* ("beating") reads as follows: ". . . admonish them; then leave them alone in bed; then spank them."<sup>47</sup>

However, the newest translation in the forthcoming *The Sublime Quran*, which is being completed by a Muslim feminist, Laleh Bakhtiar, is creating a stir for its far out contrived translation. Bakhtiar who spent three months translating only this one verse, came up with the following

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<sup>46</sup> Translated by Mir Ahmad Ali, S.V. *The Holy Quran*. 4:34.

<sup>47</sup> Translated by Thomas Clearly. *The Quran*. 4:34.

translation of the “beating” in 4:34: “. . . admonish them and abandon them in their sleeping place, then go away from them.”<sup>48</sup> [My emphasis] The latter interpretation of *daraba* seems to be quite generous and perhaps incorrect given the fact that so many scholars translate *daraba* as beating or something close to it. None of them come close to Bakhtiar’s generous but strange translation of beating as “go away from them.” Here is a clear case of “cutting” because no amount of reinterpretation makes this verse admissible in any modern feminist circles or in any court of law, including modern Islamic laws.

Although it is not very common, there are still regular reports that Muslim women are beaten and occasionally stoned to death in Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan, and the country of our close Western ally, Saudi Arabia. Muslim girls in many countries of the world are subjected to female genital mutilation. Although the latter practice is uncommon in many Muslim countries and forbidden in majority of them, it is still practiced often enough to raise international concerns, including the UN’s special task force to investigate the phenomenon. It is practiced even as late as 2007 and in as unlikely places as Egypt.<sup>49</sup>

If Bakhtiar’s CPR of *daraba*—“go away from them”—is accepted by Muslims around the world, it will be tantamount to a major revolution in Koranic interpretation. But there are already vociferous objections to Bakhtiar’s new interpretation, not only from fundamentalist camps, but from level-headed scholars and translators who don’t believe that “going away from them” truly captures the well accepted meaning of *daraba*, which simply means some kind of physical punishment in Arabic

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<sup>48</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, “New Translation Prompts Debate On Islamic Verse”, 17.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Slackman, “In Egypt, Shielding Girls From an Old Practice,” A1, A8.

lexicon. Maybe the case of *daraba* cannot be solved by any amount of creative CPR (cutting, pasting, and reinterpreting). Maybe this is a quintessential case “cutting”—disregarding *daraba* altogether as a practice of trying to solve marital problems. Maybe a few sessions of vigorous marriage and family counseling should take the place of *daraba*.

The irony of it all is that at one time there were women scholars, intellectuals, thinkers, poetesses in the early history of Islamic Golden Age. These remarkable Muslim women’s intellectual output and writing were equal to, if not better than, their male counterparts. Why don’t historians of early Islam neglect to include the rich and productive women scholarship and theological work<sup>50</sup>?

It is now clear to many Islamic and non-Islamic thinkers that one of the keys to modernization and reformation of Islam and rehabilitation of Islamic fundamentalism is the empowerment of Muslim women in Muslim societies. The woman question in Islam is not Muslim question. It is the responsibility of the entire world, although Islam bears the bigger burden of the struggle. It is a burden for all humanity to bear, because Muslim women belong to the family of humanity and Islam belongs to us all. While the issue of *daraba* in 4:34 remains a thorn in the side of Islamic feminists and moderate Muslims everywhere, nevertheless there is nothing in Koran that suggests that men have any privileged access to God or Her true intentions although it is clearly stated that “Men are superior to women on account of the qualities with which God hath gifted the one above the other. . .”<sup>51</sup> In fact there is nothing in Koran about privileged epistemic access by anyone. Any devout Muslim can

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<sup>50</sup> Clara Power, “A Secret History.”

<sup>51</sup> J. M. Rodwell, *The Koran*, 415.

have her own access to God through prayer, humility, devotion, and service to the poor and the needy. In this sense men and women have always been equal in Islam in the eyes of Allah.

### **FEMINIZING ISLAM**

What prevents many Muslims to engage in a Purposefully Pluralistic, diversified, and democratic CPR, is the excessive amount of masculine interpretations of Islam. Islam (and to a lesser degree Christianity and Judaism) suffers from a feminine CPR deficiency. The sheer masculinity of jihadists and Islamists cries for a balance with feminine sensibility, spirituality, and level-headedness. Abrahamic God seems to be profoundly anti women, anti gay, and anti pluralistic. To rehabilitate such masculinity Islam needs to feminize herself in both metaphorical sense and in a real sense.

By feminizing Islam in a metaphorical sense I mean to transform Islamic sensibility with a more humane and well-rounded disposition and a gentler approach to Islamic epistemology and knowledge, respecting, encouraging, and seeking alternative and imaginative interpretation of Koran. The basic tenets of Islam are gentle, kind, and humane.

By feminizing Islam in a real sense I mean simply to make sure Islam belongs to all Muslims not only to half of their population, namely the men. As it is, Islam seems to be custom-made for men. Women in Islam, and in fact in all three Abrahamic religions, are considered almost as an afterthought or as a utilitarian appendix for perpetuating men's happiness. As long as one half of the population of Islam (600,000,000 of 1.2 billion Muslims in the world) is not allowed to contribute equally to the welfare and progress of Islam, it cannot fit the modern world. And therefore, Islam and indeed the world would be deprived of unimaginable

and magnificent contributions of Muslim women. It is true that in some countries such as Iran there are more women university students than men and that women are an integral part of the workforce. But the full brilliance of Islam will not shine forth until and unless Muslim women are given full and equal rights and opportunities in all aspects of Islamic and world affairs, including opening the doors for women to become prayer leaders, Imams, and ayatollahs. A good place to start would be to allow women to drive automobile in Saudi Arabia<sup>52</sup> and stop female genital circumcision in Egypt and elsewhere.<sup>53</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The silent majority of Muslims and non-Muslims need to wage their own jihad by engaging in radical ijihad. Their silence and complacency is more damaging to Islam than anything that the West has done and continues to do to Arabs and Muslims, and more damaging than anything that radical fundamentalists are doing to Islam. As the adage goes, "Silence kills". Martin Luther King observed that there would come a time when silence becomes violence. We have learned to our much regret and horror that history is replete with various assortments of pogroms, holocausts, ethnic cleansing, and other atrocities, which were perpetuated partly by silence of the majority who were aware of what was going on but kept quiet. The lesson of "never again" is meaningless unless we raise our collective voices for justice and decency. Muslims, Christian, and Jews need to muster a new courage to cross the borders of suspicion and mistrust and reach out to one another. Islam (Christianity, Judaism, and all other world religions) is a treasure to be preserved and modernized. Islam belongs to us all and we all have a stake at transforming it into a vibrant and dynamic spiritual,

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<sup>52</sup> Hassan Fattah, "Saudis Rethink Taboo on Women Behind the Wheel," A3.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Slackman, "In Egypt Shielding Girls From an Old Practice," A1, A8.



intellectual, and cultural phenomenon. Hermeneutics of ijtihad may be answer.

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