

UNDERSTANDING ISLAM



“Say: ‘He is God, the One. God, to Whom the creatures turn for their needs. He begets not, nor was He begotten, and there is none like Him’.”

Quran 112:1-4

UNDERSTANDING ISLAM

Why Learn about Islam?

- *Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world today, with more than one and one-half billion adherents. One in every 4.5 persons on earth is a Muslim.*
- *Worldwide, Muslims live in many different cultures and speak many different languages. It is the majority religion in at least thirty-four different countries.*
- *Only about 20 per cent of Muslims live in the Middle East. The country with the largest Muslim population is Indonesia.*
- *Islam is the second largest religion in the United States. Nationwide, there are approximately seven million Muslims, about fifty thousand of which live in the Washington, D.C. area.*
- *Muslims have a shared history and common spiritual beliefs with both Jews and Christians. All three Faiths share stories of the same prophets including Adam, Noah, Jonah, Moses, Daniel, and others. Islam is the third (and believed final) revelation in the progression of Prophets of God to the people of the earth.*
- *Islam teaches that Jews and Christians are also 'People of the Book.' The Qur'an teaches that God spoke first to the Jews by giving them the Torah. He later sent Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, as a light to the Christians. Finally, He gave Muhammad (PBUH), the final revelations that are contained in the Qur'an.*
- *All three Faiths believe in angels as God's messengers. Gabriel (known as Jibril in the Qur'an) is the angel said to have spoken to Daniel, thus allowing him to interpret King Nebuchadnezzar's dreams. Gabriel is also said to have spoken to Zachariah concerning the birth of John, the Baptist and later to Mary, announcing the Virgin Birth of Jesus. It was also Gabriel who spoke to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the early 7th century C.E. instructing him to write these messages in the Qur'an (means 'recitations').*
- *Throughout their history, Muslim scholars and artists have contributed greatly to the fields of arts, science, literature, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and a host of other human disciplines. They continue to do so today.*

Brief Background and History

- *“Islam” means “submission” and is the name of the religion that began with the teachings of Muhammad (PBUH) around 620 C.E. Followers are known as “Muslims.” At its essence, Islam is a call to “peace.”*
- *The progression of Prophets from God begins with Adam and continues through Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Daniel, and Jesus, culminating with Muhammad (PBUH), the last and therefore to Muslims greatest, messenger of God.*
- *Muhammad (PBUH) was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia around 570 C.E. He heard his first “call” at age 39 while meditating in a cave at Mount Hira. A voice identified himself as the angel, Gabriel (known as ‘Jibral’ in the Qur-an).*
- *For twenty-three years, Muhammad (PBUH) was instructed by the voice of Gabriel. These messages are recorded in the Qur’an exactly as they were given to Muhammad, without chronology or narrative.*
- *These messages were given in Arabic. This is significant because the Arabic nation alone would be able to fully understand their meanings.*
- *For the first few years, only a handful of Meccans believed these messages were authentic. Eventually, Muhammad (PBUH) had to flee Mecca. He accepted an invitation to go to a city almost 300 miles to the north (Medina) to become that city’s leader.*
- *The year of this flight was 622 C.E. and is the most important date in Muslim history. The flight is known as the “Hijra,” and it marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar.*
- *When opposing armies tried to defeat the followers of Muhammad (PBUH), he initially refused to do battle, believing that the messages of the Qur’an spoke against this. Eventually, Gabriel appeared again, instructing Muhammad to defend his band of followers.*
- *After several battles, Muhammad’s armies successfully defeated the Meccan armies and soon united a new “Arabia.” Before the century’s end, Muhammad’s (PBUH) armies had also conquered Armenia, Persia, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Northern Africa, and Spain.*
- *Huston Smith says that “... but for their defeat by Charles Martel in the Battle of Tours in 733 C.E., the entire Western world today might be Muslim!”*

Basic Concepts and Beliefs

- *The word "Islam" comes from the attribute the religion seeks to cultivate: "s-l-m" = "peace." It is the same word as in "Shalom" and "Jeru-salem."*
- *"Al-lah" is Arabic for "the One True God." Muslims believe there is only one God. Like Jews, Muslims reject the Christian notion of a 'Trinity.'*
- *Muhammad (PBUH) cautioned his followers to not revere him nor to hold him up as anything higher than their equal. He makes no supernatural claims except for being the "messenger of God."*
- *Muhammad (PBUH) taught that along with Muslims, Christians, and Jews, Zoroastrians were also "People of the Book." As such, they were not to suffer at the hands of Muslim conquerors but were to be treated with respect and allowed to practice their faiths openly.*
- *Muslims hold to Friday as the day for gathering together in mosques to pray. Most mosques are also used for social gatherings such as weddings, as well as community centers for learning or serving the poor.*
- *Islam is a model for a fully integrated physical, social, political, and religious life. As a religious leader, Muhammad (PBUH) was also a head of state and governed its political, economic, and social structures. "Islam," therefore, is meant to permeate every thought, deed, and action.*
- *Islam is a straightforward faith that teaches respect for parents, protection for orphans and widows, and charity to the poor, as well as the virtues of kindness, honesty, generosity and peace.*

Islam's Five Basic Tenets of Belief

- *There is only "One True God." Angels are His messengers.*
- *Muhammad (PBUH) was the last and greatest in a line of Prophets.*
- *The Qur'an was and is the last and final book revealed by God.*
- *Life on earth is a test and preparation for the eternal life to come.*
- *A final judgment will take place and the faithful will go to an eternity in Heaven; the faithless will be consigned to an eternity in Hell.*

Islamic Scriptures

- *The Qur'an. This is said to be the world's most recited/memorized book. Muslims call it "a standing miracle," and consider it to be "poetically perfect."*
- *The Hadith. These are recorded traditions believed to be actual practices of Muhammad (PBUH) and his early followers and, therefore, examples to live by.*
- *The "Pentateuch" (Torah) and "Psalms" of the Old Testament. "We made a covenant of old with the children of Israel and you have nothing of guidance until you observe the "Torah" and the "Gospel."*
- *The Christian "Gospels" of the New Testament. Muslims believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus. Mary is the model for all women because of her chastity, humility, and total submission to God. Many Muslims believe that Christians created the story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and believe that he never died; rather that because he was sinless, he was taken directly up into heaven.*

The Sunni – Shi'a Branches of Islam

- *Sunni Islam is the term used to describe the Muslim community who revere the four Rashidun , or "rightly guided" caliphs, who succeeded Muhammad (PBUH). A succession of caliphs followed to lead the Sunni community, though none were held with the distinction of the Rashidun caliphs. The succession of caliphs ended with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire on March 3, 1924.*
- *Shi'a Muslims belong to the Shiah i-Ali ("partisans of Ali") and believe that Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's closest male relative, should have ruled in place of the Rashidun. Shi'a Muslims believe in a succession of only 12 Imams, the last of which is known as the Mahdi, or "Hidden Imam." Shi'as believe that the spirit of this Twelfth Imam is still on the earth (in occultation) and will reveal himself on the last day.*
- *The majority of about 85% of Muslims around the world are Sunni Muslims. There are four orthodox schools of thought among Sunni Muslims including the Shafi, Hanifi, Maliki, and Hanbali. These distinctions may be less important today than in their earlier histories.*
- *Shi'a Muslims are about 14% of the Islamic community, though they are the majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and a few other regions. Some Holy Cities of Shi'a Muslims are Mashad and Qom in Iran and Najaf, Karbala, and Samarra in Iraq.*
- *All Muslims share the Basic Tenets of Belief and follow the Five Pillars of Islam.*

Johnnie Hicks – 09/26/13

The Five Pillars of Faith

The Shahadah (statement of faith)

"There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God."

- *The first part speaks of monotheism, as distinct from the trinity.*
- *The second part speaks of the human character of Muhammad; he is fully human, not "God."*

The Salat (be constant in prayer)

- *Every man and woman is obliged to offer five prayers every day, facing the holy city of Mecca*
- *This assures that there is a "constant prayer" offering to God, as somewhere in the world, there are always people facing Mecca in prayer.*

The Sawm (fasting during the holy month of Ramadan)

- *This occurs during the ninth lunar month of the Muslim calendar; it is the month Muhammad (PBUH) was commissioned as a Prophet, and is also the month during which he fled from Mecca to Medina.*
- *Participants must abstain from eating and drinking (even water) during daylight hours. (This is sometimes determined to be "when one can distinguish a white thread from a black one in natural light").*
- *Fasting teaches self-discipline; makes one think clearly; underscores man's dependency upon God; reminds man of his essential frailty; and sensitizes man to the human suffering of hunger in the world, thus making him or her more compassionate.*

The Zakat (practice of charity)

- *The Zakat is a social system of the wealthier supporting the poorer.*
- *The sharing of wealth purifies the heart from greed and reconciles the heart of the recipient.*

The Hajj (holy pilgrimage to Mecca)

- *A pilgrimage to Mecca is required of every able-bodied Muslim at least once in a lifetime. After this pilgrimage, one becomes known as "Hajji."*
- *At Mecca everyone, prince and pauper, dons a simple sheet-like garment as they stand together as equals before God.*

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Scriptures from the Holy Qur'an

*"All praise be to Allah, Lord of all the worlds, Most beneficent, ever-merciful,
King of the Day of Judgement.
You alone do we worship, and to You alone turn for help.
Guide us, O Lord, to the path that is straight,
The path of those You have blessed,
Not of those who have earned Your anger, nor those who have gone astray."
(Qur'an 1:1)*

*"We sent down the Torah which contains guidance and light, in accordance with which the prophets who were obedient to God gave instructions to the Jews, as did the rabbis and priests, for they were the custodians and witnesses of God's writ. ... Later, We sent Jesus, son of Mary, confirming the Torah which had been sent down before him, and gave him the Gospel containing guidance and light ... And to you, We have revealed the Book containing the truth, confirming the earlier revelations, and preserving them ..."
(Qur'an 5:44-48)*

*"We were indeed gracious to Moses and Aaron, and saved them and their people from great distress, and helped them so they were victorious." **(Qur'an 37:14-15)***

*"(And) the angels said: 'Oh, Mary, God gives you news of a thing from Him, for rejoicing ... (news of a child) whose name will be Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in this world and the next, and one among the honored ..." **(Qur'an 3:45)***

*"So your Lord has decreed: Do not worship anyone but Him, and be good to your parents. If one or both of them grow old in your presence, do not say 'fie' to them, nor reprove them, but say gentle words to them. And look after them with kindness and love, and say: 'Oh Lord, have mercy on them, as they nourished me when I was small." **(Qur'an 17:23-24)***

*"Muhammad is only a messenger; and many a messenger has gone before him." **(Qur'an 3:144)***

*"We believe in God and what has been sent down to us, and what had been revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their progeny, and that which was given to Moses and Christ, and to all other prophets by the Lord. We make no distinction among them, and we submit to Him." **(Qur'an 2:136)***

*"We gave to (Abraham) Isaac and Jacob and guided them, as We had guided Noah before them, and of his descendants, David and Solomon and Job and Joseph and Moses and Aaron. Thus we reward those who are upright and do good., Zachariah and John We guided, and guided Jesus and Elias who were among the upright, and We gave guidance to Ishmael, Elisha and Jonah and Lot and We favored them over other peoples of the World." **(Qur'an 6:84-86)***

Glossary of Terms

- Ashura The 10th day of the Islamic month of Muharram and the climax of the Shi'a mourning ceremonies.
- Ayatollah "Interpreter" for Allah; highest ranking clergy in Shi'a Islam.
- Caliph The successor to Muhammad and temporal leader of the Sunni Muslim community. After 1400 years the Caliphate was eliminated in 1924.
- Fatwah A formal legal opinion or decision of a respected religious scholar on a matter of Islamic law.
- Hadith Documented traditions of the Prophet Muhammad which were not in the Qur'an but were recorded for posterity by his close companions.
- Hijrah The migration of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the first Muslim community from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E. This marks the beginning year of the Muslim calendar (currently 1433).
- Imam The leader of a Muslim community. For Shi'ites, the first 12 legitimate leaders after Muhammad's death; for Sunnis, the leader of a mosque.
- Jihad A struggle or striving, primarily the internal effort of one's personal struggle between good and evil (known as the "greater jihad"). Also refers to battle in the defense of Islam (known as the "lesser jihad.").
- Kaa'ba The ancient stone and cube-shaped shrine in the holy city of Mecca which Muhammad dedicated to Allah. This is the focal point for Muslim prayers and place of gathering for performing the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca).
- Madrasah Islamic religious school.
- Mahdi For **Shi'ites**, the "Hidden Imam" who is in occultation until the Last Days, at which time he will return to usher in a time of justice on the earth.
- Qiblah The direction of prayer toward Mecca.
- Rashidun The first four "Rightly Guided" Caliphs for Sunni Muslims: Abu Bakr; Umar; Uthman; and Ali.
- Shariah The body of Islamic law derived from the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the Hadith.
- Sunnah The traditions of the Prophet as composed in the Hadith.

Does Religion Cause Violence?

“Violence is not the nature of religion.

*Violence comes from the nature of men when they become
selfish and greedy.*

Religion is man’s solution to violence.

Religion is about peace.

The Muslim call to ‘jihad’ is in all the Sacred Scriptures.

*‘Jihad’ is the struggle within man himself between his own
physical lusts and his spiritual calling.*

*It is the ‘lesser jihad’ that leads to war when the ‘greater jihad’
has lost.”*

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A World Without Islam

What if Islam had never existed? To some, it's a comforting thought: No clash of civilizations, no holy wars, no terrorists. Would Christianity have taken over the world? Would the Middle East be a peaceful beacon of democracy? Would 9/11 have happened? In fact, remove Islam from the path of history, and the world ends up exactly where it is today.

BY GRAHAM E. FULLER | JANUARY 1, 2008

Imagine, if you will, a world without Islam -- admittedly an almost inconceivable state of affairs given its charged centrality in our daily news headlines. Islam seems to lie behind a broad range of international disorders: suicide attacks, car bombings, military occupations, resistance struggles, riots, fatwas, jihads, guerrilla warfare, threatening videos, and 9/11 itself. Why are these things taking place? "Islam" seems to offer an instant and uncomplicated analytical touchstone, enabling us to make sense of today's convulsive world. Indeed, for some neoconservatives, "Islamofascism" is now our sworn foe in a looming "World War III."

But indulge me for a moment. What if there were no such thing as Islam? What if there had never been a Prophet Mohammed, no saga of the spread of Islam across vast parts of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa?

Given our intense current focus on terrorism, war, and rampant anti-Americanism -- some of the most emotional international issues of the day -- it's vital to understand the true sources of these crises. Is Islam, in fact, the source of the problem, or does it tend to lie with other less obvious and deeper factors? For the sake of argument, in an act of historical imagination, picture a Middle East in which Islam had never appeared. Would we then be spared many of the current challenges before us? Would the Middle East be more peaceful? How different might the character of East-West relations be? Without Islam, surely the international order would present a very different picture than it does today. Or would it?

IF NOT ISLAM, THEN WHAT?

From the earliest days of a broader Middle East, Islam has seemingly shaped the cultural norms and even political preferences of its followers. How can we then separate Islam from the Middle East? As it turns out, it's not so hard to imagine.

Let's start with ethnicity. Without Islam, the face of the region still remains complex and conflicted. The dominant ethnic groups of the Middle East -- Arabs, Persians, Turks, Kurds, Jews, even Berbers and Pashtuns -- would still dominate politics. Take the Persians: Long before Islam, successive great Persian empires pushed to the doors of Athens and were the perpetual rivals of whoever inhabited Anatolia. Contesting Semitic peoples, too, fought the Persians across the Fertile Crescent and into Iraq. And then there are the powerful forces of diverse Arab tribes and traders expanding and migrating into other Semitic areas of the Middle East before Islam. Mongols would still have overrun and destroyed the civilizations of Central Asia and much of the Middle East in the 13th century. Turks still would have conquered Anatolia, the Balkans up to Vienna, and most of the Middle East. These struggles -- over power, territory, influence, and trade -- existed long before Islam arrived.

Still, it's too arbitrary to exclude religion entirely from the equation. If, in fact, Islam had never emerged, most of the Middle East would have remained predominantly Christian, in its various sects, just as it had been at the dawn of Islam. Apart from some Zoroastrians and small numbers of Jews, no other major religions were present.

But would harmony with the West really have reigned if the whole Middle East had remained Christian? That is a far reach. We would have to assume that a restless and expansive medieval European world would not have projected its power and hegemony into the neighboring East in search of economic and geopolitical footholds. After all, what were the Crusades if not a Western adventure driven primarily by political, social, and economic needs? The banner of Christianity was little more than a potent symbol, a rallying cry to bless the more secular urges of powerful Europeans. In fact, the particular religion of the natives never figured highly in the West's imperial push across the globe. Europe may have spoken upliftingly about bringing "Christian values to the natives," but the patent goal was to establish colonial outposts as sources of wealth for the metropole and bases for Western power projection.

And so it's unlikely that Christian inhabitants of the Middle East would have welcomed the stream of European fleets and their merchants backed by Western guns. Imperialism would have prospered in the region's complex ethnic mosaic -- the raw materials for the old game of divide and rule. And Europeans still would have installed the same pliable local rulers to accommodate their needs.

Move the clock forward to the age of oil in the Middle East. Would Middle Eastern states, even if Christian, have welcomed the establishment of European protectorates over their region? Hardly. The West still would have built and controlled the same choke points, such as the Suez Canal. It wasn't Islam that made Middle Eastern states powerfully resist the colonial project, with its drastic redrawing of borders in accordance with European geopolitical preferences. Nor would Middle Eastern Christians have welcomed imperial Western oil companies, backed by their European viceregents, diplomats, intelligence agents, and armies, any more than Muslims did. Look at the long history of Latin American reactions to American domination of their oil, economics, and politics. The Middle East would have been equally keen to create nationalist anticolonial movements to wrest control over their own soil, markets, sovereignty, and destiny from foreign grips -- just like anti-colonial struggles in Hindu India, Confucian China, Buddhist Vietnam, and a Christian and animist Africa.

And surely the French would have just as readily expanded into a Christian Algeria to seize its rich farmlands and establish a colony. The Italians, too, never let Ethiopia's Christianity stop them from turning that country into a harshly administered colony. In short, there is no reason to believe that a Middle Eastern reaction to the European colonial ordeal would have differed significantly from the way it actually reacted under Islam.

But maybe the Middle East would have been more democratic without Islam? The history of dictatorship in Europe itself is not reassuring here. Spain and Portugal ended harsh dictatorships only in the mid-1970s. Greece only emerged from church-linked dictatorship a few decades ago. Christian Russia is still not out of the woods. Until quite recently, Latin America was riddled with dictators, who often reigned with U.S. blessing and in partnership with the Catholic Church. Most Christian African nations have not fared much better. Why would a Christian Middle East have looked any different?

And then there is Palestine. It was, of course, Christians who shamelessly persecuted Jews for more than a millennium, culminating in the Holocaust. These horrific examples of anti-Semitism were firmly rooted in Western Christian lands and culture. Jews would therefore have still sought a homeland outside Europe; the Zionist movement would still have emerged and sought a base in Palestine. And the new Jewish state would still have dislodged the same 750,000 Arab

natives of Palestine from their lands even if they had been Christian -- and indeed some of them were. Would not these Arab Palestinians have fought to protect or regain their land? The Israeli-Palestinian problem remains at heart a national, ethnic, and territorial conflict, only recently bolstered by religious slogans. And let's not forget that Arab Christians played a major role in the early emergence of the whole Arab nationalist movement in the Middle East; indeed, the ideological founder of the first pan-Arab Ba'ath party, Michel Aflaq, was a Sorbonne-educated Syrian Christian.

But surely Christians in the Middle East would have at least been religiously predisposed toward the West. Couldn't we have avoided all that religious strife? In fact, the Christian world itself was torn by heresies from the early centuries of Christian power, heresies that became the very vehicle of political opposition to Roman or Byzantine power. Far from uniting under religion, the West's religious wars invariably veiled deeper ethnic, strategic, political, economic, and cultural struggles for dominance.

Even the very references to a "Christian Middle East" conceal an ugly animosity. Without Islam, the peoples of the Middle East would have remained as they were at the birth of Islam -- mostly adherents of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. But it's easy to forget that one of history's most enduring, virulent, and bitter religious controversies was that between the Catholic Church in Rome and Eastern Orthodox Christianity in Constantinople -- a rancor that persists still today. Eastern Orthodox Christians never forgot or forgave the sacking of Christian Constantinople by Western Crusaders in 1204. Nearly 800 years later, in 1999, Pope John Paul II sought to take a few small steps to heal the breach in the first visit of a Catholic pope to the Orthodox world in a thousand years. It was a start, but friction between East and West in a Christian Middle East would have remained much as it is today. Take Greece, for example: The Orthodox cause has been a powerful driver behind nationalism and anti-Western feeling there, and anti-Western passions in Greek politics as little as a decade ago echoed the same suspicions and virulent views of the West that we hear from many Islamist leaders today.

The culture of the Orthodox Church differs sharply from the Western post-Enlightenment ethos, which emphasizes secularism, capitalism, and the primacy of the individual. It still maintains residual fears about the West that parallel in many ways current Muslim insecurities: fears of Western missionary proselytism, a tendency to perceive religion as a key vehicle for the protection and preservation of their own communities and culture, and a suspicion of the "corrupted" and imperial character of the West. Indeed, in an Orthodox Christian Middle East, Moscow would enjoy special influence, even today, as the last major center of Eastern Orthodoxy. The Orthodox world would have remained a key geopolitical arena of East-West rivalry in the Cold War. Samuel Huntington, after all, included the Orthodox Christian world among several civilizations embroiled in a cultural clash with the West.

Today, the U.S. occupation of Iraq would be no more welcome to Iraqis if they were Christian. The United States did not overthrow Saddam Hussein, an intensely nationalist and secular leader, because he was Muslim. Other Arab peoples would still have supported the Iraqi Arabs in their trauma of occupation. Nowhere do people welcome foreign occupation and the killing of their citizens at the hands of foreign troops. Indeed, groups threatened by such outside forces invariably cast about for appropriate ideologies to justify and glorify their resistance struggle. Religion is one such ideology.

This, then, is the portrait of a putative "world without Islam." It is a Middle East dominated by Eastern Orthodox Christianity -- a church historically and psychologically suspicious of, even hostile to, the West. Still riven by major ethnic and even sectarian differences, it possesses a fierce sense of historical consciousness and grievance against the West. It has been invaded repeatedly by Western imperialist armies; its resources commandeered; borders redrawn by Western fiat in conformity with its various interests; and regimes established that are compliant with Western dictates. Palestine would still burn. Iran would still be intensely nationalistic. We would still see Palestinians resist Jews, Chechens resist

Russians, Iranians resist the British and Americans, Kashmiris resist Indians, Tamils resist the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, and Uighurs and Tibetans resist the Chinese. The Middle East would still have a glorious historical model -- the great Byzantine Empire of more than 2,000 years' standing -- with which to identify as a cultural and religious symbol. It would, in many respects, perpetuate an East-West divide.

It is not an entirely peaceful and comforting picture.

UNDER THE PROPHET'S BANNER

It is, of course, absurd to argue that the existence of Islam has had no independent impact on the Middle East or East-West relations. Islam has been a unifying force of a high order across a wide region. As a global universal faith, it has created a broad civilization that shares many common principles of philosophy, the arts, and society; a vision of the moral life; a sense of justice, jurisprudence, and good governance -- all in a deeply rooted high culture. As a cultural and moral force, Islam has helped bridge ethnic differences among diverse Muslim peoples, encouraging them to feel part of a broader Muslim civilizational project. That alone furnishes it with great weight. Islam affected political geography as well: If there had been no Islam, the Muslim countries of South Asia and Southeast Asia today -- particularly Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia -- would be rooted instead in the Hindu world.

Islamic civilization provided a common ideal to which all Muslims could appeal in the name of resistance against Western encroachment. Even if that appeal failed to stem the Western imperial tide, it created a cultural memory of a commonly shared fate that did not go away. Europeans were able to divide and conquer numerous African, Asian, and Latin American peoples who then fell singly before Western power. A united, transnational resistance among those peoples was hard to achieve in the absence of any common ethnic or cultural symbol of resistance.

In a world without Islam, Western imperialism would have found the task of dividing, conquering, and dominating the Middle East and Asia much easier. There would not have remained a shared cultural memory of humiliation and defeat across a vast area. That is a key reason why the United States now finds itself breaking its teeth in the Muslim world. Today, global intercommunications and shared satellite images have created a strong self-consciousness among Muslims and a sense of a broader Western imperial siege against a common Islamic culture. This siege is not about modernity; it is about the unceasing Western quest for domination of the strategic space, resources, and even culture of the Muslim world -- the drive to create a "pro-American" Middle East. Unfortunately, the United States naively assumes that Islam is all that stands between it and the prize.

But what of terrorism -- the most urgent issue the West most immediately associates with Islam today? In the bluntest of terms, would there have been a 9/11 without Islam? If the grievances of the Middle East, rooted in years of political and emotional anger at U.S. policies and actions, had been wrapped up in a different banner, would things have been vastly different? Again, it's important to remember how easily religion can be invoked even when other long-standing grievances are to blame. Sept. 11, 2001, was not the beginning of history. To the al Qaeda hijackers, Islam functioned as a magnifying glass in the sun, collecting these widespread shared common grievances and focusing them into an intense ray, a moment of clarity of action against the foreign invader.

In the West's focus on terrorism in the name of Islam, memories are short. Jewish guerrillas used terrorism against the British in Palestine. Sri Lankan Hindu Tamil "Tigers" invented the art of the suicide vest and for more than a decade led the world in the use of suicide bombings -- including the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Greek terrorists carried out assassination operations against U.S. officials in Athens. Organized Sikh terrorism killed Indira

Gandhi, spread havoc in India, established an overseas base in Canada, and brought down an Air India flight over the Atlantic. Macedonian terrorists were widely feared all across the Balkans on the eve of World War I. Dozens of major assassinations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were carried out by European and American "anarchists," sowing collective fear. The Irish Republican Army employed brutally effective terrorism against the British for decades, as did communist guerrillas and terrorists in Vietnam against Americans, communist Malayans against British soldiers in the 1950s, Mau Mau terrorists against British officers in Kenya -- the list goes on. It doesn't take a Muslim to commit terrorism.

Even the recent history of terrorist activity doesn't look much different. According to Europol, 498 terrorist attacks took place in the European Union in 2006. Of these, 424 were perpetrated by separatist groups, 55 by left-wing extremists, and 18 by various other terrorists. Only 1 was carried out by Islamists. To be sure, there were a number of foiled attempts in a highly surveilled Muslim community. But these figures reveal the broad ideological range of potential terrorists in the world.

Is it so hard to imagine then, Arabs -- Christian or Muslim -- angered at Israel or imperialism's constant invasions, overthrows, and interventions, employing similar acts of terrorism and guerrilla warfare? The question might be instead, why didn't it happen sooner? As radical groups articulate grievances in our globalized age, why should we not expect them to carry their struggle into the heart of the West?

If Islam hates modernity, why did it wait until 9/11 to launch its assault? And why did key Islamic thinkers in the early 20th century speak of the need to embrace modernity even while protecting Islamic culture? Osama bin Laden's cause in his early days was not modernity at all -- he talked of Palestine, American boots on the ground in Saudi Arabia, Saudi rulers under U.S. control, and modern "Crusaders." It is striking that it was not until as late as 2001 that we saw the first major boiling over of Muslim anger onto U.S. soil itself, in reaction to historical as well as accumulated recent events and U.S. policies. If not 9/11, some similar event like it was destined to come.

And even if Islam as a vehicle of resistance had never existed, Marxism did. It is an ideology that has spawned countless terrorist, guerrilla, and national liberation movements. It has informed the Basque ETA, the FARC in Colombia, the Shining Path in Peru, and the Red Army Faction in Europe, to name only a few in the West. George Habash, the founder of the deadly Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, was a Greek Orthodox Christian and Marxist who studied at the American University of Beirut. In an era when angry Arab nationalism flirted with violent Marxism, many Christian Palestinians lent Habash their support.

Peoples who resist foreign oppressors seek banners to propagate and glorify the cause of their struggle. The international class struggle for justice provides a good rallying point. Nationalism is even better. But religion provides the best one of all, appealing to the highest powers in prosecuting its cause. And religion everywhere can still serve to bolster ethnicity and nationalism even as it transcends it -- especially when the enemy is of a different religion. In such cases, religion ceases to be primarily the source of clash and confrontation, but rather its vehicle. The banner of the moment may go away, but the grievances remain.

We live in an era when terrorism is often the chosen instrument of the weak. It already stymies the unprecedented might of U.S. armies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. And thus bin Laden in many non-Muslim societies has been called the "next Che Guevara." It's nothing less than the appeal of successful resistance against dominant American power, the weak striking back -- an appeal that transcends Islam or Middle Eastern culture.

MORE OF THE SAME

But the question remains, if Islam didn't exist, would the world be more peaceful? In the face of these tensions between East and West, Islam unquestionably adds yet one more emotive element, one more layer of complications to finding solutions. Islam is not the cause of such problems. It may seem sophisticated to seek out passages in the Koran that seem to explain "why they hate us." But that blindly misses the nature of the phenomenon. How comfortable to identify Islam as the source of "the problem"; it's certainly much easier than exploring the impact of the massive global footprint of the world's sole superpower.

A world without Islam would still see most of the enduring bloody rivalries whose wars and tribulations dominate the geopolitical landscape. If it were not religion, all of these groups would have found some other banner under which to express nationalism and a quest for independence. Sure, history would not have followed the exact same path as it has. But, at rock bottom, conflict between East and West remains all about the grand historical and geopolitical issues of human history: ethnicity, nationalism, ambition, greed, resources, local leaders, turf, financial gain, power, interventions, and hatred of outsiders, invaders, and imperialists. Faced with timeless issues like these, how could the power of religion not be invoked?

Remember too, that virtually every one of the principle horrors of the 20th century came almost exclusively from strictly secular regimes: Leopold II of Belgium in the Congo, Hitler, Mussolini, Lenin and Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot. It was Europeans who visited their "world wars" twice upon the rest of the world -- two devastating global conflicts with no remote parallels in Islamic history.

Some today might wish for a "world without Islam" in which these problems presumably had never come to be. But, in truth, the conflicts, rivalries, and crises of such a world might not look so vastly different than the ones we know today.

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