

THE CLOSING OF THE  
MUSLIM MIND

*How Intellectual Suicide Created  
the Modern Islamist Crisis*

ROBERT R. REILLY



WILMINGTON, DELAWARE

Copyright © 2010 by Robert R. Reilly

Paperback edition, February 2011

Paperback reprint, February 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in a magazine, newspaper, broadcast, or online publication.

Reilly, Robert R., 1946–

The closing of the Muslim mind : how intellectual suicide created the modern Islamist crisis / Robert R. Reilly.—Pbk ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-61017-002-4

1. Islamic countries—Intellectual life. 2. Islamic civilization. 3. Islamic fundamentalism. 4. Islam—Doctrines—History. I. Title.

DS36.8.R45 2011

320.5'57—dc22

2011005173

ISI Books

Intercollegiate Studies Institute

3901 Centerville Road

Wilmington, DE 19807-1938

[www.isibooks.org](http://www.isibooks.org)

Manufactured in the United States of America

## *Introduction*

### INTELLECTUAL SUICIDE

Dost thou not know that God has the power to will anything?

—*Qur'an* 2:106

Philosophy is a lie.<sup>1</sup>

—*Abu Sa'id ibn-Dust* (d. 1040)

Wherever I go in the Islamic world, it's the same problem: cause and effect; cause and effect.<sup>2</sup>

—*Fouad Ajami*, 2005

This book is about one of the greatest intellectual dramas in human history. Its landscape is the Muslim mind. How man regards his powers of reason has been a decisive influence on the shape and destiny of civilizations, including the Islamic one. How could it be otherwise, when these rational powers affect how reality is perceived, how revelation is received, what can be known, and how to discern the meaning of the known? This is the story of how Islam grappled with the role of reason after its conquests exposed it to Hellenic thought and how the side of reason ultimately lost in the ensuing, deadly struggle.

## THE CLOSING OF THE MUSLIM MIND

It may seem outrageous to say in the title of this book that the Muslim mind has closed—that a whole civilization has mentally shut down and abandoned reason and philosophy. I do not mean that the minds of every individual Muslim are closed, or that there are not varieties of Islam in which the Muslim mind is still open. I do mean, however, that a large portion of mainstream Sunni Islam, the majority expression of the faith, has shut the door to reality in a profound way.<sup>\*</sup> The evidence attesting to this embrace of unreality is unfortunately abundant and has been offered by Muslims themselves. This closure is especially true of, and due to, a particular current of Muslim theology, the Ash'arite school of Islam, which predominates in the Arab Middle East (and is heavily present in other areas such as Pakistan and south Asia). As it has in the past, this part of the world plays the leading role in Islam today.

The great twentieth-century Muslim scholar Fazlur Rahman said, "A people that deprives itself of philosophy necessarily exposes itself to starvation in terms of fresh ideas—in fact, it commits intellectual suicide."<sup>3</sup> In his September 2006 Regensburg address, Pope Benedict XVI said something similar. He spoke of dehellenization—meaning the loss of reason, the gift of the Greeks—as one of the West's main problems. Less well known is the dehellenization that has afflicted Islam—its denigration of and divorce from reason. (The pope alluded to this only briefly, though it became a source of major controversy.) The dehellenization of Islam is less well known because it was so thorough and effective that few are aware that there was a process of hellenization preceding it—especially during the ninth and tenth centuries. It was a pivotal period for Islam and

---

<sup>\*</sup> I do not include Shi'a Islam in this book except tangentially, because it is different enough from Sunni Islam as to require a separate work. Also, my general theme would have to be treated in a very different manner, if at all, for the simple reason that Shi'a Islam's relationship to philosophy was and is entirely different, for reasons that will be alluded to in Chapter 2.

## INTELLECTUAL SUICIDE

the world. As the late King Hussein of Jordan said in his last interview, it was then, toward the end of this period, that the Muslim world took a decisive turn in the wrong direction.

This is an account of Sunni Islam's intellectual suicide—in Fazlur Rahman's meaning of the term—and the reasons for it. This book will relate not so much *how* it happened, but *why* it happened; not so much *what* went wrong, but *why* it went wrong. This book will detail the devastating consequences of Islam's intellectual suicide, and how the Muslim mind might possibly be reopened (as suggested by Muslims themselves), an endeavor fraught with repercussions for the West, as well as for the Islamic world.

The dehellenization of Islam had its roots in a particular idea of God that took definitive shape in the ninth century, though a large portion of Islam had embraced a version of it far earlier. The struggle over reason involved a profound disagreement about who God is. Each side in the dispute had certain prerequisites for who God *must* be, originating in or confirmed by their distinct readings of the Qur'an. On one side was God's will and power, and on the other his justice and rationality. The argument, precipitated and exacerbated by the encounter with Greek philosophy, took place over the status of reason in relation to God's revelation and omnipotence. The questions involved: What has reason to do with man's encounter with God? Is there any relationship between reason and revelation? Does reason have any standing to address God's revelation, or must reason remain outside of it? And perhaps most importantly, can reason know the truth?

It is on account of certain theological notions that philosophy was ultimately found to be incompatible with Ash'arite Islam (and that Islamic jurisprudence rose to be by far the most important discipline). How did such a conception of God develop, and why did it prevail? Muhammad was not a theologian. It was up to his followers to develop the notions of God contained both explicitly and implicitly in the Qur'an. They

## THE CLOSING OF THE MUSLIM MIND

did so according to the needs that arose from various disputes within Islam and, also, as Islam encountered the ideas and religions of the civilizations it conquered.

The issues dealt with here are among the most difficult and profound with which the followers of any religion have had to wrestle. *Every* monotheistic religion has had to consider the same theological, philosophical, metaphysical, and epistemological problems that Islam has faced. This book shows how these perennial challenges were raised and treated in Sunni Islam, and how the outcomes of these considerations decisively influenced the shape of the Muslim world today. This may make for heavy slogging in places. However, the reader who does not make the effort to understand the struggle at the level at which it took place—and is still taking place—will be unable to grasp why the Sunni Islamic world has found itself in such a predicament, and whether it has the means within itself to find an opening back to reality.

There are two fundamental ways to close the mind. One is to deny reason's capability of knowing anything. The other is to dismiss reality as unknowable. Reason cannot know, or there is nothing to be known. Either approach suffices in making reality irrelevant. In Sunni Islam, elements of both were employed in the Ash'arite school. As a consequence, a fissure opened between man's reason and reality—and, most importantly, between man's reason and God. The fatal disconnect between the Creator and the mind of his creature is the source of Sunni Islam's most profound woes. This bifurcation, located not in the Qur'an but in early Islamic theology, ultimately led to the closing of the Muslim mind.

The key contemporary question may be this: If one's theological assumptions about reality are incorrect, can one recover from them if these assumptions have been dogmatized and made pillars of one's faith? If one wishes, for instance, to admit to the reality of "cause and effect" in the natural order, there does not seem to be any obstacle in the Qur'an to doing

## INTELLECTUAL SUICIDE

so, even though the Qur'an explains events almost exclusively as the direct product of God's actions. After all, the Old Testament tells much of its story with the same kind of emphasis on God acting directly on humanity and the world, but this did not prevent Jews, or the Christians after them, from embracing causality. It is Ash'arite theology, as it developed in the ninth to twelfth centuries, which makes this a problem in Islam today, because its denial of causality became, broadly speaking, Sunni orthodoxy and a part of Arab culture. This is what led to Lebanese-American intellectual Fouad Ajami's observation that "wherever I go in the Islamic world, it's the same problem: cause and effect; cause and effect." Is this dysfunctional view now sanctioned by consensus or *ijma'* making it hard if not impossible to reverse? Muhammad proclaimed that "my community will never agree upon an error," meaning that something confirmed by that community, or *umma*, is taken to be infallible.

Much of this subject matter may seem remote from day-to-day concerns, and therefore easily dismissible. No doubt, the average Muslim may be as unaware of the teachings of medieval-era Islamic thinkers like al-Ashari and al-Ghazali as the average Christian is of the teachings of Augustine and Aquinas. If asked which Islamic theological school he belongs to, the Muslim man in the street may not know whether he is an Ash'arite or a Maturidite, any more than the Christian would know if he is an Augustinian or a Thomist. This, however, does not mean that the respective Muslim and Christian are any less under the influence of the ideas of these thinkers. Despite such lack of awareness, philosophical, metaphysical, and theological issues ultimately determine how daily concerns are addressed; indeed, they even determine what these concerns are. What may seem abstruse theological points can have the most practical and devastating consequences.

The closure of the Muslim mind has created the crisis of which modern Islamist terrorism is only one manifestation. The problem is much broader and deeper. It enfolds Islam's

## THE CLOSING OF THE MUSLIM MIND

loss of science and of the prospect of indigenously developing democratic constitutional government. It is the key to unlocking such puzzles as why the Arab world stands near the bottom of every measure of human development; why scientific inquiry is nearly moribund in the Islamic world; why Spain translates more books in a single year than the entire Arab world has in the past *thousand* years; why some people in Saudi Arabia still refuse to believe man has been to the moon; and why some Muslim media present natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina as God's direct retribution. Without understanding this story, we cannot grasp what is taking place in the Islamic world today, or the potential paths to recovery—paths many Muslims are pointing to with their rejection of the idea of God that produced this crisis in the first place.

The closing of the Muslim mind is the direct if somewhat distant antecedent of today's radical Islamist ideology, and this ideology cannot be understood without divining its roots in that closing. The ideas animating terrorist acts from September 11, to the bombings in London, Madrid, and Mumbai, to the attempted airline bombing in Detroit on Christmas 2009, and beyond have been loudly proclaimed by their perpetrators and their many sympathizers in every form of media. We know what they think; they tell us every day. But questions arise concerning the provenance of their ideas, which they claim are Islamic. Are they something new or a resurgence of something from the past? How much of this is Islam and how much is Islamism? Is Islamism a deformation of Islam? If so, in what way and from where has it come? And why is Islam susceptible to this kind of deformation? The latter part of the book will address these questions.

The book's approach will be to cite translated primary sources wherever possible and, within the necessary context, to let the texts speak for themselves. For those unfamiliar with the material, the quotations from some of the key Muslim theologians from the ninth to twelfth centuries will be surprising,

## INTELLECTUAL SUICIDE

even shocking. The radical voluntarism (God as pure will) and occasionalism (no cause and effect in the natural order) found in them were not seen to any significant extent in the West until Scottish philosopher David Hume began writing in the eighteenth century. By that time the recognition of reality had become firmly enough established to withstand the assault (until fairly recently, that is, when a form of voluntarism has also undermined reason in the West). Unfortunately, this was not true in Sunni Islam, where these views arrived so much earlier.

The voluntaristic and occasionalist character of Sunni Islam is hardly a recent discovery. St. John of Damascus, Maimonides, Hegel, and many others amply noted it. However, the reason many Westerners today remain perplexed by Muslim behavior is that they are unaware of the fundamental theological doctrines that animate it. I abundantly cite twentieth-century scholarship on these theological issues, both Western and Islamic, to affirm their essential importance as the formative influence on Sunni character. The abiding influence of these doctrines will be, for some, hard to believe or accept because they are so remote from the modern Western world. But they are largely responsible for the situation today and present a profound obstacle to the reform that many Muslims, as well as those in West, hope to see in a reopening of the Muslim mind. To many in the Sunni Muslim world, reality has become inaccessible because the views of certain theologians of the ninth to twelfth centuries prevailed. The reasons for this must be understood, so that hopes are not misplaced and the path to recovery runs true.

Many Muslims recognize this. In "Reinventing the Muslim Mind," a contemporary Indian leader of reformist thought, Rashid Shaz, states: "Those eager to make a new beginning must accept beforehand that the traditional mind will lead them to nowhere. A new Muslim mind is the minimum to start with. Without reactivating our brains we would even fall short of realising in full the nature and magnitude of our malaise."<sup>4</sup>

This book, then, is an effort to understand the journey that Sunni Islam took to “nowhere.” It may be the only way to make the journey back.

### Overview and Apologia

I propose to sketch briefly the early Muslim world and its first theological controversy, then to introduce the first fully developed school of theology, the Mu‘tazilites, then their opponents, the Ash‘arites, and then the pivotal figure of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). In the latter part of the book, I will suggest the profound consequences of the triumph of al-Ghazali and the Ash‘arites, including the extirpation of philosophy, and then trace the effects of this to modern-day behavior. This will include an examination of the susceptibility of Islam today to Islamism, which is driving Sunni Muslims back to nowhere. Throughout, I try to keep the crucial issue of the status of reason—and the effects of its decline—in the forefront.

Also, the purpose here is not to explicate the works of the great thinkers in Islamic philosophy. It would be an enormous task even to survey this subject matter, which has been well enough done in other places. Rather, I intend to suggest why these works, despite their brilliance, gained little if any purchase on the Sunni Muslim mind, then or now. We restrict ourselves to a broad outline of the major intellectual events in Sunni Muslim history that decisively formed today’s world. Some of the figures with whom we deal, such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, are still subjects of controversy as to what their real thinking might have been. Did they have esoteric teachings? The goal here is not to resolve such disputes but to point out the primary influence of their thinking as it has been generally felt and understood within Islam.

On a personal note, I would like to say that I am fully aware that I have embarked upon a difficult and sensitive subject. I will not be surprised by strong reactions to what is said here. I should like to be dissuaded of this book’s thesis, and to

## INTELLECTUAL SUICIDE

be convinced that the obstacles to reform are not as great as they seem. However, I am trying to understand the situation as it is and the reasons for it. I am simply offering the conclusions to which I have come after searching for years to make sense of what I have seen, experienced, and read. If there is a thesis that explains more of it than I have here, I welcome it. I reserve the right to learn more.

## *Chapter 8*

### THE SOURCES OF ISLAMISM

The other answer to al-Afghani's question about the decline of Islamic civilization had nothing to do with the loss of science or the need to catch up with the West. It understood the crisis as a rebuke from Allah because Muslims had not followed His way. Just as success is a validation of faith, failure is a personal rebuke. Did not Allah promise, "You shall be uppermost if you are believers" (3:139)? The corollary to this must be that, if you are not uppermost, you must not be believers. Within this theological viewpoint, defeat by a superior power must be interpreted as a judgment from Allah that Muslims have deviated from His path. This is the perspective that was seized upon by the Islamists.

A narrative of grievance and potential recovery exists throughout the Muslim world, but particularly among the Islamists, who are still in a state of shock over the abolition of the caliphate by Kemal Ataturk in 1924. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the caliphate was but a shell of itself. Nevertheless, its abandonment left some Muslims completely adrift. It was as if the Vatican had abjured its authority to represent the church. How could the end of the caliphate be explained? Its abolition called into existence the

## THE CLOSING OF THE MUSLIM MIND

first Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*, dedicated to its restoration. While most Muslims may not share in the Islamist mythology regarding the caliphate, which did not exist continuously from the time of Muhammad, they nonetheless do require an explanation for the decline of their civilization.

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

Similarly, Islamists try to focus the widely shared sense of grievance and humiliation in the Muslim world on the loss of the caliphate because they wish to restore it. Their explanation for the decline of their civilization is, as indicated above, a loss of faith. The solution to this problem is obviously not imitating the West, but restoring Muslim faith to a pristine condition, as defined by them. They, too, began looking for the internal enemy and then the external enemy. Osama bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, gives typical expression to this formulation in describing "the apostate domestic enemy and the

## THE SOURCES OF ISLAMISM

Jewish-crusader external enemy.”<sup>21</sup> It is here, at the heart of the effort to restore past glory, that the questions asked in the introduction reappear.

Are the Islamists of today something new or a resurgence of something from the past? How much of this is Islam and how much is Islamism? Is Islamism a deformation of Islam? If so, in what way and from where has it come? And why is Islam susceptible to this kind of deformation?

Quite some time ago, an answer to the first question was proffered by the famous British author Hilaire Belloc. In *The Great Heresies*, published in 1938, he predicted the resurgence of Islam in the following way: “Since religion is at the root of all political movements and changes and since we have here a very great religion physically paralysed but morally intensely alive, we are in the presence of an unstable equilibrium which cannot remain permanently unstable.”<sup>22</sup> A few pages later Belloc wrote: “That [Islamic] culture happens to have fallen back in material applications; there is no reason whatever why it should not learn its new lesson and become our equal in all those temporal things which now *alone* gives us our superiority over it—whereas in *Faith* we have fallen inferior to it.”<sup>23</sup>

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

As prescient as Belloc may seem, can one adequately understand what is happening today in the terms he suggested?

---

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

#### THE CLOSING OF THE MUSLIM MIND

The centuries-long expansion of Islam came from the center of an extraordinary dynamic that thrust out to the boundaries of its potential, but then slowly subsided into quiescence. As already stated, the Islamic world was jolted out of its several centuries of torpor only by intrusions from the West. By the early nineteenth century, the West had demonstrated such a decisive superiority over Islamic culture that Islam's defensive attempts to recover from its influences have been indelibly marked by the very things against which Muslims were reacting. To resist the West, they became, in a way, Western. As Raphael Patai pointed out in *The Arab Mind*, the very standards by which Muslims measure their own progress are Western. This is amply evident in the UN Arab Human Development Reports, written by Arabs themselves. In a final irony, the most rabid ideological reactions against this state of affairs in the Muslim world are also infused with Western ideology. Islamists practice a perverse kind of homeopathy which uses the very disease from which they are suffering to combat it, but with dosages that are lethal. Belloc did not foresee this.

Islamist authors cannot be accurately understood in the terms of Islam simply, but only within the perspective of the twentieth-century Western ideologies that they have assimilated, most especially those based on Nietzsche and Marx. (We shall shortly see how thorough the assimilation was.) The seminal thinkers in Islamism, like Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, were very well versed in Western philosophy and literature. Qutb went to the United States for two years of postgraduate studies (1949–50). He was completely repelled by what he saw as a materialist culture. For example, he thought that the way Americans cared for their lawns was a sign of materialism and that the parish dances he witnessed were examples of sexual degeneracy. His exposure to the West intensified his hatred of it. The solution to what he diagnosed as Western alienation was Islam. Islam could overcome the relativism and the moral degeneracy that he had observed. Islam would save the West as well as the East.

#### THE SOURCES OF ISLAMISM

In order to do this, Qutb said that Muslims must emulate the behavior of the Companions of the Prophet to prepare for the struggle ahead. But he used Leninist terms and means, espousing a "vanguard" of the faithful which would lead the restoration of the caliphate. (In fact, Qutb, though he despised Marxism, was the Muslim Brotherhood's liaison to the Communist Party in Egypt and to the Communist International.) Because of his opposition to the Egyptian government, Qutb was hanged by Nasser in 1966. He is said to have gone to the gallows smiling, leaving that iconic image to inspire his followers today.

The highly heterogeneous world of contemporary Islam stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Morocco to the southern Philippines. There are very few things that one can say about this world that are true in all these places. Of the forty-four predominantly Muslim countries in the world, twenty-four do not use Islamic law as their primary source of laws. While Muslims everywhere observe the five pillars of Islam, they are culturally very different in, say, Indonesia and the Arab world. However, this highly heterogeneous character is in danger of being homogenized. The engine for the homogenization is Qutb's Islamist ideology, which has demonstrated tremendous cross-cultural appeal. Qutb's writings are considered the new writ, along with those of Pakistani writer Maulana Maududi and Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Qutb's teachings are at the foundation of, for instance, the Justice and Prosperity Party (PKS), which is the fastest-growing and only dues-paying party in Indonesia (although it has suffered some recent setbacks), as well as the more explicitly violent Jemaah Islamiyah. The Hizb ut-Tahrir organization, which is banned in most Muslim countries, has had quite an impact in central Asia and western Europe. The foundation of its ideology is also Sayyid Qutb. The people at whom Hizb ut-Tahrir aims are the intelligentsia and the upper middle class across the Islamic world. Hizb ut-Tahrir does not explicitly advocate

## THE CLOSING OF THE MUSLIM MIND

violence and terrorism, but prepares the intellectual foundations for it by using Qutb's teachings. On the other hand, al-Qaeda, also spawned by Qutb's ideology, explicitly promotes violence in the fifty-some nations in which it has a presence. Qutb's brother, Muhammad, taught Osama bin Laden at Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Islamic Jihad in Palestine, another Qutb clone, advocates violence. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, translated substantial parts of Qutb's works into Farsi, demonstrating the impact of Qutb's thought across the Sunni-Shi'ite divide. In other words, this is not a local phenomenon. The cross-cultural appeal of this ideology reflects a deeper crisis within Islam itself. It is in its most exacerbated form in the Arab world, but it exists everywhere in the Muslim universe or *umma*.

Why is Qutb so popular and influential? There is a two-fold answer. Part of the explanation comes from the abiding sense of Muslim grievance and humiliation to which Qutb's ideology plays. This part stems from Islam itself, which takes as its model for success the Companions of the Prophet, who blazed the way to glory and empire. So, said Qutb, Muslims must remove the accretions of the ages and go back to that original community, model themselves on the Companions and prepare to do what they did—to retake the world, and to reestablish the caliphate. The instrument for doing this, depending on which Islamist you talk to, is a combination of persuasion (*darwa*) and *jihad*, both of which are grounded in traditional Islam, or simply *jihad*.

Qutb blamed the Jews in Istanbul for conspiring in the collapse of the caliphate (“The Jews have always been the prime movers in the war declared on all fronts against the advocates of Islamic revival throughout the world”),<sup>4</sup> and labeled impious Muslims as the internal enemy, who must be vanquished so that the infidel West could be confronted and overcome. This much of the program can be understood from Islam alone, without any contamination by Western ideology.

The rest of the appeal stems from the results of the ancient

struggle within Islam over the primacy of power versus the primacy of reason, which has been the subject of this book. As we have seen, the outcome of this contest decisively affected the character of the Islamic world in which Qutb could find such a ready audience for his ideology. The infection of Western millenarian ideological thought from Nietzsche and Marx would not have made Islamism the attraction it is unless Islamism was not also able to claim legitimacy by drawing upon something within the traditions of Islam itself. For this, Islamist thinkers selectively chose one, albeit a primary one, of the many theological and philosophical traditions within Islam's rich history. The nexus between this school of thought and Western totalitarian ideology was the primacy of will.

### The Totalitarian Connection

The Ash'arite demotion of reason at the theological level is Islamism's connection with modern secular ideology and its denigration of reason, and the subsequent celebration of the use of force. Modern Western ideology also asserts that the primary constituent of reality is will. This is at the heart of Nietzsche, of course, and his analysis of Socrates and Greek philosophy. Philosophy is simply a rationalization for an assertion of the will, the will to dominate, the will to power. Nietzsche set up a metaphysical project to make everything the object of the will, which would then transform it. The instrument of pure will is force. The political vulgarization of this project was the Nazi Party. (As Hans Friedrich Blunk, president of the Reich's Chamber of Literature, 1933–35, put it: "This government [was] born out of opposition to rationalism.") The same demotion of reason took place in Marxism-Leninism. In *The German Ideology*, Marx said that reason is an excrescence of material forces.<sup>5</sup> It has no legitimacy. One does not argue with man; one does not persuade people. In order to change humanity, one must get hold of all the means of production, alter them, and then change man's thinking through force.

## THE CLOSING OF THE MUSLIM MIND

Ineluctably, if will and power are the primary constituents of reality, one will, in a series of deductive steps, conclude to a totalitarian regime. There is no other way out of it. The curious thing is that it does not matter whether one's view of reality as pure will has its origin in a deformed theology or in a totally secular ideology, such as Hegel's or Hobbes's; the political consequences are the same. As Father James Schall has shown, the notion of pure will as the basis of reality results in tyrannical rule. Disordered will, unfettered by right reason, is *the* political problem.

As mentioned earlier, when facing the challenge from the West, many Muslims sought to imitate it. Why, of all things, did they choose as their models the worst of what the West had to offer, fascism and communism? Why, with few exceptions, did they not try to imitate a constitutional democratic order? In *The Middle East*, Bernard Lewis suggests it was because these ideologies were anti-Western and anti-Christian, but also because "the ideologies and social strategies that were being offered corresponded in many ways much more closely to both the realities and the traditions of the region."<sup>6</sup> However, Lewis does not spell out what that correspondence is, beyond saying the West is "individualistic" in orientation and the Middle East "collective." In *The Closed Circle*, David Pryce-Jones gets closer by suggesting that "Nazism and Arab power challenging had in common the belief that life is an unending struggle in which the victor works his will upon the loser by virtue of his victory."<sup>7</sup> The fuller answer is that they were naturally drawn to fascism and communism as more compatible with what they already believed because these models are based upon the primacy of the will and the denigration of reason. A political order that presumes the primacy of reason did not appeal. This natural affinity helps explain the easy passage to Islamism of leftist nationalists and communists like prominent Egyptian writer Dr. Mustafa Mahmud and well-known Islamist Shi'ite writer Samih Atef El-Zein.

### Islamism as Ideology

Neither communism nor fascism has worked for the Arabs—because they have not worked for anyone—but the Islamists have ingested their totalitarian programs and mixed them with their Ash'arite interpretation of Islam. That is why one can compare the features of these ideologies and even some of the language they use almost exactly. As Maulana Maududi wrote, "In reality Islam is a revolutionary ideology and programme which seeks to alter the social order of the whole world and rebuild it in conformity with its own tenets and ideals. 'Muslim' is the title of that International Revolutionary Party organized by Islam to carry into effect its revolutionary programme. And 'Jihad' refers to that revolutionary struggle and utmost exertion which the Islamic Party brings into play to achieve this objective."<sup>8</sup> With changing only two words, "Islam" and "Muslim," to either "Nazism" or "communism," and then rereading the sentence above, one will immediately see the nearly complete ideological affinity among them, as no other word changes are necessary to represent the Nazi or communist revolutionary points of view. This can be done with a number of Maududi's statements. For instance, "Islam wishes to destroy all States and Governments anywhere on the face of the earth which are opposed to the ideology and programme of Islam regardless of the country or the Nation which rules it. The purpose of Islam is to set up a State on the basis of its own ideology and programme, regardless of which Nation assumes the role of the standard bearer of Islam or the rule of which nation is undermined in the process of the establishment of an ideological Islamic State."<sup>9</sup> Statements like these are inconceivable without the influence of Western totalitarianism.

This is evident, as well, in Qutb's description of Islam as an "emancipatory movement" and "an active revolutionary creed."<sup>10</sup> Islamism is inevitably on the march, proclaims Sudan's Hasan al-Turabi, because, much as communism used

#### THE CLOSING OF THE MUSLIM MIND

to be, "it's a wave of history." This is familiar rhetoric, but not from Islam.

Islamism definitely has a new element in it. Modern radical Islamism and twentieth-century Western totalitarian movements are not simply akin, moving in parallel to each other. There was a good deal of ideological cross-pollination, and they had real working connections. This is not news in respect to Nazism and Hitler's mufti, Amin al-Husayni, but such relations also existed with the Soviet Union, as outlined in Laurent Murawiec's book *The Mind of Fihad*.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Qutb said all liberation movements were welcome to his revolution: "The Islamic doctrine adopts all struggles of liberation in the world and supports them in every place."<sup>12</sup>

Like twentieth-century Western ideologies, Islamism places the burden of salvation upon politics, a total politics that, only through its control of every aspect of life, can bring about their version of God's kingdom on earth. Islamism is not a religion in the traditional sense. Most religions, in fact all monotheistic ones, put before man a revelation from God that is similar in certain essential respects. The revelation contains a moral code by which man is expected to live if he wishes to achieve eternal life in paradise. Paradise is located in the hereafter—never on this earth. So is the hell to which man will be sent if he is disobedient. The terrestrial and the transcendent are distinct—the city of man and the city of God, as St. Augustine put it. Life here is a test. The ultimate resolution of the problem of justice is not in this vale of tears, but before the throne of God in the next world. Man's ultimate destiny is in the transcendent. This general view is shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all of which see perfect justice as being established by God's final judgment.

Islamism is an ideology in the classic sense in that it offers, or rather insists upon, an alternative "reality"—one that collapses the separate realms of the divine and the human, and arrogates to itself the means to achieve perfect justice here in

this world or, as Qutb said, “to abolish all injustice from the earth.”<sup>13</sup> This notion of the inner perfectibility of history—the achievement of perfect justice here—is the very heart of ideology, whether sacred or profane. It places alongside reality its false version and insists that reality conform to its demands. Its adherents live in the magical world of this second reality and obey its laws. They may seem to live and move in the realm of the real world, but they are already transposed into the second, false reality. When they behave according to its laws—such as in slaughtering innocent people without remorse—others are surprised and disturbed because they do not know the contours of this second reality, which has just been so shockingly imposed on them.

Jessica Stern, the author of *Terror in the Name of God*, reflected the puzzlement that initially strikes almost everyone encountering Islamist terrorism until they come to understand its ideology as a pseudoreligion rather than as a political movement. She writes: “I have come to see that apocalyptic violence intended to ‘cleanse’ the world of ‘impurities’ can create a transcendent state. All the terrorist groups examined in this book believe—or at least started out believing—that they are creating a more perfect world. From their perspective, they are purifying the world of injustice, cruelty, and all that is anti-human. When I began this project, I could not understand why the killers I met seemed spiritually intoxicated. Now, I think I understand. They seem that way because they are.”<sup>14</sup> The joint commissioner of the Mumbai police, Rakesh Maria, said of the captured terrorist Muhammad Ajmal Kasab, the only surviving perpetrator of the 2008 mass murder in Mumbai, India, “He was led to believe that he was doing something holy.”<sup>15</sup>

With scathing sarcasm, Abdelwahab Meddeb, the Tunisian reformist, said of Islamist terrorists, “No criminal is more despicable than one who not only fails to feel any guilt after [committing] his crime, but also harbors the illusion that this [crime] will bring him . . . divine reward. This conversion of bad

#### THE CLOSING OF THE MUSLIM MIND

into good not only spares him guilt, but also turns an unhappy person into a happy soul."<sup>16</sup>

Thus, terrorism is not simply terror—some people doing terrible things on the spur of the moment. It is murder advanced to the level of a *moral* principle, which is then institutionalized in an organization—a cell, a party, or a state—as its animating principle. It is the rationalization that allows, as Meddeb said, “the conversion of bad into good,” on which the organization is based. In order to act, terrorists must first firmly believe that their violence is moral or “holy,” that it will achieve some higher good. Therefore, the very first thing one must understand is the ideology incarnated in the terrorist organization that allows terrorists to do this; it is the source of their moral legitimacy. Without it, they or their organization cannot exist. It is the “ism” in terrorism. In the case of radical *Islamism*, already mentioned, the trinity of thinkers behind the ideology is Sayyid Qutb, Hassan al-Banna, and Maulana Maududi.

The means for the transformation of reality into the alternative reality is, as in all ideologies, total control based upon absolute power, exercised to annihilate the old order. Qutb said that “only a radical transformation with the complete destruction of old systems could guarantee the flourishing of the ideal society under God’s suzerainty.”<sup>17</sup> Maududi stated that Islam is a “comprehensive system which envisages to annihilate all tyrannical and evil systems in the world and enforces its own programme of reform which it deems best for the well-being of mankind.”<sup>18</sup>

While most ideologies are secular attempts to displace religion as the main obstacle to fulfillment, Islamism is based upon a deformed theology that nonetheless shares in the classical ideological conflation of heaven and earth into one realm. It is exactly in these terms that its chief ideologue, Sayyid Qutb, spoke: “Islam chose to unite earth and heaven in a single system.”<sup>19</sup> This means that “the patent purpose of establishing God’s law on earth is not merely an action for the sake of

the next world. For this world and the next world are but two complementary stages. . . . Harmonizing with the divine law does not mean that man's happiness is postponed to the next life, rather it makes it real and attainable in the first of the two stages."<sup>20</sup> In other words, transcendent ends will be achieved by earthly means, as Qutb said, "to reestablish the Kingdom of God upon earth"<sup>21</sup> or "to create a new world."<sup>22</sup> This is obviously not a political objective but a metaphysical one. Its achievement will bring about a condition, predicted Qutb, which sounds eerily similar to that proclaimed by Marx for his classless society: "Universal adoption of the Divine law would automatically mean man's complete emancipation from all forms of enslavement."<sup>23</sup> To reach this goal, announced Maududi, "Islam wants the whole earth and does not content itself with only a part thereof. It wants and requires the entire inhabited world."<sup>24</sup>

It should be no surprise that, in its political manifestation, Qutb's "single system" duplicates the features of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century's secular ideologies and of Socrates' proto-totalitarian city in Plato's *Republic*. In *The Republic*, Socrates showed the limits of the political by transposing the order of the soul into the political order and letting us see, in the form of an imaginary state, what such a transposition would mean. He asked, in effect: If we tried to realize politically a perfect state according to the order of the soul, what would we get? The answer was: the garrison state, the destruction of the family, regimentation, the abolition of the private, eugenics, state education, etc. In other words, the political order cannot satisfy the highest needs of man. Politics cannot meet the goal of the human soul, for it cannot achieve perfect justice; if it is made the vehicle for doing so, it will end in a horrendous tyranny. This is the profound error into which both the Western totalitarians and the Islamists fell.

Therefore, it is only logical that "in such a state," as described by Qutb's ideological soul mate, Maulana Maududi, "no one can regard any field of his affairs as personal and

private. Considered from this aspect the Islamic state bears a kind of resemblance to the Fascist and Communist states.”<sup>25</sup> It is, he remarked, “the very antithesis of secular Western democracy.” In a line worthy of Robespierre, Sayyid Qutb said that a “just dictatorship” would “grant political liberties to the virtuous alone.”<sup>26</sup> Hassan al-Banna, whose bedside reading was al-Ghazali, also regarded the Soviet Union under Stalin as a model of a successful one-party system.

So long as some part of the world eludes the control of the Islamist revolutionary, conflict continues—with the *dar al-harb* (the abode of war)—just as perpetual revolution was proclaimed by Marxists until the complete overthrow of the bourgeois order or by the Nazis until the eradication or enslavement of inferior races. Since total control is never achieved, an excuse is always available for why the kingdom has not arrived, just as it was with the ever-receding prospects of a classless society for the Marxists. The excuse for not having achieved the utopia of God’s kingdom on earth, or of the Thousand-Year Reich, or of the classless society, is always the same, and roughly analogous: An infidel has escaped our grasp, a Jew has escaped, or a capitalist has eluded us. Thus, paradise is forever postponed, and the war continues as part of a permanent revolution. As Qutb proclaimed, “This struggle is not a temporary phase but a perpetual and permanent war.”<sup>27</sup> And Hassan al-Banna said, “What I mean with jihad is the duty that will last until the Day of Resurrection.”<sup>28</sup>

### The Foundation of Hatred

The fuel for the permanent war is the same for Islamism as it was for Marxism-Leninism and Nazism; it is hatred. Only the object of hatred changes—from race hatred in Nazism and class hatred in communism to hatred of the infidel in radical Islamism, to include any Muslim who does not conform to its version of Islam. “We must hate,” Lenin counseled; “hatred is the basis of communism.”<sup>29</sup> Bin Laden’s parallel doctrine is

equally explicit: "As to the relationship between Muslims and infidels, this is summarized by the Most High's Word: 'We [Muslims] renounce you [non-Muslims]. Enmity and hate shall forever reign between us—till you believe in God alone' [Qur'an 60:4]. So there is an enmity, evidenced by fierce hostility from the heart. . . . If the hate at any time extinguishes from the heart, this is great apostasy! . . . Battle, animosity, and hatred—directed from the Muslim to the infidel—is the foundation of our religion."<sup>30</sup>

The most successful megaphone for this message today is the Internet, which radical Islamists use to create what Dr. Jerr-old M. Post, a professor of psychiatry, political psychology, and international affairs at George Washington University, calls "a virtual community of hatred."<sup>31</sup>

### The Evil of Democracy

As already intimated by Maududi, democracy is antithetical to the Islamist project, as the primacy of reason is antithetical to the primacy of power. The antirational view not only makes democratic, constitutional order superfluous, it also renders it inimical to Islamists as the form of blasphemy they fear the most. Al-Qaeda author Yussuf al-Ayyeri (killed in a gun battle in Riyadh, June 2003) wrote in his last book, *The Future of Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula after the Fall of Baghdad*: "It is not the American war machine that should be of the utmost concern to Muslims. What threatens the future of Islam, in fact its very survival, is American Democracy."<sup>32</sup> Because democracies base their political order on reason and free will, and leave in play questions radical Islamists believe have been definitively settled by revelation, radical Islamists regard democracies as their natural and fatal enemies. Man-made law is a form of *shirk* in that its purported authority impinges upon that of the divine law that has already been prescribed for every situation. It places man's laws on the level of God's. Thus it appears to divinize man and is seen not so much as a form of political order but as

a competing, false religion. This is why Sayyid Qutb declared in *Milestones*, “Whoever says that legislation is the right of the people is not a Muslim.”<sup>33</sup>

In his book *Democracy: A Religion!*, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the Palestinian-Jordanian theologian, confirms Qutb’s view that “democracy is a religion but it is not Allah’s religion.” Thus, as a religious obligation, Muslims must “destroy those who follow democracy, and we must take their followers as enemies—hate them and wage a great jihad against them.”<sup>34</sup>

The Indonesian Islamist cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, who was released from prison in July 2006 after having been charged with complicity in the Bali terror attacks of 2002, echoes Qutb: “There is no democracy in Islam, so do not try to interpret the Qu’ran and turn Islam into a democracy to suit your needs. God’s law comes first. It is not up to the will of the people to decide what is right and how to live. Rather the will of the people have [*sic*] to be bent to suit the will of God. It is not democracy that we want, but Allah-cracy! The principles of Islam cannot be altered and there is no democracy in Islam or nonsense like ‘democratic Islam.’ . . . Democracy is *shirk* [blasphemy] and *haram* [forbidden].”<sup>35</sup>

Al-Qaeda spokesman Suleiman Abu Gheith said, “America is the head of heresy in our modern world, and it leads an infidel democratic regime that is based upon separation of religion and state and on ruling the people by the people via legislating laws that contradict the way of Allah and permit what Allah has prohibited.”<sup>36</sup> For radical Islamists, as we have seen, democracy itself is a blasphemous act of impiety and must be destroyed.

Therefore, as Islamic cleric Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman (the “blind sheikh”) exhorted, “Muslims everywhere [should] dismember [the American] nation, tear them apart, ruin their economy, provoke their corporations, destroy their embassies, attack their interests, sink their ships, . . . shoot down their planes, [and] kill them on land, at sea, and in the air. Kill them wherever you find them.”<sup>37</sup>

## THE SOURCES OF ISLAMISM

It is important to understand that the radical Islamist desire to destroy the United States, as the leader of the democratic West, is not simply a political goal but also a metaphysical requirement for the transformation of reality. The United States must be destroyed because “America is evil in its essence (*Amreeka sbarrun mutlaq*),” as pronounced by Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah of Hezbollah.<sup>38</sup> “We are not fighting so that you will offer us something,” warned Hussein Massawi, a former Hezbollah leader. “We are fighting to eliminate you.”<sup>39</sup> “The real matter,” announced Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, “is the extinction of America. And, God willing, it will fall to the ground.”<sup>40</sup>

Within Islamism, this destruction is as metaphysically necessary as was the elimination of the bourgeoisie for the Marxists and inferior races for the Nazis for their respective millenarian projects. Like these twentieth-century totalitarians, radical Islamists use their view of reality to dehumanize large portions of mankind, justifying their slaughter—albeit in their case as “infidels,” rather than as non-Aryans or bourgeoisie.

In this respect, radical Islamism is a form of neobarbarism. Civilization is defined by the act of recognizing another person as a human being. The definition of a barbarian is someone who cannot perform this act—often because he has either come from or chosen a universe of meaning that does not contain the term *human being*. It is hard to overstate the catastrophe resulting from this incapacity or refusal. If one is unable to recognize another person as a human being, then one does not know the difference between the human and the animal, or the human and the divine. Confusion over these matters leads to slavery, human sacrifice, cannibalism, genocide, and other horrors. Through Islamism, as through communism or Nazism, one loses one’s ability to recognize another person as a human being. Like its totalitarian predecessors, Islamism is an engine of dehumanization—of turning other people into animals or less. In the name of this dark, neotribal god, one becomes a barbarian.

### The Necessity of Force: Terrorism as a Moral Obligation

Like both the communists and the Nazis, Islamists also see force as *necessary* to effect the transformation that they desire. Reason is impotent; therefore, force is the only instrument for fundamental change. A God without reason sets the theological foundations for violence. There are multiple examples of this doctrine of force. Bin Laden's spiritual mentor, Abdullah 'Azzam, said that "those who think that they can change reality, or change societies, without blood sacrifices and wounds . . . do not understand the essence of our religion." The price is high: "Glory does not build its lofty edifice except with skulls. Honour and respect cannot be established except on a foundation of cripples and corpses."<sup>41</sup> His cry was "jihad and the rifle alone: no negotiation, no conferences, and no dialogue."<sup>42</sup> Bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, announced, "Reform can only take place through Jihad for the sake of Allah, and any call for reform that is not through Jihad is doomed to death and failure. We must understand the nature of the battle and conflict."<sup>43</sup>

When a chastened former leader of Egyptian al-Jihad, Kamal el-Said Habib, says in way of criticism that "violence replaced politics as a means of interaction" in the behavior of Egyptian jihadists, he does so without seeming to realize that such violence is the *logical* working out in action of the premises on which jihadist "theology" is based.<sup>44</sup>

In a 1998 interview, Muhammad Khan—the amir of Lashkar-e Taiba, a group now notorious for sponsoring the terrorist attack in Mumbai, India—proclaimed this necessary connection with violence: "When change comes it will come when those opposing Islam will be crushed." "By force?" asked the interviewer. "Yes," responded the amir, "that is a must."<sup>45</sup> Indonesian Islamist Abu Bakar Bashir said, "The struggle for Islam can only come through crisis and confrontation. . . . Remember

## THE SOURCES OF ISLAMISM

that jihad is what brought Islam to power and built our community. There can be no Islam without jihad."<sup>46</sup>

On November 30, 2005, an al-Qaeda tape asked rhetorically, "How can we impose this religion? Can we do that through peace? Can we do it through logic? Can we do it by suggestions and ballots?" Then the voice answered: "The only way we can do it is by the sword." Another al-Qaeda source, showing al-Qaeda's lineage to the medieval antirationalists, announces its call for violence in direct opposition to philosophy: "The confrontation that we are calling for with the apostate regimes does not know Socratic debates, Platonic ideals, nor Aristotelian diplomacy. But it knows the dialogue of bullets, the ideals of assassination, bombing, and destruction, and the diplomacy of the cannon and machine-gun."<sup>47</sup>

This view is not exclusive to Sunnis. Ayatollah Khomeini said: "Whatever good there is exists thanks to the sword and in the shadow of the sword. People cannot be made obedient except with the sword. The sword is the key to Paradise." In a speech in December 1984, he spoke of the benefits of killing infidels as a service to the infidels themselves. He said, "War is a blessing for the world and for every nation. It is Allah himself who commands men to wage war and to kill."<sup>48</sup> And cleric Morteza Muthhari said, "The factor of violence is necessary. . . . There is no inhibition against the use of violence."<sup>49</sup>

Radical Islamists translate their version of God's omnipotence into a politics of unlimited power. As God's instruments, they are channels for this power.\* The "vanguard" of God takes the place of God somewhat as the vanguard of the proletariat took the place of the proletariat in Marxism-Leninism, and produces what then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger called, in reference to liberation theology, "a totalitarianism that practices an atheistic sort of adoration ready to sacrifice all humanness

---

\* There are obvious precedents in Islam to this notion. "I rule with the omnipotence of God," announced Caliph Mu'awiya's adopted brother, Ziyad, to the people when he was appointed governor in Basra.

## THE CLOSING OF THE MUSLIM MIND

to its false god.”<sup>50</sup> In his 1998 *fatwa*, Osama bin Laden gave a good example of this transference of divine authority in his issuance of the ruling “to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military” by claiming it was “Allah’s order to kill the Americans.” Once the primacy of force is posited, terrorism becomes the next logical step to power, as it did in Nazism and Marxism-Leninism. This is what led Osama bin Laden to embrace the astonishing statement of his spiritual godfather, Abdullah ‘Azzam, which Osama quoted in the November 2001 video, released after 9/11: “Terrorism is an obligation in Allah’s religion.”<sup>51</sup> This can be true—that violence in spreading faith is an *obligation*—only if God is without reason and, therefore, acting unreasonably is not against His nature.

‘Azzam’s announcement is news to most Muslims, who find terrorism morally repugnant and alien to Islam’s core teachings, especially in regard to suicide killings of civilians. Islamism within Islam may be roughly analogous to the development of liberation theology within Christianity. Especially in Latin America, Catholicism was infected with Marxist ideology by way of Christianity’s preferential option for the poor. According to liberation theology, it is not enough to help the poor through charity. One must root out the institutions that purportedly cause poverty. This includes property and other aspects of capitalism. Within this teaching, the Christian part was soon subsumed by the Marxist part and its promotion of the necessity of violence. Priests dropped their rosaries, picked up machine guns and grenades, and joined the revolution. In the ensuing struggle against this totalitarian infestation, the pope, John Paul II, won. In an exhortation that could have come from a liberation theologian, Muhammad Navab-Safavi called on his fellow Muslims: “Throw away your worry beads and buy a gun. For worry beads keep you silent, while guns silence the enemies of Islam.”<sup>52</sup> Islam does not have a figure of authority corresponding to the pope who could definitively delegitimize Islamism, and it is uncertain, if there were such a figure, that he

## THE SOURCES OF ISLAMISM

would do so, since Islamism has a claim to legitimacy despite its adulteration by Western ideology.

The problem today is that the side of reason in Islam lost, and therefore its natural antibodies to this totalitarian infection are weak. What we are witnessing today are the ultimate consequences of the rejection of human reason and the loss of causality as they are played out across the Muslim world in the dysfunctional culture engendered by them. It is not that the side of reason is not still there. As Fatima Mernissi says so poignantly, "The fact that the rationalist, humanistic tradition was rejected by despotic politicians does not mean that it doesn't exist. Having an arm amputated is not the same as being born with an arm missing. Studies of amputees show that the amputated member remains present in the person's mind. The more our rational faculty is suppressed, the more obsessed we are by it."<sup>53</sup>

There are some extraordinarily intelligent Muslim scholars who would like to see something like a neo-Mu'tazilite movement within Islam, a restoration of the primacy of reason so that they can reopen the doors to *ijtihad* and develop some kind of natural-law foundation for humane, political, constitutional rule. In fact, Indonesian scholar Harun Nasution (1919–1998) was willing to wear the neo-Mu'tazilite label openly, despite the imprecation of heresy that it carried. He explicitly called for the recognition of natural law and opposed Ash'arite occasionalism and determinism as inimical to social, economic, and political progress. He insisted on man's free will and accountability.<sup>54</sup> Reformist Tunisian-born thinker Latif Lakhdar calls for a revival of "Mu'atazila and philosophical thought that subjected the holy writings on which the religion is based to interpretation by the human mind."<sup>55</sup> He recommends that "open religious rationalism—subjecting the religious text to rational investigation and research—ought to become the core of the aspired religious education in the Arab-Islamic region, since it is absurd to believe the text and deny reality."<sup>56</sup>

## THE CLOSING OF THE MUSLIM MIND

In certain if not most places in the Islamic world, however, if one dares to suggest that the Qur'an is not coeternal with Allah, one had better have protection. In Egypt, Dr. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, an assistant professor of Arabic at the University of Cairo, provoked an uproar for suggesting that the Qur'an was a partially human product because language is a human convention. Appealing to the Mu'tazilites, he said, "The Mu'tazilites drew from the Qur'anic text on the assumption that it was a created action and not the eternal verbal utterance of God. In other words, the relation between the signifier and the signified exists only by human convention; there is nothing divine in this relationship. They endeavoured to build a bridge between the divine word and human reason. That is why they maintained that the divine word was a fact which adjusted itself to human language in order to ensure well-being for mankind. They insisted that language was the product of man and that the divine word respected the rules and forms of human language."<sup>57</sup> For this, he was brought to trial for apostasy. On June 14, 1995, the Appeals Court of Second Degree in Egypt ruled that Dr. Abu Zayd was a *kafir* (unbeliever). The consequence of this would have been a forced divorce from his wife, as Muslim women are not allowed to be married to non-Muslim men. But Dr. Abu Zayd and his wife fled to Europe. Few voices were raised in his defense.<sup>58</sup> Safely in exile, he recently stated that "the Islamic reformation started as early as the 19th century and, of course, it has even earlier roots as well. One important school of Koranic scholarship, Mutazilism, held 1,000 years ago that the Koran need not be interpreted literally, and even today Iranian scholars are surprisingly open to critical scholarship and interpretations."<sup>59</sup>

However, exile was also the fate of an Iranian, Abdolkarim Soroush. Father Samir Khalil Samir related that "a young Iranian Muslim, with a degree in Islamic studies, told me the other day: 'We can no longer think of the Qur'an as directly dictated by God to Mohammad through the angel Gabriel. It

#### THE SOURCES OF ISLAMISM

must be interpreted. Unfortunately, in today's Islam there is not much freedom: a few decades ago, one of our intellectuals, Abdolkarim Soroush was removed from university teaching for having taught such things. [Soroush was physically assaulted on several occasions.] In the end, to be able to live and express himself, he had to emigrate to Europe."<sup>60</sup> Many of the neo-Mu'tazilites, the ones who want to resuscitate the great tradition of Muslim rational theology and philosophy, are in the West as well.

Unfortunately, as Bassim Tibi has warned, "Those intellectually significant Muslims who . . . still hope to apply reason to Islamic reform, had better do so in their Western exile, be it Paris or London or Washington. Their ideas are discussed in Scandinavia, but not in the Islamic world."<sup>61</sup> Even in Europe, such Muslims have problems and have to confront the dangers of being labeled apostates. For several years in Germany, Tibi himself required armed bodyguards provided by the German state to protect him from assassination. Taj Hargey, a British imam, laments that "iconoclastic thinkers, liberals, and non-conformists who dare to challenge this self-assumed religious authority in Islam by presenting a rational or alternative interpretations of their faith are invariably branded as apostates, heretics, and non-believers."<sup>62</sup>