

Chapter 9

Conservative Ecumenism: Politically Incorrect Meditations on Islam and the West

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Overview

These are not propitious times to attempt to comment objectively on relations between Islam and the West.¹ In the United States, Islam has come to be widely identified with terrorism and frequently is assumed to constitute a surrogate, perhaps in tandem with Confucian China, for the late USSR as an exigent geostrategic threat. In the Muslim world, a small minority of extremists disfigure the third of the three monotheistic revelations by invoking putative religious sanctions for actions that are baldly criminal. Terrorism by individuals who call themselves Muslims constitutes first and foremost a direct attack on the tolerance, compassion, and mercy that historically have characterised Islam both as creed and practice.² However, extremism is not limited to the Arab Middle East, or indeed to the Muslim world. In fact, it may well be that since 11 September 2001, it is in the United States itself where ideological extremism may have become most obvious, and where obstacles to understanding between civilisations have now assumed their most intimidating forms.

In recent years, a powerful political alliance has emerged between Southern Baptist and other Christian fundamentalists on the one hand, and former Cold Warriors and neo-conservatives on the other. For theological reasons in the first case³ and ideological and geostrategic reasons in the second, a view of Islam is now promoted in the United States that bears little resemblance to the faith as it is understood by the enormous majority of the world's Muslims. One consequence of this new reality is that those few American conservatives and cultural traditionalists committed to interfaith understanding and cooperation among civilisations face unprecedented difficulties in their labours. In this chapter, an argument will be made that Islam should be analysed within a radically different framework from that commonly adopted by many "Christian" websites and radio broadcasts, and by such neo-conservative organs of opinion as the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Weekly Standard*, and *National Review*.

But the problem is not restricted to an inaccurate understanding of what Islam is and what it advocates. Today, there exists in the United States – and

especially in conservative circles – widespread amnesia concerning what conservatism itself once was, and near total incomprehension of how traditional American conservatism has been transformed into a radical and aggressively interventionist Wilsonianism. This second misunderstanding may be fully as important as the first. The essay at hand gives substantial attention to both misunderstandings of Islam, on the one hand, and culturally traditionalist conservative dissent from American foreign policy, on the other.

In fact, the hard reality now is that, in both the West and the Muslim world, religions and civilisations have become increasingly reified.⁴ Before 9/11, little effort was being devoted to acquiring understanding of supposedly homogeneous and inimical “Others”. But the situation now is immeasurably worse. Wholesale vituperation of Islam and Arabs now seems the order of the day, and explanations or analyses are all too often dismissed as apologies. Nevertheless, the truth remains that unless Christians and Muslims begin to hear each other when they whisper prayers to their common God, they indeed are likely to meet on ever more battlefields around the world. Clearly, there is now a need to rethink the stereotypes that today are pushing the children of Abraham ever more widely apart.⁵

In addition to proposing new paradigms for both Westerners and Muslims to employ in thinking about Islam, this essay focuses on the reinterpretation or revival of such key Islamic concepts as *jihad* and *hirabah* that is now exemplified by an increasing number of Muslim intellectuals. It also makes the point that Jihad, as currently propagated by assorted Islamist extremist groups, is simply illegal according to traditional Islamic criteria. In addition, this chapter discusses one conservative ecumenical initiative now under way that suggests the possibility of a better future for all of the children of Abraham. This initiative is intended to enable Western and Muslim cultural traditionalists to move deeper into the new century as companions rather than as enemies. Above all, the subtext of this essay is that every possible effort should be made to avoid a war of civilisations, in the interests of all mankind.⁶

Mediterranean Commonalities

Muslims understand their faith as pure and unadulterated Abrahamic monotheism, purged of the textual deformations and theological misunderstandings that they believe have compromised Judaism and Christianity. For some years after he began his mission in 610 CE, the prophet Muhammad had no idea that he would in fact establish a new and separate Abrahamic monotheism. Rather, he understood his charge to be the same as that given to the many prophets who had come before him. Muhammad originally conceived his mission to be that very ancient, Semitic one of calling upon a fallen humankind to repent, and discover the love and mercy of what in Arabic is al-Lah, the one and only God.

Christianity and Islam share a vast reservoir of faith. Revelations to Muhammad included important portions of Christian scripture that were duly incorporated into the Qur’an. The specific vehicle for revelation to Muhammad

was the Archangel Gabriel. In fact, Gabriel is the messenger through whom Muslims believe that God spoke to all of His prophets, from Abraham to Jesus Christ. Concerning Jesus, the Qur'an states that he is "worthy of regard in this world and the hereafter, and is one of those drawn nigh to God" (3:44). Concerning the crucifixion, it says: "O Jesus! I will cause you to die and exalt you in my presence and clear you of those who disbelieve and make those who follow you above those who disbelieve to the Day of Resurrection" (3:54). The Virgin Mary is also a major figure in the Qur'an, and is depicted as the God-touched mother of one of the very greatest of the prophets. Examples of this sort could be multiplied. For present purposes, it is sufficient to summarise the religious similarities between Christianity and Islam by citing the remarks of Imam Muhammad Abd al-Raouf: Muslims believe in the "Christian Gospel, the Christian Prophet [Jesus Christ], his twelve Apostles, his mother's purity, and his miraculous birth ... Above all, [they] share a belief in ... [a] common God." Most bluntly put, without Judaism and Christianity having preceded it, Islam as revealed and practised would simply be inconceivable.

It may be especially important for Westerners to understand that the Qur'an specifically forbids any imposition of Islam on non-Muslims by force.⁷ The Qur'an endorses free will, as represented by the freedom it accords each individual to choose whether to believe or not to believe. On the subject of religious tolerance, the Qur'an is categorical: "There shall be no compulsion," it states, "in matters of faith" (2:256). "The truth is from your Lord," the Qur'an states, "so let him who pleases believe; and let him who pleases disbelieve" (18:29). The Qur'an states elsewhere: "Say: O Mankind! Indeed there has come to you the truth from your Lord. Whosoever, therefore, chooses to follow the Right Path, follows it but for his own good, and whosoever chooses to go astray, goes astray but to his own hurt" (10:108). To the degree to which Muslims or self-proclaimed Islamic regimes have in fact violated such injunctions prescribing tolerance and religious pluralism, they have grossly transgressed against the most fundamental tenets of Islam itself.⁸

One should always remember that Islam was revealed and first adopted within the same Semitic ethos and general geographic location as were Judaism and Christianity. Like them, Islam was born not far from the Mediterranean and, like the prior Abrahamic revelations, has been profoundly shaped over 1400 years by its interactions with the other monotheistic faiths that ring that sea. Islam should be understood religiously, and Arab Islam culturally, as part of the same Mediterranean ecumene that has also profoundly shaped Judaism and Christianity.⁹ The "West" (despite current headlines) does not stop at the Bosphorus,¹⁰ but in fact at the Indus.

It is worthy of note that both China and India consider the West to constitute one civilisational block derived from three constituent parts: Byzantium, Europe, and the world of Mediterranean Islam. For the very different civilisations located to its east, Western civilisation is most emphatically not made up only of Europe and North America but consists also of both Arab Christianity and the Arab Muslim world. The distinguished Roman Catholic historian and economist Leonard Liggio has amplified this point:

When Islam arose, it adopted (especially in Syria) the Hellenistic culture which Byzantium and Europe were rejecting. Islam carried logic, philosophy and science beyond the Hellenistic legacy. [During the Middle Ages] Islam passed on the classical intellectual tradition to Europe . . . Europe built on the shoulders of the Islamic part of that tradition. Similarly, Islam built on the capitalism and commerce of the Hellenistic tradition and for centuries was far ahead of Byzantium and Europe. Later, Islam was burdened by the domination of Ottoman rule. In a sense, Islam became like Byzantium – one large empire – rather than the European continuity of the Islamic tradition of many different political centres.¹¹

I would suggest that the civilisation of the contemporary West might more accurately be designated as “Abrahamic” rather than “Judeo-Christian”. The latter term excludes Islam from the values that Jews and Christians are presumed to share. In that sense, Judeo-Christian is not only inaccurate but may in fact contribute to polarisation between the West and a reinforcement of the stereotype of an alien and homogeneous Muslim enemy. The fact is that the term Judeo-Christian is a category invented and widely disseminated only during the past four decades. As late as the 1950s, the operative term for describing the heritage of the West was “Greco-Roman”. Precisely how and why “Judeo-Christian” came to replace “Greco-Roman” is a story awaiting an author.¹² With more than 6 million Muslims now in the United States, as against 5.6 million Jews, and major immigrant Muslim communities in Western Europe, the time may be ripe to rethink how most accurately to describe civilisations and categorise the monotheistic faiths. Most important to keep clearly in mind is that Islam is today fully in and of the West, just as the West has become in and of Islam.

American Conservative Dissenters from the Ideology of Crusade: Peter Kreeft and Russell A. Kirk

In stark contrast to many Southern Baptists and evangelicals, Roman Catholic scholars such as Peter Kreeft and Russell Kirk have frequently adopted ecumenical positions sympathetic to Islam. Moreover, they have voiced powerful criticism of the now-ascendant foreign policy that Christian fundamentalists and neo-conservatives so strongly support. Serious attention to the thought of such cultural traditionalists concerning religion on the one hand, and American national security policy on the other, is long overdue.

In this age of the “war against terrorism”, penetration of the spiritual nature of Islamic religiosity by Western non-Muslims is rare indeed. Such penetration by Western conservative thinkers is almost non-existent. One striking exception to this sad reality is *Ecumenical Jihad*, a truly excellent book by Professor Peter Kreeft of Boston College. In it, Kreeft presents an imaginary dialogue between himself in the role of a contemporary non-Muslim and misinformed Westerner, and the Prophet Muhammad. The exchange suggests that at least one Western Christian has finally succeeded in gaining access to the spiritual core of Islam.

The dialogue begins when a departing Buddha, with whom Kreeft had just completed a discussion, says, “This [next] man will teach you more about religion than Confucius or [I] . . . He will teach you the heart and soul of all true religion.” Kreeft confesses to being “shocked” by this, since the man who now appeared before him was clearly Muhammad. “So I asked [Muhammad],” Kreeft writes, “What is the heart and soul of all true religion?” And the answer “. . . came from [him] in a single word: Islam – surrender – and the peace that comes from surrender, the peace that the world cannot give, that comes only from total surrender to the will of God. This is the heart and soul of all true religion . . . The only true first step is adoration, the bent knee and the bent spirit, surrender, Islam.”

Muhammad goes on to utter a warning:

“You [Westerners] are not winning your world, you are not winning your Jihad, your spiritual warfare; your world is sliding down the road to Hell. Why? Why have you lost a century to the devil? [It is] because you prattle about yourselves and your freedoms and your rights and your self-fulfilment rather than forgetting yourself and adoring and obeying the Lord . . . the child you must become again if you are to enter His Kingdom. The saying is His, not mine. I am only His prophet. He is the One than whom there is no other. *Laa ilaaha illa al-Lah.*”

And Muhammad then fell to his knees, Kreeft writes, “and bowed his back and prayed.”

Kreeft continues:

The comfortably condescending cultural chauvinism with which I had always unconsciously viewed those holy Arabic words and that holy Arabic deed seemed to have suddenly died in me . . . I wondered . . . whether my world could ever be saved in any other way . . . I suspected then that the explosive growth of Islam in our time might be due to a simpler cause than any sociologist had yet discovered: that God blesses obedience and faithfulness, especially when surrounded by unfaithful and disobedient cultures.

Meanwhile, Muhammad had more to say:

- Muhammad: “The religion I taught my people was the simplest one in the world. There are times that call for complexity, and there are times that call for simplicity. Today is a time when ‘simplistic’ is the favourite sneer word of a decadent, arrogant, corrupt, and aggressively anti-God establishment. So what time do you think it is today?”
- Kreeft: “I had nothing to say, so Muhammad answered his own question.”
- Muhammad: “It is time for a Jihad, a holy war, a spiritual war . . . [I]t is time to wake up to the fact that, whether you like it or not, you are in the middle of one.”
- Kreeft: “But we are commanded to love our enemies, not to make war.”
- Muhammad: “We love our human enemies, we war against our spirit enemies.”

- Kreeft: "Aren't Muslims famous for confusing the two and fighting literal holy wars?"
- Muhammad: "Some. About three per cent of Muslims in the world believe that Jihad means physical war, killing infidels. But the Qur'an makes it quite clear that this war is first within oneself and against one's own sins and infidelities."
- Kreeft: "But your people, the Arabs, are world-famous for violence."
- Muhammad: "Unlike your people in Northern Ireland, I suppose."
- Kreeft: "But your whole history is full of ..."
- Muhammad: "Crusades and inquisitions and forced conversions and anti-Semitism and religious wars?"
- Kreeft: "I quickly realised that my 'argument' was going nowhere except to blow up in my face."
- Thereupon Muhammad continued more gently:
- Muhammad: "Let me try to explain. Islam and Jihad are intrinsically connected. For Islam means not only 'submission' but also 'peace,' the peace that the world cannot give, the peace that only God can give when we submit to Him. And this submission requires the inner Jihad, a war on our war against God. So we get the paradoxical result that peace (Islam) is attained only through war (Jihad). And this peace also leads to war, because the submission that is this peace requires us to obey God's will, and God's will for us is to become spiritual warriors against evil."¹³

These few pages should be considered required reading by Christian fundamentalists, neo-conservatives, and Washington policy makers alike. Kreeft's imaginary dialogue says more about the real nature of Islam as a faith than any number of academic or journalistic articles. Given the contemporary international situation, it is imperative that Kreeft's comprehension of the soul of Islam be disseminated as widely as possible both in the West and in the Muslim world.

Russell Kirk had little to say about Islam itself but a very great deal to say about what American conservatism is, or at least should be. The author of some thirty books¹⁴ dealing with political philosophy, economics, history, and culture, as well as haunting ghost stories and tales of adventure, Kirk thought deeply about the meaning and importance of history. He understood the prescriptive claims of the past, and the unalterable nature of history as tragedy. Man's state, man's prospects, and man's fate were primary concerns for him throughout a professional career spanning almost half a century. And Kirk, like Kreeft, accorded to religion fundamental importance in explaining how the world works. "Culture (or civilisation)," Kirk never tired of reminding his interlocutors, "comes from the cult." As a practising Roman Catholic, Kirk was himself a vibrant exemplar of how religion must inform culture if society is to flourish. Kirk's sympathy for both religion and tradition may not have been unconnected with the open-mindedness of his posture toward the Arab and Islamic world.

For Kirk, conservatism¹⁵ constituted the negation of ideology. Conservative politics, he believed, is always prudential politics, and prudential politics is the opposite of ideological politics. True conservatives, Kirk understood, regard politics as merely the art of the possible, while ideologues consider politics to

be a “revolutionary instrument for transforming society and even transforming human nature” (1993: 1). Kirk pointedly remarks: “Ideologues . . . [are] enemies [of] religion, tradition, custom, convention, prescription, and old constitutions . . . In [their] march toward utopia, ideologue[s] [are] merciless” (1, 3). Indeed, Western ideologues have consistently attempted to “substitute secular goals and doctrines for religious goals and doctrines [in order to] overthrow present dominations so that the oppressed may be liberated” (5). In Kirk’s opinion, ideologues have offered a formula that “promises mankind an earthly paradise but in cruel fact has created a series of terrestrial hells” (5).¹⁶ What, then, are some of the specific aspects of conservatism that may serve as antidotes to the poison spread by ideologues of all sorts?

For Kirk, conservatives believe that there exists an “enduring moral order” (17). In other words, conservatives believe that human nature is a constant, and that moral truths are permanent. Moreover, they believe that the “inner order of the soul, and the outer order of the commonwealth” (17) are inseparably connected. For those who wish to establish and strengthen viable democratic systems, understanding this conservative conviction may be especially important. For Kirk and other conservatives, the “body social is a kind of spiritual corporation . . . it may even be called a community of souls” (19). Therefore, human society and its political systems cannot be understood as mere machines, to be treated as machines are. In the case of democratic governance, this means that although technique (constitutions, separation of power, parliaments, and a formal rule of law) is essential, it can never be sufficient without a commonality of values to which such technique must be grafted.

Above all, prudence must pervade the polity. “Any public measure,” Kirk writes, “ought to be judged by its probable long-run consequences, not merely by temporary advantage or popularity” (20). Prudence is obligatory because of the inescapable imperfectability of man, and the fact that the flaws of human nature preclude the creation of any perfect political order, democratic or otherwise. “To seek for utopia,” Kirk repeats, “is to end in disaster” (20). Indeed, given human imperfectability and the dangerous passions inherent in human nature, formal restraints upon political power, perhaps especially in democracies, are a *sine qua non* for the preservation of individual liberty.

Conservatives also believe, as Kirk points out, that freedom and property are closely linked. “Separate property from private possession,” he notes, “and Leviathan becomes master of all” (21). And Kirk adds an observation that should resonate with Muslims today: “The conservative acknowledges that the possession of property fixes certain duties upon the possessor: he [the possessor] accepts those moral and legal obligations cheerfully” (22).¹⁷ Man is a creation of God, Kirk understood, and men with property have a special obligation to use what God has given them in trust for the benefit of their less fortunate fellow men.

In addition, and perhaps especially important in the context of contemporary world events, is Kirk’s emphasis on the traditional conservative respect for the “principle of variety” (20). Kirk’s insistence on the importance of religious,

political, and civilisational pluralism reflects the intent of the Qur'anic verse, "For every one of you We appointed a law and a way. And if God had pleased He would have made you a single people but (His plan is) to test you in what He has given you; so strive as in a race in all virtues" (5:48). Kirk detested uniformity, homogenisation, and standardisation, and regarded cultural variety as truly part of the divine order. This conservative empathy for non-European peoples, and reverence for the multiformity of God's handiwork, extends back to Edmund Burke himself, as exemplified in Burke's courageous opposition to the policies of repression of Warren Hastings, the British Governor of India, and Burke's support for both Muslims and Hindus against the tyranny of the British crown. Kirk himself wandered through the souqs of both Cairo and Marrakesh, and rejoiced in the way that those vibrant worlds linked the present to the past.

Finally, Kirk had much to say about United States foreign policy. In *The Politics of Prudence*, published in 1993 only a year before his death, Kirk offered sage advice about America's role in the world that most of the "conservative" impostors who currently wield power in Washington have categorically repudiated. A decade ago Kirk knew that the USA had come to bestride the world as a single colossus. But he asked the question that was fundamental then, and remains so today: "How should the United States employ the powers of its ascendancy? Are we Americans fulfilling a manifest destiny, the mission of recasting every nation and every culture in the American image?" (212). Any such homogenisation would constitute hell itself, Kirk believed, totally inimical as it was to his entire understanding of the critical importance of pluralism and variety in human affairs. Kirk pulled no punches in expressing his contempt for the "enthusiasts" who continue to maintain that the "political structure and the economic patterns of the United States will be emulated on every continent, forevermore" (213). In all of this, what is perhaps most remarkable is how totally ignored Kirk's insights have been by those who now hold power in Washington.

Kirk, the greatest of American conservatives, is almost frightening in his perspicacity. There is a law of nature, he wrote, that impels every living organism to preserve its identity against all attempts at appropriation or assimilation. That being the case, no one should be surprised that "men and nations resist desperately . . . any attempt to assimilate their character to some other body social. This resistance is the first law of their being" (216). And then Kirk makes this striking observation: "There is one sure way to make a deadly enemy, and that is to propose to anybody, 'Submit yourself to me, and I will improve your condition by relieving you from the burden of your own identity and by reconstituting your substance in my own image'" (217). But such conservative insights are manifestly incomprehensible to those presently directing American foreign policy.

In summary, Kirk makes the point that a "soundly conservative foreign policy . . . should be neither 'interventionist' nor 'isolationist': it should be prudent" (221). Its objective "should not be to secure the triumph everywhere of America's name and manners . . . but instead the preservation of the true [American] national interest" (221). Kirk emphasised that the United States

should accept “the diversity of economic and political institutions throughout the world” (221). Today, among most of those who pass themselves off as conservatives, such counsel is emphatically rejected.¹⁸

Let us turn now to the challenge of reinterpretation or revival of key Islamic concepts. Muslim intellectuals have for some time been grappling with this challenge, and have redoubled their efforts since 9/11. Americans should be aware of the efforts of such Muslim thinkers, and themselves come to understand the true meaning of some of the Islamic terms that are currently so ignorantly bandied about by the Western media.

Jihad and Qital

Especially in recent decades, perhaps no term has been more misunderstood by Muslims and non-Muslims alike than the word *jihad*. Among both Muslim extremists on the one hand and the general public in the West on the other, *jihad* has come to be associated with military conflict, and more broadly with compulsion and intolerance in general. However, and as Kreeft’s observations suggest, all interpretations of *jihad* that place primary emphasis on violence are radically anti-Quranic. Nevertheless, such interpretations are everywhere, and now constitute major impediments to any new beginning in Muslim-Western relations.¹⁹

In the West, far too many commentators expostulate about Islam who have no knowledge of Arabic. In fact, it is a useful exercise to analyse the various meanings of *jihad* as offered in the two best Arabic-English dictionaries available, Hans Wehr’s *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* and Edward William Lane’s *An Arabic-English Lexicon*. The Arabic root (*jim ha dal*) of the word *jihad* means variously to try, to endeavour, to strive, and to exert effort. In the four classes of verbs in which the root appears, only one (verb class three) incorporates any notion whatsoever of military activity. Even there, warfare is only a tertiary meaning. Both Wehr and Lane agree that the principal meaning of even verb form three is “to endeavour”, or “to strive”, in primarily moral or spiritual ways. Certainly, *jihad* has an obvious military aspect, but that military dimension is subsumed in a much larger whole.

Jihad has been historically understood by Muslims as of two different sorts, one far more important than the other. The “greater” *jihad* is the eternal struggle of each individual against temptation and the wiles of Satan. The “lesser” *jihad*, now much emphasised but downplayed in Islamic history, is the conduct of defensive war to protect the Islamic community. On the permissibility of defensive warfare only, the Qur’an is explicit: “And fight in the way of God against those who fight against you and be not aggressive; for surely God loves not the aggressors” (2:190). Fighting, the Qur’an explains, is permitted by Muslims only against people “who broke their oaths and sought to expel the Prophet and attacked you first” (9:13). When defensive religious war is unavoidable, the Qur’an makes clear that no advantage should be taken of the situation to amass booty: “Let those fight in the way of God who sell this world’s goods for the Hereafter” (4:74). Above all, the Qur’an emphasises that

peace is much to be preferred to military conflict: “If [one’s enemies] incline to peace, incline you also to it and trust in God . . . And if they intend to deceive you – then surely God is sufficient for you” (8:61, 62). In fact, the Qur’anic understanding of *jihad* has much in common with the Christian notion of “just war”.²⁰

Here, one should distinguish between the Qur’anic use of the term *jihad* on the one hand, and the word it employs to denominate fighting (*qital*) and killing (*qatl*) on the other. Linguistically, the Qur’an employs the word *jihad* in the vast majority of cases to describe actions that are moral rather than military. Although defensive military struggle has always been understood by Muslims to fall within the category of *jihad*, the usage of the term in the Qur’an is largely restricted to an advocacy of intellectual, moral, and missionary effort. The Qur’an denominates fighting, and/or killing, by most frequently avoiding the word *jihad* and using an entirely different root, namely *qaf ta lam*. A few examples of this very different usage will make my point.

For example, in Surah 2:190 the term *jihad* is not used. Rather, the verb form meaning fighting in the military sense is employed (*qatala*). The same is true in 2:191: the *qaf ta lam* root, meaning killing in verb form one and fighting in war in verb form three, are both employed (*tuqatiluhum* and *uqtuluhum* respectively). And in 2:193 and 2:217, *qatala* (or *qital*) is again the verb of choice. In 9:5 and 9:13, the same is true: the verb forms used, respectively meaning to “kill” and “fight”, are derived from the same *qaf ta lam* root. The same is true in the cases of 4:74, 9:13, 9:36, and 22:38. And in every case where fighting or killing in war is endorsed, that endorsement is restricted by some moral condition. For example, in 2:190, after defensive warfare has been authorised, believers are cautioned “not to commit aggression” (*la ta’tadu*) because “Verily God does not like aggressors (*mu’tadin*).”

Contrast all of this with the Qur’anic use of the root *jim ha dal*. Thus, in 16:110 believers are urged to “struggle hard” (*jahidu*) and persevere under the burden of afflictions, and in 29:6 are told that “Whoever strives mightily (*jahada*) strives (*yujahidu*) for his own soul”. In 29:8, the believers are reminded that “We have enjoined kindness to parents: but if they (either of them) endeavour (*jahadaka*) (to force) you to associate anything with Me in worship, obey them not.” And in 29:69 they are told that “Those who strive (*jahidu*) in our (Cause) – We will certainly guide them to Our Paths.” In 22:78 and 25:52 the *jim ha dal* root is also used in precisely the same sense of moral effort. At the same time, one should note that in 9:73 and 66:9, both late (Medinan) revelations, the Prophet is told by God to “Strive hard (*jahid*) against the unbelievers (*kuffar*)”. This injunction can (and has) been interpreted in both military and moral senses. But the balance of what was truly intended by the use of *jihad* in its various forms seems clear enough on the grounds of both quantity and context.

To all of this, one might add that the notion of “holy war” (*al-harb al-muqaddasah*) is a relatively modern idea. There is no idea of “holy war” in the Qur’an, and it is not a concept developed by classical Muslim theologians. The focus on war in Islamic theology has traditionally been utilitarian: the question usually has been whether war is justified or not, and if so, under what

conditions. In that theological literature one will search in vain for any denomination of war as holy. It may be especially important to remind oneself of these facts today (Abou El Fadl 2002: 19–20).

Hirabah

Given the all too common tendency to employ *jihad* and terrorism as synonyms, there is now perhaps no traditional Islamic concept that cries out louder for revival than that of *hirabah*.

Hirabah, designating “unholy war” and derived from the Arabic root *hariba*, meaning to be “furious” or “enraged”, is a concept of seminal importance. *Hirabah*, not *jihad*, should be employed when describing any action that is clearly terrorist. *Jihad* might now best be largely restricted to describing non-military endeavours, and used especially in the context of the traditional Islamic understanding of the “greater *jihad*”. Of course, *jihad* might continue to be used to denote what is clearly defensive warfare, but the fact that such warfare is defensive only, and why, needs to be clearly explained.

The Qur’an is categorical in its condemnation of terrorism, or *hirabah*:

[Verily] the punishment of those who wage war (*yuharibuna*) against God and his Messenger, and strive with might and main for mischief through the land, is: execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land: That is their disgrace in this world, and a heavy punishment is theirs in the hereafter. (5:33)

The medieval Arab commentators explained what they understood this Qur’anic condemnation of *hirabah* to mean. For example, the Spanish Maliki jurist Ibn al-Barr defines the committer of *hirabah* as “Anyone who disturbs free passage in the streets and renders them unsafe to travel, striving to spread corruption through the land by taking money, killing people, or violating what God has made it unlawful to violate, is guilty of *hirabah*.”²¹ Imam al-Nawawi states: “Whoever brandishes a weapon and terrorises the streets ... must be pursued by the authorities because if he is left unmolested his power will increase ... and corruption will spread.”²² And Ibn Qudamah defines *hirabah* as “the act of openly holding people up ... with weapons to take their money.”²³ What is common to all these definitions, as Professor Sherman A. Jackson has pointed out, is that *hirabah* has traditionally been understood by Muslims to mean an effort to intimidate an entire civilian population, and the attempt to spread a sense of fear and helplessness in society.²⁴ Could one ask for better designations of what one today calls terrorism? And is it not precisely the realization of such social paralysis that groups like al-Qa’ida are attempting to accomplish?

In traditional Islamic parlance, *hirabah* means not only “unholy war”, but also “warfare against society”. As defined by Professor Khalid Abou El Fadl, it means “killing by stealth and targeting a defenceless victim to cause terror in society”.²⁵ The concept of *hirabah* is closely connected with that of *fitnah*,

which designates the disruption of established political and social order. *Fitnah*, like *hirabah*, was long considered by Islamic jurists to be among the crimes meriting the most severe of punishments. When Muslims refer to the activities of organisations allied with or sympathetic to Usama bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida – many of which use the word *jihad* to describe themselves and their activities – they would do well to describe those activities as *irhabiyyah* (terrorist) rather than as *jihadiyyah*.

Tajdif, Mufsidun, and Shaitaniyyah

There are assorted terms in traditional Islamic vocabulary in addition to *hirabah* that currently are attracting new attention from Muslims. Those terms include *tajdif*, *mufsidun*, and *shaitaniyyah*. Today, an increasing number of Muslims are employing this traditional vocabulary in an attempt to rethink their faith and to reclaim Islam from those extremists who are now so blackening its reputation.²⁶

Of all allied understandings, the Islamic concept of *tajdif* has long been intimately associated with *hirabah*. *Tajdif* designates the blasphemy that results from the waging of unholy warfare by evildoers. *Tajdif* has traditionally been considered by Muslims as an act of apostasy punishable by death. The word *mufsidun* designates those who engage in *hirabah*, and who perpetuate what we today understand as terrorism. *Tajdif*, and the activities of *mufsidun*, have been understood by Muslims as examples of *shaitaniyyah*, or Satanic and anti-Islamic activity. Today, the fact is that increasing numbers of Muslim scholars and students of Islam, both in the West and the Islamic world, are beginning to use this old vocabulary to delegitimise terrorism. To the extent that this new (traditional) usage continues to spread, the better off the world will be.

Muslims Speak Out

Prominent Muslims throughout the world are beginning to discuss *hirabah*, and the substitution of the concept of *hirabah* for that of *jihad* in reference to terrorism. For example, Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi of the United Arab Emirates categorically condemned the bombing in Bali in 2002 as a terrorist action, and said it represented “total barbarism”. He stated that rather than an act of *jihad*, the Bali bombing constituted an “act of ... *hirabah* in juristic terms: a crime in Islam for which a severe punishment is specified without [any allowance] for the race, colour, nationality or religion of the culprit”.²⁷ Similarly, condemning terrorism, and employing the word *hirabah* rather than *jihad* to describe it, Ezzedin Ibrahim, also of the UAE, states: “What occurred on 11 September 2001 is one of the most loathsome of crimes, which in Islam goes under the name of *al-hirabah*. *Hirabah* is the most abominable form of murder, in that it involves killing with terror and intimidation.” Professor Akbar Ahmed of the American University in Washington, DC, describes contemporary events as constituting a “war of ideas within Islam”, featuring

pronouncements that are “clearly un-Islamic and even blasphemous toward the peaceful and compassionate God of the Qur’an . . . al-Qa’ida’s brand of suicide and mass murder and its fomenting of hatred among races, religions and cultures do not constitute godly or holy Jihad – but, in fact, constitute the heinous crime and sin of unholy *Hiraba*.” Professor Ahmed emphasises that the act of *hirabah* committed on 9/11, through its “wanton killing of innocents – both non-Muslim and Muslim alike” as a means of “terrorizing [an] entire community”, constituted the most “ungodly sort of ‘war against society’ and should be condemned as blasphemous and un-Islamic”.²⁸ Radwan Masmoudi, President of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy in Washington, DC, states:

The war against society and innocent civilians that Usama bin Laden is calling for is not *jihad*. To the contrary, it is a forbidden and un-Islamic war [*hirabah*] that is counter to all the values and teachings of Islam. [*Hirabah*] is a crime against innocent civilians and therefore a crime against humanity. In Islamic jurisprudence, there is no justification for the killing of innocent people.²⁹

And Robert D. Crane echoes other prominent Muslims by noting:

There is no such thing as Islamic terrorism, but there have always been Muslims who are terrorists. Today [such] alienated extremists . . . are committing the most serious crime condemned by the Qur’an, which is the root of all other crimes, namely, arrogance . . . They are committing the crime of *hirabah* . . . There can be no greater evil and no greater sin.³⁰

This condemnation of terrorism as *hirabah* builds on the more general denunciation of terrorism by Muslim leaders and scholars outside the United States that has been so much in evidence since 9/11. Many of them have cited the following passage from the Qur’an: “If anyone kills a human being for other than manslaughter or for spreading corruption on earth – it shall be as though he had killed all mankind; whereas, if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all mankind” (6:51).³¹

Unfortunately, many of these condemnations of terrorism were made in languages other than English (principally Arabic and Urdu), and have only belatedly been translated into English. Even so, many have received little attention in the US media. This is the principal reason for the continuing misperception in the United States that Muslim leaders have given a green light to extremists by their supposed failure to categorically condemn terrorism.

The Islamic Illegitimacy of Contemporary Jihad

Today, Muslims may wish to remind themselves, and Westerners should understand, that in any acute emergency in which Muslim lives and lands were to be threatened and therefore defensive war were to be imperative, such defensive war – *jihad* – can legally be declared only by a recognised and legitimate ruler. Usama bin Ladin, or Ayman Zawahiri, or the various

“resistance” groups that invoke military *jihad* in their own names, have (under traditional Islamic criteria) no right whatsoever to do so. Therefore, Usama bin Ladin’s proclamation of a Jihad against the United States, “Jews”, and “Crusaders” is a violation of Islamic law.³² In this same vein, both Muslims and non-Muslims should understand that there are rules for military *jihad* and when it must be waged. These rules were codified by the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, and are considered authoritative by all traditional Sunnis. To the Islamic army he led, Abu Bakr prescribed the following: “Do not betray; do not carry grudges; do not deceive; do not mutilate; do not kill children; do not kill the elderly; do not kill women . . . do not cut down fruit-bearing trees . . . You will come upon [Christian monks], leave them to what they have dedicated their lives”³³

Abu Bakr’s rules for *jihad* are based on what is prescribed in the Qur’an and were endorsed by Muhammad. In the Qur’an, believers are enjoined “not to let the hatred of others . . . make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety” (5:8). And the Prophet himself said: “Attack in the name of God, but do not revert to treachery; do not kill a child; neither kill a woman; do not wish to confront the enemy.”³⁴ Clearly, these sources leave no doubt that the military *jihad* proclaimed by some today constitutes not only *hirabah* but is illegal and even blasphemous according to traditional Islamic criteria.

Conservatism, Ecumenism, and the Future

Today, it is vital to understand that there is now in evidence a moderate Islamist movement throughout most of the Muslim world. This moderate Islamism insists above all upon democratic governance.³⁵ Moreover, it is supportive of traditional values and morality, and emphasises the importance of economic development, private property, and entrepreneurship.³⁶ The development of moderate Islamism, which remains anchored in traditional cultural values, provides great opportunity for dialogue between cultural traditionalists and conservatives, West and East. The good news is that this dialogue is already well under way. If a conflict of civilisations is to be avoided, it will surely be through conversation and dialogue that results will be achieved.

The Islamic revival, in its moderate and democratic form, has been considerably more successful than were the secular Arab nationalists in bringing women out of the home and into both politics and civil society. In common with American conservatives, the vast majority of moderate Islamists articulate an agenda that accords priority to the “permanent things”, to the “wisdom of the ancestors”, and to cultural orientations profoundly inimical to the secularist radicalism that Peter Kreeft deplores. Happily, the Vatican has led the West in engaging with this new reality. As long ago as the mid-1990s, Pope John Paul II made common cause with a number of Muslim delegations to the Cairo Conference on Population and the Beijing Conference on Women to oppose some of the egregious feminist and secularist proposals advanced by Western representatives.

Much of the return to an activist religious faith by Muslims worldwide should be understood by American conservatives to be good news. The Islamic revival has largely purged Muslim countries (with the notable exception of Syria) of the socialist nationalism once symbolised by Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt. Moderate Muslim activists have taken the initiative in reactivating that civil society, or “Third Sector”, which Nasserite statism had done so much to destroy. Today, moderate Islamist intellectuals are spearheading discussion about limiting the power of the state and achieving an appropriate equilibrium between liberty and community. Everywhere, Islamist intellectuals are articulating notions of culture, tradition, and society strikingly congruent with the world-view of Russell Kirk and Robert Nisbet, and the scholarship of the distinguished American student of Third World societies, Grace Goodell of The Johns Hopkins University. The reassertion of conservatism in the Islamic world should be understood by American cultural traditionalists to constitute a golden opportunity to recruit allies among moderate Islamists in order more effectively to confront the radical secularism of late modernity that is now so prevalent everywhere.³⁷

To these ends, an international association was established in 1997 consisting of distinguished Christian and Muslim scholars of conservative or traditionalist inclination committed to a common investigation of the “permanent things”. That association, the Circle of Tradition and Progress, has held international symposia and workshops in Washington, DC, London, and Berlin. The objective of the Circle is to reintegrate Mediterranean and Arab Islam within that Western world of which it long constituted an important part. The Circle’s goal is to accomplish this within the parameters of cultural conservatism, democratic governance, and individual liberty. The organisation’s founding statement specifically cites Edmund Burke, Russell Kirk, Eric Voegelin, and Gerhart Niemeyer as providing much of its inspiration. The following excerpt from the Circle’s Statement of Purpose may give a more substantive notion of what it is about:

Implicit in the modernist project derived substantially from the European Enlightenment is an arrogant and naive insistence that human fulfilment can be achieved solely on materialistic bases, and a belief in the absolute autonomy of human reason and in man’s presumed ability to transcend his moral and cultural systems in isolation from any belief in transcendence . . . More broadly, the intention of the Circle is to foster intellectual activities designed to rectify the modern rupture between economics and ethics, reason and religion, and man and God. Above all, the Circle hopes to encourage greater understanding between religions and to contribute to reconciliation of peoples and to international cooperation.

In addition, the Circle’s Statement of Purpose gives attention to geopolitics:

We favour the conduct of international relations on a basis of respect for all of the world’s civilisations. We oppose all attempts to export or impose cultural systems, to support dictatorial regimes, or to obstruct democratic transformation. It is our conviction that attempts to re-invent the Cold War with Muslims targeted as enemies of the West, or the West designated as an incorrigible enemy of Islam, are deplorable

and should be avoided. We are united in our belief that all such Manichean formulations will impede cooperation between Muslims and the West and are likely over time to have a dramatically negative impact on both international stability and world peace.³⁸

Today, when a true “conflict of civilisations” appears only too possible, if it has not already begun, and when the radical secularism encapsulated in Western culture seems omnipresent, the principles of the Circle of Tradition and Progress constitute one reason to hope for a better future.

In this new century, it may be more important than ever before that all of the children of Abraham reject religious, cultural, and geostrategic polarisation. Indeed, it is now imperative for the monotheistic faiths to make common cause to address the similar challenges that confront them all. On this score as on so much else, Imam Abd al-Raouf offers good counsel. “We earnestly urge [our friends in the West] to go back to God, to turn their face to Him . . . What was morally right for Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad must be the same for us whether we live in America, Europe, Asia, or Africa. We all should remember that we are brothers, members of the [same] human family. [Therefore] let us live together in peace.”³⁹

Notes

- 1 For their counsel or comments on aspects of this essay, I am grateful to Leonard J. Hochberg and Leonard P. Liggio.
- 2 For one judicious essay on terrorism, see Bernard Lewis, “License to Kill: Usama bin Laden’s Declaration of Jihad”, *Foreign Affairs*, November–December 1998. Lewis observes: “At no point do the basic texts of Islam enjoin terrorism and murder. At no point do they even consider the random slaughter of uninvolved bystanders.” Lewis also takes note of Islam’s generally excellent record of tolerance toward non-Muslim religious communities, especially when contrasted with medieval Christianity, where “evictions of Jews and . . . Muslims [by Christians] were normal and frequent” (p. 19). It is unfortunate that this dispassionate essay was given so lurid a title.
- 3 For one of many examples of the theological perversities that now shape American domestic politics and influence the formulation of US foreign policy, see Alan Cooperman, “Bush’s Remark About God Assailed”, *Washington Post*, 22 November 2003, p. A6. This article discusses Southern Baptist and evangelical outrage over President George W. Bush’s theologically accurate observation that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Cooperman cites the vigorous disagreement with President Bush of the Revd Ted Haggard, President of the National Association of Evangelicals: “The Christian God encourages freedom, love, forgiveness, prosperity and health . . . The Muslim God appears to value the opposite. The personalities of each God are evident in the cultures, civilisations, and dispositions of the people that serve them.” To such comments by Haggard and others Cooperman reports the response of Sayyid M. Syeed, Secretary General of the Islamic Society of North America: “We read again and again in the Qur’an that our God is the God of Abraham, the God of Noah, [and] the God of Jesus. It

would not [enter] the mind of a Muslim that there is a different God [from the one] that Abraham or Jesus or Moses was praying to.” But in fact the comments by Christian fundamentalists reported by Cooperman are mild when compared to others made by such evangelicals as the Revd Jerry Vines who has stated that Muhammad was a “demon possessed paedophile”. For similarly extremist views, but from a neo-conservative perspective, see the online publication edited by David Horowitz, *Front Page Magazine*, at <www.frontpagemag.com>. All of this is truly surreal at a time when the United States government is so urgently soliciting the aid of the Islamic world in the ongoing “war against terrorism”.

- 4 For a powerfully evocative portrait of a world very different from the one that we inhabit today, see Menocal 2002.
- 5 For discussion of some of those stereotypes and the urgent need to rethink received opinion, see Augustus Richard Norton, “Rethinking United States Policy Toward the Muslim World”, *Current History*, February 1999, 51–8.
- 6 For one of many analyses indicating that a war of civilisations may now be well underway, see Patrick Seale, “Has the Bush Administration Declared War on Islam?”, *Mafhoum Press Studies Review*, no. 70, 28 November 2003, at <<http://www.mafhoum.com/press6/170P57.htm>>.
- 7 It is now well established that, in most of the vast territories that fell under Islamic control after Muhammad’s death in CE 632, it took three or four hundred years before a majority of the population converted to Islam.
- 8 Just as in Christianity, where “injustice, corruption and bloodletting have been committed in the name of a faith that teaches love, tenderness and sympathy”, so in Islam, Abd al-Raouf notes, “one must make a distinction . . . between Muslims in the ideal and Muslims as they actually behave” (Abd al-Raouf 1984: 21).
- 9 For one seminal work on the commonalities of that civilisation, see Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1949).
- 10 For an analysis of how problematic the traditional notion is of a peninsular European continent and culture terminating neatly at the Bosphorus, see J. G. A. Pocock, “What Do We Mean By Europe?”, *The Wilson Quarterly*, Winter 1997.
- 11 Liggio to Sullivan, electronic mail, 1 November 1998.
- 12 See David Gress, *From Plato to Nato: The Idea of the West and its Opponents* (New York: Free Press, 1998). Gress’s discomfort with the category of Greco-Roman is due to the fact that he associates the putative ideals of classical Greece with the “radical” (Voltairean) rather than “sceptical” (Montesquieu, David Hume) Enlightenment, and with twentieth-century American liberalism. Gress maintains that since the Enlightenment the West has erred because it has used the myth of ancient Greece as a “replacement for Christianity” (p. 60). He follows Samuel P. Huntington in treating Islam as an alien and potentially enemy Other (pp. 527–34). For a critique of Gress, see Morton A. Kaplan, “What is the West?”, *The World and I*, vol. 13, no. 12 (December 1998), pp. 14–15. Kaplan points out that classical Greek science was derived from North Africa and the Middle East, and that Christianity is hardly a Western invention. Kaplan also implicitly argues for retention of the category “Greco-Roman” as a proper designation of the essence of the West, and maintains that today the most dangerous enemies of the West are not outside it but “within its very bowels” in the form of irrationalism, relativism, and the collapse of faith.
- 13 Kreeft 1996: 98–102. For an echo of what Kreeft has to say by a prominent Muslim, see Khurshid Ahmad, “The Nature of Islamic Resurgence”, in John L. Esposito (ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

- 14 Russell Kirk's most important book was perhaps his first, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, published in five editions by Regnery Publishing between 1953 and 1995. This massive study should be considered required reading by anyone who wishes to understand true conservatism, as distinguished from today's counterfeit varieties.
- 15 The American Republican administration of President George W. Bush is following a policy of revolutionary internationalism that is diametrically opposed to all that is adduced here as the "Great Tradition" of conservative thought. And this is so because the former political Right in the United States has largely been captured by the so-called "neo-conservatives", ideologues all. For one excellent, if dated, discussion of the neo-conservatives, see Kirk 1993: 172–90. *The Politics of Prudence* is Kirk's last book, and distils the wisdom of a lifetime. Kirk denounced the neo-conservatives as "cultural and economic imperialists" (1993: 187), who failed to manipulate the elder and widely experienced President Bush.
- 16 In the Muslim world it may now be the radical Islamists who constitute the counterpart to the extremist and secular Western ideologues. Uncompromising, ideological Islamists have fallen into the same utopian trap as have the radical purveyors of ideology in the West. The fact that radical Islam claims to seek the establishment of true religion, while Western ideologues often reject religion entirely, should not be permitted to conceal the fact that ideologues both West and East are attempting what Eric Voegelin has described as the "immanentization of the eschaton": the impossible and enormously destructive endeavour to establish in this world what can only exist in the next. Radical Islamists would do well to ponder Kirk's observation that "the purpose of religious faith is the ordering of the soul, not the ordering of the state" (p. 210).
- 17 This comment by Kirk is at one with the Muslim understanding of stewardship. In its simplest form, this understanding identifies God as the owner of all things, and the legitimacy of man's temporary possession of property and wealth as contingent upon its use for individual and social betterment.
- 18 However, the contemporary picture is not all bleak. The new American journal of opinion, *The American Conservative*, has launched a vigorous campaign to recapture conservatism from neo-conservative and Likudnik interlopers. For one good example of the magazine's rhetorical vigour, see the issue of 1 December 2003. The cover carries a photograph of President George W. Bush below a caption reading, "Righteous Anger: The Conservative Case Against George W. Bush". And an article by Neil Clark not only criticises the "imperialism" and "Arabophobia" of the Bush administration but specifically evokes themes that are very close to those of Russell Kirk: "For the first time we have a US administration that talks of de-Arabizing the Middle East – the ultimate Perleian dream of each Arab nation governed by a clone of Ahmad Chalabi, bazaars replaced by shopping malls, and Arab hospitality (not good for business) replaced by Western corporate ethics" (p. 16). For additional evidence of contemporary conservative political incorrectness, see the website of Conservatives for Peace.com at <<http://www.againstbombing.com/index.htm>> .
- 19 For an ambitious but now dated overview of *jihad*, see Rudolph Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1966).
- 20 For the idea of just war in Christianity and Islam, see James Turner Johnson, *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). For an authoritative book demonstrating the fallaciousness of any notion that Islam has historically fostered violence, see Peter