

## **The Ishmael Factor:**

### **Seeing the Heart of the Middle East Conflict**

#### **Chapter 7**

##### **The Attackers**

Between March of 2004 and August of 2005, the Israeli Defense Force apprehended six would-be suicide bombers attempting to pass from Gaza into Israel whose ages were from 16 to 11.<sup>1</sup> Facts like these can generate outrage at the lengths to which an extremist movement will go to achieve its ends. But these facts can also invoke wonder: What message is attached to a motivating force of this power? These children were not forced, but *influenced* to do what they did, so what kind of influence can be so powerful? There were twenty-one suicide attacks in Israel that did succeed in those years (according to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and in the Iraq war the numbers soar into the hundreds, now directed against U.S. personnel and fellow Muslims across the Sunni-Shi'a divide. Somewhere around 2000 people, almost all young men, have given their lives since 1981. Each of them died to kill as many randomly selected human beings as possible, in order to give voice to the complaint that is the cry of Ishmael. It is imperative, then, that the world begin to understand what that plaintive message is about. There is an explanation that excuses these young men and blames the West, and there is one that upbraids them as unresponsive to the moral coaching of the West, but a better explanation than either of these is needed.

I have so far been circling around this problem, looking at the difficulties that beset the search for wisdom about the Middle East, picking out the Players, the points of view from which a variety of groups understand it, and probing their weaknesses, which are generally that each group is happy with its own view and uses it defensively to make a comfortable position from which to *not* understand the others. But I am stepping up to the plate as we get to these last two players. To look closely at the Attacker mind set will require that we consider the actual religious differences between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, because the Ishmael Factor is the social and psychological effect of the religious difference brought out in his story. To look at the Zionists closely is to see the other side of that religious

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<sup>1</sup>Mitchell G. Bard, *Myths and Facts: A Guide to the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Chevy-Chase Maryland: American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2006), 182–3.

difference. By the end of Chapter 8 the theory of Middle East conflict that I am calling the “Ishmael Factor” will be visible, with all of its players identified.

*i. Understanding “Jihad”*

Designating the Islamists as the “Attackers” seemingly settles the moral case against them, but readers know already how the Attacker-Defender positions can be reversed. It is difficult to say who really started it, and the motives of any “defender” can be challenged. More central to our present task, “jihad” means something like “attack” but is taken in a good sense by those who practice it; it is seen as a justified struggle. So the value judgments are on slippery ground, for now, and the Attacker label simply indicates the first face of the matter: that there is global terrorism attacking Israel and the institutions of the West.

The Islamists could also be labeled as the *Complainer*, employing the diagnosis with which we began of a dysfunctional lack of responsibility. But that idea applies more broadly than to Arab Muslims and Palestinians. It is a condition of human experience that we will be examining as background to our understanding of the Attacker phenomenon and identity.

The Ishmael identity describes Islamism specifically. It includes the biblical idea that Ishmael would live “to the east of” or “against” his kinsmen (Genesis 16:12), which foreshadows both divisiveness in the Middle East and the present stance against Israel and the West. This identity applies foremost to the Arab Muslim extremists who violently resist Western dominance and the establishment of the State of Israel. Also included are those who disavow the violence but identify with or support the complaint. Morally, there is a huge difference between the suicide bomber and the angry Muslim in a crowd, but psychologically it is not a difference in kind. My analysis broadly applied could include even a comfortable American Protestant, for instance, who blames his boss or company for his unhappy state of mind and feels that God supports him in his complaint. That feeling of being vindicated in one's undeserved condition, or sympathy for that feeling in others, is the Ishmael Factor.

The Arab complaint is about the “chosen” status of the Jews, as manifested in their return to the land at the expense of Arab Palestinians and their success in maintaining their foothold there. The complaint is also about the power of the West, which Westerners have in the past seen as *manifesting* a Western *destiny*, in a notion as unpopular today as the idea that a particular nation could dare to call itself *chosen*. In both cases the special status is manifested as *power*, which is why we easily take it cynically. Power does not get a good press today, so to reduce a group's status to the fact that they are powerful is to demean it. This is different from saying that their power is a manifestation of an actual status as chosen or

destined, or that their power comes from being *right*. The Ishmael Factor is about the Arabs seeing themselves as victims of an unjust imposition of power.

The terrorists explain and justify their attack on the West by its sins toward them and its bad effect on humanity, making themselves both a liberation movement and a social reform. The justifying complaint is against the West in general as it affects the Middle East, and then in particular against Israel, thought to be a pawn of the West (or its secret ruler). There is the sense of being on a mission and also of being a victim. The mission is self-vindication, which is often true of liberation movements, as when the poor take up a moral cause against the rich in order to strengthen themselves. But often in such movements there are two voices, the righteous interveners and the politically awakened victims, as with the abolitionists and the American slaves, or the radicalized intelligentsia of Marxism, who could have remained comfortably bourgeois but came to the aid of the politically uneducated proletariat. Here it is a single voice: “We are saving the world from the Great Satan that is the West, of which we are the victims.” The Palestinians are the victims *par excellence*, we might say, but the attitude is the same among all Islamists.

The name for this is *jihad*. Righteous struggle. The legitimization of violence is connected to the idea in the Qur’an that the fledgling Islamic people could defend themselves militarily against those who sought to exterminate them, so that the new Muslims of Yathrib could defend themselves against the threatening infidels of Mecca. Militarization quickly took on a vaster role, we know, in the rapid spread of Islam, and yet the official doctrine is that religion cannot be forced on people, and the legitimate use of “*jihad*” today is mostly centered on the struggle to live a life that pleases God. Yet the world knows this term through those who are in fact attacking the West and Israel; these extreme actions are justified by the victim status of the Palestinians and whole region, and by the overall rightness of the cause. So violence is justified as a righteous struggle, as *jihad*.

The meaning of *jihad* has been studied throughout Islamic history and is very important today. John L. Esposito gives a very useful summary in his *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*. He sees four meanings of *jihad*, including the struggle to live the righteous life, the advancement of Islam as the best religious and moral choice for others, the fight against oppression in a particular region, as with the Palestinians resisting Israel or those under colonial power, and a global attack upon the evil influence and power of the West. His approach overall is that there is a legitimate use of *jihad* and many expropriations of the idea for the particular agendas of various extremists.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

“*Jihadists*” could be the name in this study for the Attackers, but, as with the idea of *blame*, I prefer to keep the term available for a broader use. If I needed to name this book differently, I might call it “The Human Jihad.” The “Ishmael Factor” refers to a syndrome that is very visible in the Middle East but also shows up elsewhere and which, when we have dug deeply enough, can be seen in humanity as a whole. The world can learn about it in our present day *jihadists* but find itself looking in the mirror, too.

*ii. The Search for the Moderate Muslim*

Since *jihad* is known mainly today through the violent actions of the Islamist extremists, the troubling question is whether the violence and the hatred are really limited to the extremist fringe. Where are the moderate Muslims? Do they exist on any scale, or are Muslims as a whole invested in *jihad* in its anti-American, anti-Israel and anti-Western manifestation? Or, if being against America, Israel, and the West is possible in rational and nonviolent ways, as simple objections to the unfairness of these powers, then the question is, What proportion of Muslims go beyond that and manifest hatred and destructiveness? And how many are moderate and harmless in practice but quietly embrace the violence? The problem, of course, is that those who quietly indulge the hatred will justify their response as a complaint against the sins of the West, so it will not be clear where the legitimate objections leave off and something dysfunctional enters in.

Everyone wants there to be a huge majority of moderate and peaceful Muslims, and in most places it is easy to see them this way. A typical American like myself finds Muslim neighbors, students, colleagues, medical professionals, and business persons all around. None of the Muslims I have known show signs of violent tendencies, nor is it plausible that any sizeable amount of them—any at all, I would think, in my surroundings—are lying low, in cell groups dedicated to *jihad*. Nevertheless, the search for the moderate Muslim, as a viable force that can retake control of global Islam, is mostly meeting disappointment.

*Commentary* devoted itself to this search in an article with this title, “In Search of Moderate Muslims.” The writer was not contemptuous of the question, as one might fear in a magazine of American Jewish conservatism. He argued that there are moderates, but the difficulty is in turning them into the prevalent voice. This is a common view. Nearly everyone wants to believe that the evil and the good both exist, and that the whole task is to strengthen the good, to bring it into the forefront.<sup>3</sup> Readers may recall that when examining the Correctors we saw a proposal to *force* upon the region a kind of stability and control that will, over time, become the norm. It is a little like setting a broken bone. But if forces within the

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<sup>3</sup>Joshua Muravchik, “In Search of Moderate Muslims,” *Commentary*, Feb. 2008.

fracture are still causing movement or further deterioration of structure, then the cast will have no effect. So we face the question whether we have yet seen the forces at work in this conflict.

The 2005 film that was widely distributed in the United States, “Obsession: Radical Islam’s War Against the West,” begins with a well known quotation from Edmund Burke, “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil . . . is that good men do nothing.” Thus it holds to the view that the Attackers are motivated by a force that is simply evil, thus not analyzable by or accountable to the principles of rationality. That is the Defenders’ explanation of this conflict. Yet the film is careful not to be fear-invoking demagoguery, because it begins also with a disclaimer: “This is a film about Radical Islamic terror, a dangerous ideology fueled by religious hatred. It is important to remember, most Muslims are peaceful and do not support terror. This is not a film about them. This is a film about a radical worldview, and the threat it poses to us all, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.”

“Obsession” presents the voices of former Muslims and people inside the Middle East, as well as other informed observers, and they are mainly commenting on the Middle Eastern radicals who are caught on tape brazenly advocating hate and violence. Those are the extremists, we tend to say. Yet the fear is expressed that these radicals have hijacked Islam. Palestinian journalist Khaled Abu Toameh says that “Radical Islam is at war, now, with the West, to bring down the West, to undermine the foundations of Christianity and Judaism.” He feels that the normal Muslims of the region are intimidated by the radicals, and he hopes that their expressions of support come from fear and not from agreement.

But a number of these witnesses, and the video clips they are commenting upon, bear witness to the deeply rooted nature of the violent type of *jihad*. Nonie Darwish, daughter of an Islamist martyr, grew up in Gaza and knows what they told her in elementary school. She says they were taught, “Jihad is a sacred holy war, for the sake of Allah, to conquer the world for Allah.” And many examples from Arab television are given of messages with the same intent. The television clips also show that the people of the Arab Middle East are taught that America is at war with them, to eradicate Islam. So the defensive instinct to preserve one’s culture is coupled with the religious impulse to spread its superior beliefs in the world. That kind of militant defensiveness is *jihad*.

The film shows many instances of hatred being preached vociferously on television. It is difficult, then, to be sure these are extremists, since they are in the place of authority and influence. And the film also tells the story of the Grand Mufti, the spiritual leader of Jerusalem and of all Palestinians, in the early years of World War II. The Nazis courted the Arabs, and Haj Amin al-Husseini met with Hitler. This was November of 1941, early in the process of the Holocaust, but Hitler was very clear with the Mufti that the intent was extermination of the Jews. (According to the film, this is a documented conversation.) The Mufti then went to

Bosnia and raised up a Muslim S.S. force to join the battle.<sup>4</sup> The messages of hatred, then, were on the loose in Palestine throughout the twentieth century. And the effects are very visible, perhaps most notably the day after the New York attack, with the dancing on the streets of East Jerusalem, hands held up in signs of V for victory. That is support for terrorism.

The question is not whether or not there are moderate Muslims, for certainly there are. One question is whether or not they can take control of that culture, since the real appeal, the strength to recruit and to inflame passion, lies with the hatred born out of fear of the power of the West and of Israel. This goes very deep, calling upon a fear that predates any complaints about the United States or the nascent State of Israel. I mean, to put it simply, anti-Semitism goes back much further, and it is part of the brew that is making moderate Islam a mostly impotent influence in the Middle East.

One of the commentators in the “Obsession” film, Professor Robert Wistrich, Chair of the Sassoon Center for Antisemitism, says that radical Islam challenges the “central pillar of human civilization, the sacredness of life itself.” That makes it nihilism, anarchism, or, in my terms, the repudiation of power itself, including the power of the human moral tradition, as conceived by the West. Since power includes economic and military power, it is, as everyone in the film attests, a war against the West. Do the moderates have any effect against such a massive tide?

A second troubling question is whether or not Islam itself, not just its extremists, is fundamentally involved in the kind of *jihad* which attacks Israel, Christianity, and the West, including the moral underpinning of Western society. It will seem an absurd claim that Islam, great civilizing religion that it has been, is implicated in such a conflict, despite the good intentions of most of its adherents. The moderates do not intend to tear anything down, and even the radicals see themselves as preserving world culture against the dissolute impulses of the decadent West. But that seemingly absurd claim is the thesis of this study and the significance of its title, “The Ishmael Factor.” Ishmael represents a rejected religion, because he stands for “human religion,” or a “law-based” religion, as I am calling it. In the Christian interpretation of the story, law-based religion is rejected and promise-based religion is destined to prevail. Hagar and Ishmael are rejected, but two millennia later a powerful culture rises up, in their spirit, in opposition to the religious culture that looks back to Isaac as chosen one and child of promise, and in opposition to Isaac’s descendents and power itself.

This is both a religious conflict and a political one, as we see it today. The victim-based thinking that is the visible mantle of the Islamists is understood politically: it has to do with nations seemingly more favored than their own. But

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<sup>4</sup>David G. Dalin and John F. Rothman, *Icon of Evil: Hitler’s Mufti and the Rise of Radical Islam* (New York: Random House, 2008), 46–52, 56.

we will be exploring for the remainder of this study how the rejected *religion* operates under the surface to psychologically empower the political rejectionism.

I admit it is an audacious claim. Almost anyone would say that surely a Muslim who chooses to live peacefully beside his Jewish or Christian neighbors can enjoy and benefit from his religion in the same way they enjoy and benefit from theirs. And at one level this is true; nominal Jews, Christians, and Muslims can live like this, as can Buddhists, Hindus, and others. But the most serious adherents of the biblical religions will be working at another level where conflict cannot be avoided. The world generally wants to dismiss those extremists, so that we can all live happily together, but clearly this is not what is happening in history, and whatever the dynamic of this struggle is, we have not tamed it by telling everyone to be nice. So we need to look closely at the religious dynamic of the parties to the Middle East conflict.

### *iii. The Religions as Players*

It is an empirical question whether or not Muslims are moderate and peaceful, and, looking around, the answer is yes, *but not completely*. If moderation is lacking in Islam, a good place to look for the explanation is in the religion itself, although nearly everyone wants to play the religious pluralist and minimize any actual differences in belief. All religions boil down to the Golden Rule, we are told. But that is a shallow view of what these religions believe. We will find, looking more closely, that Islam has qualities that account for its tendency toward extremism, and that it really does oppose Judaism and Christianity. In a way, nearly every religion opposes every other one, but the specific way in which Islam goes against Judaism and Christianity is relevant to the explanation of Middle East conflict. The Qur'an's words about violence in *jihad*, are not at issue here, but instead the nature of Islam with respect to guilt, righteousness, salvation, and related theological issues within theism.

Drs. Emir and Ergun Caner, American Muslim brothers who converted to Christianity and wrote *Unveiling Islam*, said on the John Ankerberg Show (Nov. 15, 2009) that as young Muslims they were saddled with a huge amount of guilt and insecurity regarding their spiritual condition. They were taught that there is a balance sheet of good and evil attached to each human life, and only if the balance turned out to be positive could one receive divine acceptance. It was clear what needed to be done to win these points, but it would never be clear whether or not one had done enough. So there was guilt and no security at all.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Ergun Mehmet Caner and Emir Fethi Caner, *Unveiling Islam: An Insider's Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2002).

J.D. Greear, author of *Breaking the Islam Code: Understanding the Soul Questions of Every Muslim*, speaks also of this lack of security, in a *Christian Post* article. “This is probably the saddest things about Islam, because nobody knows for sure,” Greear said. “[I]n the Hadith (the collection of Muhammad’s sayings) you find out that Muhammad said, ‘I don’t know for sure if I’m going to heaven.’”<sup>67</sup>

But this lack of security, Drs. Caner point out, is the secret of the success of Islamist manipulation and recruitment. Americans chuckle or grimace at the notion of 72 virgins greeting the suicide bomber in paradise, but a carrot like that coupled with a stick of extreme condemnation is very powerful. The condemnation motivates more than the reward, because guilt is a torment, and if the supremely righteous act is to kill many people and also oneself, then the self-hatred hidden in guilt is merged into the righteous act. One kills himself and many infidels, too, and goes to paradise. We call this extremism, but the problem of guilt and its power to motivate comes from the actual beliefs of this religion.

To understand the power of guilt, we need to compare Islam with Judaism and Christianity. Judaism and Islam are both legal religions, meaning that they base righteousness on the observation of rules, thought to be given by God. Christianity goes beyond this paradigm to profess that salvation is “by grace, through faith” (Ephesians 2.8). Righteousness comes by believing that God has provided it as a free gift, through the propitiatory death of Jesus. But this comparison of the three religions needs many qualifications.

Judaism as a legal religion is Rabbinic Judaism, which began with the Babylonian Captivity but developed fully after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 c.e. Then there was no temple, and the teaching of the Law or *Torah* in the synagogue by the Rabbi became the norm. The Talmud soon took on its final form to supplement the teaching of the Bible. But the Jewish Bible contains a rich and complex idea structure that Christians incorporate fully into their views, and this includes the very thing that was lost with Rabbinic Judaism, which is the temple sacrifice. Christians see it as revealing the plan God had to send his Son as a sacrifice. Judaism teaches about sacrifice from the very beginning of the Pentateuch, and about faith, too, especially the story of Abraham being willing to sacrifice his miraculously conceived son, Isaac. That story includes the divine provision of the sacrifice: a ram was caught by his horns in the thicket, so that Abraham could complete the animal sacrifice in place of the sacrifice of his son. Christianity sees the killing of the son, even though it did not happen, as a picture of the giving of the Son by the Father, to pay the price of human sin. These ideas and many more exist within the religious literature and culture of Judaism, making it the

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.christianpost.com/article/20100225/pastor-core-beliefs-of-islam-is-similar-to-christianity/pageall.html>. March 6, 2010.

<sup>7</sup>J.D. Greear, *Breaking the Islam Code* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 2010).

seedbed of New Testament doctrines. Yet it is in practice a legal religion, and righteousness is measured through observance of the Law.

Judaism and Islam, though based on law, both emphasize God's ability to forgive. In the earlier, biblical Judaism, forgiveness came through temple sacrifice, which Christians interpret as presaging the final sacrifice of Jesus. But after the temple sacrifice ended, Rabbinical Judaism had to do what Islam and nearly any other law-based religion will do: try to keep the rules, but also rely upon God to be forgiving. That resembles the grace idea, and in the actual practice of Christianity there is often little difference. But Christianity does not teach that we try hard and God then forgives as necessary; it is more radical.

The Christian belief is that God provides forgiveness through the death of Messiah (Christ), and it cannot be earned in any degree. Human effort to comply to the Law is ineffective. But Christianity in its compromised form, and both Judaism and Islam in their practices, teach that God sets high standards, and humans must keep them as much as possible, and for whatever they cannot do, God makes up the difference. They try hard to be righteous, and God relaxes the standards enough to allow them a passing grade. Human righteousness and divine holiness meet in this compromise. This is the grand illusion of human religion in general, practiced to some degree by almost anyone religious, but nevertheless not the message of Christianity.

The practice I am describing produces an uneasy mixture of guilt and pride. Religious people feel guilty to the extent they think they have failed to keep the law and prideful when they think they have succeeded in keeping it. Guilt can arise from failure to keep any part of a huge assortment of religious requirements, and it can be allayed by many methods of propitiation, whether ritualistic or psychological, like going to Mass or making promises to God. The guilt can be severe, and the pride can be audacious, but typically the whole process works at a low level, with some guilt, some smugness, and a good measure of evasion and denial.

In theory, Christianity goes beyond this, because guilt is cleansed away continually by faith in the sufficiency of the sacrificial offering of Christ, and pride is whittled away by continued experiences of the fact that righteousness can never be deserved, that it is "unmerited favor," which is the definition of grace. But in practice historical Christianity has seen relatively little of this deliverance from religiosity, because the beliefs about faith and grace are compromised with typical human tendencies in religion, and the institutional church has mostly condoned the religious malfunction I am describing. Revivals have restored the essential message, but revivals have short lives.

Another mark of human religion is that the genuine religious and moral Law of the Bible, the Torah, which is one expression of a global, universal human morality, is lost to sight, covered over by a quilt of misconstruals. These share the

quality of making it seem possible for humans to keep the Law, and often they single out a particular group—one's own—thought especially successful in keeping it, as well as other groups who fail utterly. In Isaiah 29:13 it is written, "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men."

Jesus dealt with this problem of reducing the Law to something a human can perform. The Pharisees were the ones who received the brunt of this correction. Christians see "Phariseeism" as a clear case of religious legalism, reducing the legitimacy of that arm of the Jewish tradition. Then Christianity sees itself as the reformation of a Judaism that had lost track of the meaning of the Law and replaced it with ritual and human regulations. Of course, history shows us that Christianity needed its own Reformation, having strayed from the understanding of righteousness it began with, requiring Luther to bring the "justification by faith" idea back into the center. Dozens of other revivals or reforms have been required to keep Christianity even remotely in touch with this slippery truth about how humans cannot attain righteousness through their efforts. There are perhaps more sightings of this elusive idea in recent decades.

Common religious practice is thus a mix of Torah and many cheap imitations of Torah, some of them looking silly to outsiders but still carrying great psychological weight with those whose religious practice is invested in them. But the defining quality of the Law itself, as glimpsed in Judaism and Christianity, is Love, and in pure form it is impossible to keep. That is, no one can do it in the strength of his or her human abilities, but it can be fulfilled little by little in a human life where there is faith in the grace provided by God.

As we will be examining in Part Three, one could say that the Torah, the Instruction, includes the idea that the Torah, the Moral Law, cannot be fulfilled by human effort. (See Galatians 4:21.) Or we might say that to obey Torah is to give God all of the credit for righteousness where it does appear in human life. Conversely, sin is to claim righteousness and take credit for it. But this is the message that is constantly slipping away and hiding itself from the historical experience of these religions.

Having faith in a freely given grace is, in Christian thinking, sufficient to solve the actual problem of guilt and death, so that the imperfect experience of righteousness while living is consummated in a perfect experience upon death. Theistic religions in general believe something like this, with a judgment day upon death followed by either punishment or reward. But the idea of having earned the reward has slipped back in, in most cases, in place of the Christian idea of being saved by divine provision. Thus the suicide bombers, driven by guilt, have this hope of the ultimate reward, based on an outstanding level of dedication and sacrifice. They feel this is the only way they can get into heaven.

The motivational effect of guilt is the fuel of religious extremism. But even if there were few or no Muslims killing themselves and others to win salvation, the difference would still be there between Christians believing they are saved by grace and Muslims believing they are saved by moral and religious work. This kind of conflict is as old as history, and it is crucial to understanding the Middle East conflict. Every soft word about being nice and recognizing our actual religious commonality entirely misses the point and blinds us to the explanatory key of the Middle East.

When we attend to the genuine conflicts in these religions, we see that Judaism gave birth to Christianity, which sees Jesus bringing out the real meaning of Torah, in contrast to the Jewish establishment that had slipped into legalism. But Judaism was able to ignore the “messianic cult” that became Christianity and continue in its Rabbinic form, keeping alive its identity as Chosen People, destined to bring God’s instruction to the world from Jerusalem.

The Church very quickly lost its salt and became self-righteous, turning its venom on the Jews, thinking that it had written them out of God’s plan for history. The Church did write the New Testament, but Israel’s future is well inscribed there, despite faulty, supersessionist readings of it.

In a few more centuries Islam came on the scene, borrowing stories and prophets from the Jewish-Christian scriptures, but declaring that the Jews had perverted the message, and that Christians had become polytheistic with their wrong view of God and Jesus. They offered a simple plan of righteousness that the Christians see as primitive legalism. Both Christians and Jews think that Islam has added to the message that was already complete.

What needs to be highlighted in this messy scene is the essential difference between the message of human religion and the message of God’s grace. That is the dynamic of the Middle East conflict. It gets clouded over by the fact that Judaism and Islam are both legal religions, on the surface. Yet the line in the sand is between Judaism-Christianity and Islam, not between Judaism-Islam and Christianity. This needs to be explained.

First, there *is* a battle between Judaism and Christianity over this law-and-grace issue. Jews do not like the Gospel, however much they may of late have come to appreciate the growing friendliness of Christians. Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem have driven American Christian tourists out of their neighborhood for the audacity of walking in there wearing shorts and tee shirts emblazoned with “Jesus Loves You” and similar thoughts. That is the law-and-grace conflict, with regard to both the clothing and the messages on it. Much more serious pressures are exerted against the Messianic Jews—Jews believing the gospel—who now are sometimes blocked from immigrating on the grounds that they have by their conversions stopped being Jews.

Since Judaism is the source of the messages that comprise Christianity, it is potentially on the grace side of the law-and-grace divided. And there are historical expectations in Christianity about Jews accepting Jesus as their Messiah. But implying that the Jews will become Christians is misleading. An emerging view in Messianic Judaism is that Christianity is a temporary phenomenon (the church age) and millennial expectations are about the future of Israel and the Jews, as worshipers of *Yeshua Ha Mashiach*.

The grace idea in Judaism is not in religious practice but in its national story. These are the chosen people, who will return to their promised land and will prevail there. They will do this, as this story goes, not because of their merits, but because of their closeness. Paul, in explicating the idea of grace in his letter to the Romans, makes it plain that the stories of Isaac and Ishmael and of Jacob (Israel) and Esau are a figurative presentation of the truth about the futility of religious law and self-effort. But these stories refer also to the historical enactment of God's grace, the real-life manifestation of unmerited favor in the future of the Jews. (See Romans 9:6-16, and my treatment of Romans 9-11 in Chapter 8B.)

The Jewish-Christian relation is complex and difficult, but what is plain is that Islam is a completely legalistic religion. It does have grace and mercy and compassion in its scripture, but only as the compromise described above: God relaxes his holiness a little to accommodate the sincere efforts of the human. All religions do this, including Christian religions, as practiced. But the heart of the unique Christian idea is that God has total grace and the human has no standing before him whatsoever, but for mercy. Instead of God's holiness and humanity's goodness meeting in a compromise, God's utter holiness meets humans in their utter depravity. The cross is where humans killed their *God-who-was-thereby-saving-them*. Or as the angry crowd called out to Pilate, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Mt. 27.25). Their hateful disdain for the consequences of their choice was simultaneously the prophetic declaration of God's love. But all of this is distasteful to human thinking and human religion. Islam does not believe that God could have a son, nor that a prophet like Jesus would be allowed to die on a cross. While Judaism has the grace idea in its roots and is manifesting it—unmerited favor—in its history, Islam comes out openly as a legal, effort-based religion.

Judaism sees Christianity and Islam as uncalled-for additions to the revelation, and Christianity sees Islam that way. Islam sees itself as the correction of the messages brought through Judaism and Christianity. It sees those religions as having lost their purity and their power. The Bible was corrupted by the Jews, and the Christians grossly violated the tenet of monotheism. Yet many of the figures of the biblical religions are prophets in Islam. Abraham is the prophet of faith, Moses the prophet who brought the Law, and Jesus the prophet who taught us about love. But Muhammad, the final prophet, told us finally how to live. Islam presents itself

this way, as, finally, the revelation of what God requires of us. But from the Christian point of view this is nothing less than having suddenly reduced righteousness to rules. It is backsliding, going back “under the law”—legalism of the worst sort.

The pillars of Islam are simple: One accepts the creed, “There is no God but *Allah*, and Muhammad is his prophet.” One prays five times a day bowed toward Mecca, gives a proportion of his wealth to charity, honors the month of fasting at Ramadan, and endeavors to make the pilgrimage to Mecca once in his life. Along with this comes *Shari’a*, the law of God worked into public life, with rules about sexuality, modesty, intoxicants, and other things. Anyone can follow these with enough effort, and anyone can thereby know that he or she has God’s approval. But from the Christian point of view this is the worst possible outcome, because there is nothing worse than to think you have done it all right. That leads to pride, as long as it is going well, and guilt, as soon as anything goes wrong. As Drs. Caner told us above, the actual result often is extreme guiltiness and insecurity, even while the religious life is being pursued with great zeal.

I said above that human religion in general produces a mix of guilt and pride. It also produces a great deal of failure. People simply fail to live up to the expectations they have set for themselves. So if we were to canvas the Muslim experience, which I do not intend to do here, we would find many responding to the promise that they can know what to do and succeed in the worthy project of pursuing righteousness. But we would also find many struggling, making promises to God, and nervously bewailing their lack of success. Malcom X got a grip on himself while in prison and rose up out of his defeats to lead the Black Muslims. The appeal to human dignity, with the promise that one can stand up and succeed, has gone out to thousands of American prisoners and reaped a large harvest. But failures are never far away. Elijah Muhammad, Malcom X’s mentor, was a Muslim leader whose sexual life was a moral failure. The fiction of Middle Eastern authors shows Muslims living wildly, but beneath the radar of their outwardly perfected society.

Of course, the same can be said of Christianity. There are hugely embarrassing moral failures among its most visible leaders. This is because Christian practice is largely legalistic, so there is the reduction of the Law to a set of rules, pride among those who think they are doing well, and guilt among those who fail. Those most prominent often fall the hardest, but according to the same principle: pride goeth before a fall.

The question is not whether Islam or Christianity has the more hypocrisy and hidden failure, but whether Islam and Christianity (and Judaism indirectly) differ fundamentally on beliefs that affect this matter of pride, hypocrisy, failure, and guilt. And they do, because Islam is outwardly a legal religion, and if this kind of religion produces these effects, then it has no other way to go. It can only steer one

into further effort, to the point sometimes of fanaticism. But the Christian “grace” message is the alternative for both Christians and Muslims when they grapple with their religious inadequacies.

The existence of the alternative is good news, known as the “Good News” that is the Gospel, but at the same time it is the *offense* of the Gospel. Thus Islam resists Christianity in both thought and deed. Christians are considered a threat and cannot live and speak freely in an Islamic country, because Islam is opposed to the idea of grace, as Christians understand it. In the pattern of Ishmael mocking Isaac, the child of promise, Islam today does not believe that the promises of God were carried forward through Isaac, through Judaism and Christianity, nor that the teachings of Judaism and Christianity about righteousness through divine provision are correct. One achieves righteousness, according to Islam, by simply knowing what to do and trying hard to do it. Because of this belief, Islam is not friendly to Christianity, which seems easy but is hard on human pride, resulting in the spiritual conflict we now see at work politically.

#### *iv. Islamic Protectionism*

Law-based human religion operates out of both strength and weakness. Within its domain it is strong, but it is defensive toward that which possibly transcends that domain. Although this may sound like an arbitrary pronouncement, there is empirical support for it in observation of the practice of religion—especially in the way that Islam defends itself against the Gospel—and it develops also from the theory of consciousness and value theory that will come in Part Three.

This strength and weakness combination indicates rebellion. Rebels are strong in their domain but defensive toward the greater domain from which they are rebelling. Defensive people speak very strongly, but react to challenging beliefs with a special energy that can be recognized by others as insecurity. The defensive inadvertently bear witness to the power of the idea they are denying, through body language, anger, or loss of control. So although the defensive do not know they are defensive, but think they are right, those around them can see their weakness.

Some people are thoroughly blockaded into their comfortable beliefs about themselves, and as long as the cracks do not show there is little evidence of the defense against a greater power. In the same way, there are long blocks of time in which human religion held such total sway that its defensiveness or its status as rebel did not become visible. When Christianity lapses into legalistic human religion, which has been the case for more centuries than not, then there is no outside voice to raise the issue between legal religion and faith in grace, so religion operates complacently in apparent strength. The persecution of whatever revivalists may appear disturbs the calm exterior, but it still looks like strength.

The voice that is silent when Christianity loses its salt does exist, of course, in scripture, in particular in the witness of Jesus against the religious error of the Pharisees. The best example is when Jesus pointed out to the Pharisees (in Matthew 23) that they say they would not have killed the prophets, as their forefathers did, but in saying that they prove they are just like their forefathers. I do not know if the hearers understood, but we can: their forefathers killed the prophets because they were defensive, and Jesus' hearers joined that same defensiveness when they said they would not have done it. Defensiveness is the problem that cannot see itself as a problem.

When and where the voice of grace will penetrate the shield of legalistic religion is hard to predict, but Christianity presently does express the message. Gone are the centuries in which Christianity as a whole was trapped in its own self-righteous bubble. So we see a great deal of religious conflict issuing from this battle between the self-righteous human spirit and the message that would puncture its illusion. Wherever there is persecution of Christians, whether blatant or subtle, this battle is being fought. It is not the turf battle of Christendom versus other faiths, but the hostility within a humanistic culture, both religious and secular, toward the gospel. The persecutor has power but is nervous in the presence of this other message that is a threat.

Islamism and Islam itself bring out most clearly the pattern I am describing. Islam is in most respects just another example of a human religion, and as such it resists any message that could unveil its pretense of having solved the human problem by religious effort. But it is a special case in the way it is bringing this issue of law and grace before the world because of the political visibility of the conflict, and also because of its identity with Ishmael, who represents this problem in scripture. Not that my interpretation of Islamism as a conflict of law and grace is prevalent, by any measure; most commentators have not glimpsed it, so it is not exactly "before the world." But I believe this interpretation is about to burst forth upon us, because a relatively monolithic law-based religion is extremely hostile to Christianity and politically hostile to Zionism, and this religion's cracks—its nervousness in the presence of what it denies—are indeed showing. Its defensiveness is against the gospel of grace and the historical grace being visited upon the Jews, which is to say that both religiously and politically this is Ishmael railing at the favor of Isaac. He comes on strong, but he is defending himself against that which is greater.

I may be audacious to claim that a transcendent message is being delivered through its dramatic enactment in political events. But as a restrained hypothesis, look at this in a psychiatric way. Suppose that people really do feel guilty and try to deal with the guilt through human religion, but this does not work. The guilt transforms itself into anger and blame, and these fuel political conflict, which begs for an explanation. Should these religious questions about guilt and grace enter into

the world's conversation, that could be the conduit that begins to release the intellectual pressure.

I do not mean that if we begin to see why Islamists feel the way they do, then the problem will slow down, back up, and recede. The buildings crashing to the streets in New York City raised this terrible question, "Why do they feel this way?" But I do not expect a gradual therapeutic effect from the world's asking and listening. The process is crisis-driven and apocalyptic. But if the Middle East conflict is driven by religious guilt, rather than being caused by the West and Israel, then this fact will become vital to the public discussion.

Despite the pressure to understand and to relieve guilt, there is strong pressure holding back the process, too. The "Obsession" film ends marveling at the huge denial that sets in when someone claims there really is a global attack upon Western civilization. Nonie Darwish says that we are strangling ourselves with political correctness. As an example, Michael Moore appears briefly and assures us that "there is no terrorist threat, there is no terrorist threat." He allows there has been terrorism and there will be more, but there is no organized "Threat" with which to be doing battle. He stands squarely against the neoconservative idea that there is a battle of good and evil, even though he is actually fighting such a battle from another perspective. The Liberal rejects the traditional alignment of good and evil because he sees it as oppressive, and in this way he aligns himself with the humanism hidden in the Islamist struggle.

In his religious psychology, the Islamist cannot allow himself to see that he is "kicking against the goad," thus bringing his trouble upon himself by making himself an enemy of Power itself. He believes he is serving the good against evil, out of a calling born of necessity. It is far from his mind that he could have created a world with its own misplaced Center, a false god (as will be explored in the fourteenth chapter, called "Hagar's New Religion"). It is even further from his mind that he could, in doing this, be inadvertently picturing for the world the human problem, the source of all conflict.

It is hard for the world to see the underlying religious element in this conflict, but it does see how protective Islamist thought can be. If the ever-present qualification of Muslim "extremists" begins to slip a little, as it did in "Obsession" (despite the opening disclaimer), voices will arise to call this discriminatory. Denial of the full import of global *jihad* is a manifestation of the mysterious protection that Islam enjoys within the public thought process. This unusual political sensitivity to the feelings of Muslims, the fear that they will be unduly criticized *en masse* by Westerners, is one of the main puzzling facts this book seeks to explain. (It will be taken on in force in chapter 12, "The Cain Factor.") Conservatives attribute it to political correctness, as did Nonie Darwish, above. As I write, the country is discussing the murder of 13 soldiers by U. S. Army Major and psychiatrist, Nidal

Malik Hasan. One side is being exceptionally careful not to call this *jihad* or terrorism, while others see signs sticking out all over that his motive was little different than the openly Islamist terrorists we see so often. He survived his would-be suicidal attack, and we will learn more about this in coming months or years.

Jamie Glazov, of *FrontPage Magazine*, who is the son of Russian dissidents in the Brezhnev era, argues today at City-Journal.org that when it becomes obvious to all that this was an act of *jihad*, the Left will be unable to accept it.

“Leftists will either fall into apathetic silence or respond that it was American racism, oppression, and Islamophobia that forced Hasan’s hand. To recognize the evil of Nidal Hasan and his ideology, to admit the existence of pernicious enemies, is to concede that there are societies, cultures, and systems that are much more unjust than ours. This is an untenable step for leftists to take, because it means acknowledging that there is something superior about our civilization that’s worth saving and defending.”<sup>8</sup>

Glazov’s provocative speculation brings together several themes that gather around in one’s attempt to understand *jihad*. Islamist extremism is politically correct, that is, politically *protected*, in that much of the world cannot see it for what it is. It is especially the Left that is blinded to its reality, because what we call politically correct is central to the identity of the Left. They see things from political correctness—their progressive agenda for the world—and cannot see political correctness itself. This allows their surprising partnership with Islamist fundamentalism. Finally, the Islamists’ anarchistic despising of all things Western, Christian, and Jewish is the same Marxist theme discussed above in the “Excusers” chapter. Regardless of unfulfilled leftist promises, privileged Westerners who lean to the Left have learned to hate their own culture in the Marxist way. The Attackers are the accusers of the West, and the Excusers are their compliant guilt-trippers.

Partly as a result of the protective spirit gathered around the Islamists, many books are appearing to show that Arab Muslims are not the enemy. For instance, there is *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy*, by Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg. One from the world of film is *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, by Jack G. Sheehan. I cannot judge the accuracy of this film writer’s assessment of the industry’s output in this regard, and I suppose that since there are feelings of fear and distrust toward Arabs then the film industry will capitalize on it. But the surprising defensiveness regarding Islam shows in the introduction where Sheehan scoffs at the absurd belief that the Palestinians were somehow connected to the Nazis. But of course they were: the Grand Mufti of

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<sup>8</sup><http://www.city-journal.org/2009/eon1222jg.html>. 22 Dec. 2009.

Jerusalem did meet with Hitler in 1941 and pledge himself and his people to the cause of Jewish extermination. Facts like this are easily left unnoticed.

Although Sheehan may correctly see the bias against Arabs, Hollywood as a cultural force leans the other way, too, and participates in the sensitivity I am describing. When Tom Clancy's novel, *The Sum of all Fears*, was put to film, it was no longer Arabs from the Middle East who found the crashed plane with its bomb and reconstructed it into a hydrogen bomb intended for Denver and the Super Bowl; it was European neo-Nazis. The film came out the year after 9/11. When Steven Spielberg made his "Munich" film about Israeli commandos retaliating for the Munich Olympics massacre, he made a place for the Palestinians to voice their complaint—and was ravaged slightly by the Jewish community for doing so. The scene in which the Palestinians spoke was somewhat contrived, as if Spielberg felt he had to insert this view from the other side. He also directed the film to an unromantic ending that did not affirm Israel's actions, but expressed extreme self-doubt. In another part of the film industry, in the extremely successful "Slum Dog Millionaire," the trauma experienced early on by the boy was violence against him and his kind as Muslims in India. In those three high profile films no bad Arabs were put on display.

A person entering this conversation with little background information might ask right away whether these Arabs and Muslims are victims of long-standing European prejudice and racism, as with Africans and others. But the Islamic Middle East was a powerful culture vying with Europe on its own terms, locked into a struggle for religious and political domination. The power of the West has had the upper hand in recent centuries, but religiously the Muslims are winning the battle today. Islam controls almost all of the land it ever controlled, with Spain the largest exception; the Balkans are a mixed bag of Christian-Muslim influence, and there the West intervened to protect the Muslims against the Christian Serbs. So this is not a case of a culture decimated by European white supremacy.

With the Arabs in Israel and Palestine, the situation is complicated, because the Israelis are defending themselves against the hostile actions of the Arabs among and around them. Possibly, they are defending themselves against the actions brought on by their own racist disregard for the welfare of the Palestinians, and by their colonialist mentality and grab for land. Whether or not that is the case is what the world is trying to sort out. But if we ask, "Are these 'Reel bad' Arabs being shown in films a persecuted and racially marginalized ethnic group?" then the question takes an ironic twist: their bad press comes from the fact that they are attacking the Jews, who *are* a long-persecuted people group. Arab hostility may be exacerbated by Israeli misdeeds, but it did not begin that way. Attacks upon Jews prior to Israel's existence have had no sensible explanation at all, and Zionism is a response to centuries of such treatment. It is not a new thing that the Grand Mufti

of Jerusalem followed Hitler and promoted the anti-Semitism present in Palestine since the beginning of this conflict.

This is a chicken-or-the-egg problem: are the Jews disliked for their policies, or are their policies a result of their being disliked, that is, resisted to the point of would-be annihilation? When one hearkens to the first answer, that they are disliked for their actions, he will perceive Israel as guilty—but then *what else is new?* Possibly they really are guilty, but their *seeming* guilty proves little, based on the witness of world history. They have always *seemed* guilty. If one takes the second answer, he sees the Israelis doing their best with an extremely difficult situation. In that case, then, Palestinian Arabs are leading the region into an unjustified attack, and that is ample explanation for their bad showing in the press. And yet voices spring up bewailing the unfair treatment in public opinion of the Arab Muslims.

In its bluntest form, the irony is that a film-maker showing the dysfunctions of Islam can be murdered, a note of protest attached to his body with a stabbed knife, and the perpetrator can say in court later that he would do it again, and yet many wonder why Islam has a bad name. It is a surprising defensiveness about the murderous effect of defensiveness.

The questioning about the treatment of Arab Muslims in the press goes on alongside the fact that the Jews, too, see themselves fighting a defensive propaganda war. They are trying to be good and wonder why they are blamed for being bad. The Islamists issue and carry out death threats against those who make them look bad, which, as *jihad*, is their way of trying to be good, and wonder why they are held in ill repute. It might seem that the Jews are asking the harder question.

One may want at this point to agree that it is all relative, each side battling the other in a war of words. But such relativism is a lazy non-solution of a genuine problem. To see the true shape of things, we can include the fact that Jews have had a bad press for most of history, and as a regathered nation they still can do no right in the eyes of many; this just continues the trend. It is more plausible that their undeserved outlaw status continues in this region, as always before and everywhere, than that suddenly now they control the press and feed the frenzy of hateful Americans to make the Muslims look bad.

The battle of points-of-view has kicked up enough dust that it is difficult to factually determine who is more misjudged, the Arabs or the Jews. Both sides feel misjudged, and the evidence will seem plain to those on either side. Part Two will deal directly with that war of words, and Part Three will put it into a new context. The thought for now is that there is a remarkable protectiveness about the perception of Islam, and that this manifests the defensiveness of the human spirit.

v. *The Ummah*

The Islamic calendar begins at the year 622 c.e. and counts from that year, but you cannot get the present Islamic date by subtracting 622 from, say, 2012, because the calendar is based on lunar months, and there is no correction to synchronize it with the solar year, no “leap months” as with the Jewish lunar calendar. As a result, the holidays on the lunar calendar float around the solar year, with the interesting result that dawn to sundown fasting in Ramadan, near the summer solstice, in, say, the United Kingdom, can be taxing. But I read somewhere that the Islamic calendar is “perfect” and needs no corrections. I thought to myself dryly, “Well, yes, it is perfect, in a sense, if it is accountable to nothing but itself.” That Islam uses such a calendar is not significant in itself, but it is a token of a peculiar tactic of the human spirit: to be perfect, simply cancel any standard by which you might be judged imperfect. It is no wonder that the world loves relativism, for with its help everyone can avoid being wrong.

Avoidance of correction is part of the resistance to transcendent standards that is rooted in the human condition. The basis of this will be explored in Part Three, especially chapter 11, “Departments of Self-Defense,” and chapter 12, “The Cain Factor.” It manifests itself in many ways. It is in human religion in general, which appears to embrace the transcendent Law but has carved it into shapes amenable to humans’ optimistic views of themselves. It is in secular humanism, which denies the traditional standards, but reimposes its own morality of tolerance. And we see this avoidance in the anti-religious Left, fueled by the special energy of a liberation movement. Its values become supreme and justify any kind of extreme action. In all these movements, where the transcendent source of values has been displaced an alternative source has risen up. Humans are never as “value-free” as some intend to be. Even postmodernism, which seeks directly to neutralize all corrective values, provides the tools by which other movements advance their cause, all of them together waging war on transcendence.

The alternative source of values can be broadly described as the human community, the “horizontal,” as opposed to the “vertical” or divine. Moral and religious work is done to please the humans gathered around. In the biblical narrative of the tower of Babel, the community sought to advance itself as God, saying “Let us make a name for ourselves” (Genesis 11:4). But God put an end to it and divided the languages of humankind and scattered them. This prefigures how humans group themselves together in agreement about what is good and important, but in conflict with other groups. If history has a resolution, it could be that all the humans finally become one group again. Yet biblical theory sees that not as a solution but as the final crisis, a coming to a head of the underlying poison. To be

united would be, once again, to be united *against* the transcendent, unless something else has changed.

In the present world, ultimate values are held in suspicion as standing in the way of peace, but conflict seems to be increasing, not lessening, as we shake ourselves loose of them. Our rising up *together* and *against* transcendence has got us *scattered*—in history and more so today. Lack of transcendence unleashes the amoral impulses of power-seeking humans and puts us in a state of nature. Muslims seek a global community, but sectarian violence tears them apart.

My thoughts here are speculative, but Part Three will ground them in a plausible theory of human experience. These ideas are important to our examination of Islam. It is a human religion like many others, and it shares the widespread temptation to please men, rather than God. But it also *specializes* in this practice, in a sense, and shows it to the world. When we understand the Islamic *ummah* we get a clear picture of how human religion delivers approval based on other people and bypasses genuine transcendence.

In the plain sense of the word, the *ummah* is simply the community of believers, not much different than the Church or the Buddhist *Sangha*. It is more geographical than these others, since one can refer to the *ummah* as extending from Pakistan in the east to the western end of North Africa, and this has implications regarding the global intentions of Islamists, since these are not pluralistic lands. It is also overtly political, in that ideally the community blends religion and public law together, living under *shari'a*. In this respect it has an integrity usually missing in the West, because the source of values in religion is embraced, whereas the West slights that connection, even though it exists historically. The West mostly prefers to live with the resulting confusion, because the merging of “church and state,” is thought dangerous.

This is all familiar ground. The particular features of Islamic *ummah* that will contribute to my present analysis of human religion are threefold. First, the *ummah* is profoundly *horizontal*. It is the community of humans who approve of each other in their religious and moral endeavors. This will become a major theme in the remainder of this book. It is part of the ongoing religious critique, and it helps us understand how the Islamic community functions; it also connects the Islamic community with Western liberalism. The second is that even while the *ummah* seeks to be the basis of unity, it has the seeds of discord in it, as is evidenced in Middle East infighting and presaged in the biblical predictions that Ishmael would live “against his brethren.” The third feature of the *ummah* to be explored is how it defines itself *in opposition* to the greater powers that surround it. It stands in the position of the rebel, as described above. This, too, is part of the Ishmael identity.

Many may quickly disallow my point about the “horizontal” character of moral judgments in Islam, because it is a comparative value judgment about religions. But that is just political correctness in action, and the objection itself is part of the battle against a transcendent moral voice. I will be held accountable to the standard of Tolerance as I make these comparative judgments, but that standard depends upon there being no vertical component in religions. If there is a vertical component, a genuine will of God, then surely a religion could be found to be in error. That error could be significant to understanding the Middle East problem. So if we are really trying to learn what is going on, we will not take it as a given that no value judgment about religions can be made.

Some may object to my claim about Islam doing its works “before men,” asking, Are not all religions about pleasing other humans, or at least subject to decay that slides them in that direction? Why pick out Islam on this point? I answer that, yes, all religions are subject to this (and to the skeptic, all religions are nothing more than this). But Islam is manifesting the syndrome in a special way, I will be claiming, that presents it to the world for serious discussion. If even one terrorist killed innocents because of the driving force of guilt, and if guilt prevails mostly when religions are operating in this way, then Islam and especially Islamism are bringing this matter before the world. It is a case in point, a demonstration from which the world needs to learn.

Another objection will be that Islam, of all religions, has the most pronounced presentation of the vertical, transcendent voice. The will of *Allah* is the backbone of Islam. So if all theists tend to believe in this, and yet many slip away from it in practice, then certainly Islam is one of those that holds to the belief definitively, even if practice falls short. And yet I am saying that Islam is “profoundly” horizontal, and that it has become the paradigm case of the horizontally operating human religion.

I will not be able to fully develop this claim until near the end of the book in chapters 13 and 14 on Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael. In Part Three I will be looking at the biblical narrative and viewing the Middle East problems through its messages, treated as revelation. (Readers will not be asked to take this on authority, but to consider whether this point of view sheds light on Middle East conflict.) It will be possible then to see how Islam could be holding to a counterfeit “transcendence.” It is no secret that *Allah* and the God of the Bible are not always considered to be the same entity, religion teachers’ platitudes notwithstanding. A psychological treatment of the step taken by Hagar—that is, of the process mythically represented in the story—will show the new “transcendent” erected as a construct of the human defensive spirit. Of course, to say that humans have constructed something to worship is just to find another instance of idolatry, which is spread across the entire field of religions, and secular pursuits, too. But, again,

the point will be that the problem is brought to visibility in Islam because of its present political effect.

The claim about “horizontal” religion is that even though Islam seems to base its religious and moral requirements on the will of *Allah*, the governing principle is the will of the human community. The “surrender” in “Islam” is to the will of the human community, as mediated in religious observances. This is true of Christianity and Judaism, too, when they function in a damaged form, but in these religions there are messages calling believers back to the pure form. It is possible in Judaism and Christianity, at least in principle, to separate idolatry from worship of God. But if the purest form of worship of *Allah* is in fact bowed to the will of the human community, then there is no purification to be found, no messages calling anyone back to the real thing. There are disputes about who is doing it better, but no one calling that whole process a mistake. Islam does without the biblical God, who, though often blocked from sight by human constructs, nevertheless genuinely transcends them.

To put this more technically and carefully, the biblical religions contain ideas that can separate true worship from idolatry. Detailed symbolism on this point permeates the Bible, and when interpreted it meshes with doctrinal statements. The starting point, perhaps, is the golden calf story in Exodus, which illustrates the doctrinal point that humans should not worship their own abilities. These are signified by the jewelry of which the calf was molded, given to the Israelites as they left Egypt. The correction in this story could be applied to Islam itself, as if it tired of waiting for the fulfillment of the monotheistic promises (lost on the mountain in fire and smoke) and produced a short cut, the simple guidance of Muhammad. If this criticism applies, then the Qur’an is a human voice that appears in the clothes of transcendence. Seeking approval on its terms turn out to be seeking approval from humans. In the story, the *people* took command of their “leader,” Aaron, saying “Up, make us gods,” and when he collected from them their jewelry and forged the idol, *they* said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (Exodus 32:4) Out of lack of faith in the missing transcendent law-giver, the people took the initiative and did it on their own, much like Abraham lost faith in the delayed promise of a son and did it *on his own* in fathering Ishmael.

Biblical thought can understand Islam as idolatry, and it can apply the criticism to the practice of its own religions, too, but without reducing Torah to nothing but a human construct. It perceives that idolatry exists when humans construct a god by construing divine requirements in a way that makes them observable by fallen humans. But this is exactly what Muhammad offered, a simple set of rules that anyone who hears rightly can keep. It is a legal religion, which is a form of idolatry, the making of a graven image—a *likeness* of the Law. Judaism and Christianity do this, too, but their documents and traditions have the conceptual tools to see how they go wrong, while this kind of error—preserving human pride—

exists among Muslims not as an aberration, but as the finest example of Islamic practice.

The problem with legalism is that it produces laws that humans can feel they have kept. I can imagine a voice that cries out, “*Of course* the Law must be possible for humans to fulfill, or what good is it?” But this is the heart of the matter: thinking that we can keep the Law is violating it. *The Law is about the fact that we cannot keep the Law.* Paul writes, “Tell me, you who desire to be under law, do you not hear the law?” (Gal. 4:21) Then he gives his teaching about Isaac and Ishmael. This is the message that transcends all the mock-ups of the Law, because it is the message humans would never have arrived at if left to their own devices. In Part Three it will be my job to show the psychological facts about fallen humanity that produce this message and the resistance to it.

In the real world of religious life, of course, any religion will be able to understand another as idolatry. Muslims speak often of idolatry, of *shirk*, which is wrongful “association,” adding anything to *Allah*, like his having a son. But the problem of human works of righteousness is not addressed at all, because Muslims believe in human works, as do religionists of every stripe throughout history. There is “minor shirk” in Islam, which is showing off, and “secret shirk,” which is praying in order to impress others, and these draw close to the biblical wisdom, but the problem of “trying to do it yourself” is not recognized. One is enjoined to find out what *Allah* requires and perform it. The emphasis is upon getting the message right, being “rightly guided,” rather than on the difficulty or even impossibility of pleasing God. *Shirk* will always be not doing enough, or not doing it right. And practices that may seem to some like doing it right will be found by others to be idolatry.

Islam has its form of the grace idea, and a successful Muslim would thank *Allah* for having granted him the clarity of mind that could hear the truth. But a biblical believer, when functioning properly, does not say, “God, I thank thee that I am not like other men” (Luke 18:11). Instead, he thanks God for accepting him unconditionally, as he would anyone else, on the basis of God’s provision of the required sacrifice. Islam dislikes the idea of sacrifice and says that God would never have allowed his prophet, Jesus, to die in that way. And it then proceeds to spell out how humans can achieve righteousness, with a little help from *Allah*.

So my claim about the *ummah* is that righteousness is being dispensed by human approval as governed by a system of religious work. The transcendent is not really there, but it is a construct by which this human approval is made official. What Freud said about religion in general is possibly the whole story with this one: human power over the subject is internalized and projected into reality as God telling that subject what to do. But here the power is institutionalized and is not based as much on parental authority as on social approval.

There are two points running alongside each other here. One is that Islam is transparently law-based. This is easy to observe in just the basic beliefs about how one becomes a Muslim and practices the faith. The second is that transcendence has slipped away, and righteousness is dispensed in a wholly human way. The man-made laws please humans, because, as performable laws they do not challenge human pride and self-sufficiency. And the psychological experience of receiving approval comes from other humans, though largely internalized as expectations of what others would think. As part of the package, guilt comes through others, too, which is why it can be difficult to find out with which group one can function well. The seeds of division are in this fact. It is actually the pursuit of purity that causes division, as we can see by looking for a moment at how people pursue the religious life of Islam.

I have often wondered how and why young Americans decide to become Muslims. The prisoner population is a special category because of the sense of victimhood that radical Islam ferrets out and capitalizes upon. And sometimes desperate men find within themselves the resolve to turn their lives around. But why do ordinary Americans or others from Western culture turn in that direction, given that the social climate here promotes fun and freedom far more than serious religion? It is generally known that people entering cults tend to be insecure and more than normally vulnerable to the approval and disapproval of the group. But does this apply to religious conversions in general, and to Islam?

The answer clearly has to do with *guilt*. In any theistic religion the seekers are hoping to solve the problem of guilt, although they may avoid that word, preferring to think in terms of the search for meaning, finding the truth, or finding “what will work” for them. In traditional terms, it is simply a matter of finding what God requires of us. If theism is valid, that is, if transcendent or “vertical” truth and values do exist, then guilt is a matter between one person and God. But what other people think about us makes a huge difference in how we feel about ourselves. The approval of others can easily stand in for an actual resolution of the guilt problem. If not, then Jesus was not the perceptive teacher he is usually taken to be, for it was plain to him that we do our works of righteousness “before men.” So how one enters a religion or any other endeavor of moral improvement will be affected by the tension between the vertical and the horizontal source of approval.

I learned about the force of group approval and about how young Americans get interested in Islam from the memoir, *My Year in Radical Islam*, by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross. He was an American, Jewish youth with very liberal, hippy parents in an Oregon community where such attitudes were the norm. Near the end of his undergraduate work in a college in the East, he began to explore Islam, mostly through friendship with an Indian student who was a Muslim. Then in a time abroad in Italy he met Sufi Muslims and was converted under their tutelage,

publicly reciting the *Shahadah*, the affirmation that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet. He began to learn the proper way to pray and the other marks of Islamic life. Back in the United States, he took a job with an Islamic charity in his home town. It was supported by Saudi Arabia and more an advocacy group than a charity. For about a year he moved further into the radical practice of Islam, and then he ceased working there and went to law school in New York. Within the next year or so he began to think very seriously about where he had been going, and he pulled back from Islam. He ended up in Christianity and worked as an anti-terrorism consultant.

This is hardly a typical story of a convert to Islam, but because he was in and then out, and because he reflected carefully on the experience, it is an instructive story. As he began to second-guess the whole experience he took note of the real reason for his initial choice of Islam: it had made him feel comfortable. He reflects on this as he is considering whether or not he could leave Islam, since as an apostate he would be thought deserving of death. He writes, “I realized that my goal was to please God, not to cower before Islam’s apostasy strictures. And I realized that I wasn’t sure that I *had* found the truth in Islam.” A half page later he writes, “I now believed that one’s level of comfort shouldn’t be a factor in *any* religious decision; the only consideration was God’s will, not one’s own. *But if my original decision to become Muslim was based on what felt comfortable, maybe it too was wrong.*”<sup>9</sup>

He entered Islam because it felt comfortable, but in order to remain comfortable he had to adopt positions more and more alien to his own background—about which I will say more below. When Islam quite suddenly lost its grip on him it was because he was considering in an objective way whether or not that had been the will of God. His entry to Christianity was based on the studied decision that it had the best factual support, the best proof of being God’s will, in the teachings and witness of the New Testament. No humans were grouped around him to lead him that way. So we see here a clear division between the horizontal, the comfortable feelings, and the vertical, the demands of God’s will.

Of course, the Muslim will believe he is tracking God’s will, and the new Christian, too, will be subject to the lure of group approval. But as we see both sides through this double conversion story it is possible to surmise that the comfortable feeling was that of having other people give you attention, show great interest in your decision, and, as you move toward their position, assure you that you are doing a good and important thing. If then, some years later, you lose faith in that whole position, it could be because you have come into the orbit of a different group—and if there is no transcendence, then that is all it could be. But it is possible that in this case you have connected with that which transcends the

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<sup>9</sup>Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, *My Year in Radical Islam* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Penguin Group U.S.A., 2007), 228–9.

opinions of all the groups, which would be *the Transcendent*, the vertical will of God.

It may be impossible to prove that this is the correct description of what happened in this case, but there are signs. An instructive part of this story is how Gartenstein-Ross moved into *radical* Islam in the company of the organization he was working for. His first contact with Islam was at college, and he and his Muslim friend were idealistic social activists, concerned about the problems of racism and injustice. Enlightenment values were part of their world view. His conversion then occurred among the Sufi in Italy, whom he found warm and pleasant. When he began to work for the Islamic organization in Oregon, the same friendly camaraderie was there, but in order to stay with that spirit he had to move in directions that were surprising to him and to the reader witnessing this transformation. He learned the rules of how far up the foreleg to roll one's pant legs. He agonized over whether to keep his beard when interviewed regarding his successes in national college debating. When a schoolteacher visiting the Islamic center put out her hand, as colleagues in America would, he did not shake her hand. A visiting Imam was standing nearby, and he succumbed to the rule that a Muslim male may not touch a woman. To her it was a visible insult. He had broken up with his girlfriend and then become engaged to her, but he struggled over what to do when together. He proposed that they have an early Islamic marriage, so they could be together, but she declined. At the suggestion of one of his brothers at the center, he gave up listening to music.

The tension between what Gartenstein-Ross considered normal for a well-meaning and idealistic young person and the growing demands of Islamic fundamentalism reached a peak when he found himself seriously considering that a Muslim turned apostate should be killed. Another visiting leader told two young boys living with their Muslim father that their mother, who had departed and returned to Christianity, should be killed, and Gartenstein-Ross found himself entertaining the possibility that this was true. When he began to step away from Islam he faced the risk of being killed, but he dismissed it in favor of his new perception of the will of God. He decided he should not "cower before Islam's apostasy strictures." But consider how that threat and the "comfortable" beginning tie together: people bring you in warmly and lead you into their interpretation of the will of *Allah*, and if you agree and have the necessary self-control then all is well, but if you disagree or fail, then the same social force turns its other face. Invitation, promises, instruction, coaching, and then guilt, disapproval, the threat of extreme measures—these all operate in the horizontal dimension, meted out by humans as part of human religion. It is justified as the will of *Allah*, but people interpret that will, and people make it comfortable or not comfortable, depending on how you are doing with the demands of the group you are in.

The skeptic will say that the switch to Christianity is to but another of these human voices, and if so, then all the religions are fully horizontal together. But if that switch is to actual transcendence, as measured by the fact that humans themselves would not have created such belief—because it mortifies human pride—then we see here the distinction between the vertical and the horizontal, genuine and construct, God and the graven image.

Another important thing to be garnered from Gartenstein-Ross's account is that, as he went through these steps toward fundamentalism, he quickly realized that groups he had embraced, mainly the Sufi group in Italy, were being held in high disrespect and scorn by those he had come to be with. It is as if he could have been three different Muslims, if he had stayed in the college environment, stayed in Italy, or returned to Oregon and its fundamentalist group, and all three of these groups would have distanced themselves from the others. In particular, the *more* fundamentalist group had scorn for the others, while the friendlier groups would have serious concern about the narrowness of the fundamentalists. In the larger world of Islam (as with Christianity in various times and places), there would be more than one way to be a fundamentalist, and these equally strict and motivated groups would quickly be at each other's neck. This is where we see in the *ummah* the roots of division. The attempt at purity, which theoretically could lead to unity, has the opposite effect. This suggests that purity and righteousness, in this horizontal orientation, are always *greater* purity and righteousness, or *more correctly discerned* purity and righteousness, and the negative comparison of others is essential to the felt experience of righteousness, thus making division inevitable.

For a short course in the problem, complete with details, I refer you again to John L. Esposito, with his *Unholy War*. In the second and third chapters he portrays fundamentalist groups throughout the history of Islam. He does not make my point about division being caused by the search for righteousness greater than others', but he gives all the examples. In the second chapter, on "Jihad and the Struggle for Islam," we see, one after another, this or that group *going out* from another group (*hijrah*) and declaring itself *against* that group (*jihad*). *Shi'a* separates from *Sunni* over leadership, and splits into "Twelvers" and "Seveners"; the *Kharijites*, whose name means "to go out" or "exit," pull away from the *Shi'a*, because of compromise; the fundamentalist *Wahhabi* arise out of *Sunni* in the 18th century and are a major presence in Islam today.

As I look this over I find the key word is "purity." Everyone is seeking purity. In a grace-based religion it would be given in totality as the purity of God, who covers the imperfections of men. But in law-based religions the search for purity drives groups apart. Some always dare to push the envelope slightly more, to give up more; or they feel they have more carefully discerned what must be given up. And that group considers itself more righteous than the others, while the others

claim to be more righteous in their moderation, or in their more accurate choice of what is essential to purity.

It is surprising to me that Esposito does not see in all this data the pattern I am writing about, but I suppose his commitment to moderation and pluralism keeps him from it. The dynamic of salvation and righteousness is kept under wraps in order to remain moderate and pluralistic. In his benign view of Islam Esposito finds hope that extremism can be given up, so that the moderate essence of Islam can be recovered and dominate. His last words on how that might happen deal with politics and economics as causes, which turns the finger toward the West once again. Like so many, he is very slightly in the Islamist camp, simply by being a well-meaning humanist. To put such a view in a kettle with the rabid terrorists will seem crazy, but only if the real nature of this conflict has not yet been seen.

Esposito renounces the “clash of civilizations” thesis of Huntington, as is the case generally with moderates or pluralists. He quotes a line from near the end of Huntington’s book that is almost exactly what I am claiming here: “Islam is bloody at its borders and in its innards.” In response to this Esposito tells us that Islam is not monolithic, so generalizations like Huntington’s are suspect. As proof he gives examples of the many ways the region has not been able to pull together into a pan-Arabic unity. He says that these groups work together insofar as culture and religion draw them together, but split apart as soon as national interest or self-interest requires it.<sup>1011</sup> But that is exactly what Huntington meant by “bloody innards” and exactly what Esposito has shown so clearly in his many examples. Again, I am wondering why he does not follow through with the obvious interpretation: It is of the essence of Islam to be in conflict both within and without, which is Genesis’ prophetic description of Ishmael.

The final trait of the Islamic community to be considered is that it defines itself in opposition to existing power. I have for some time told religion students that Islam begins in 622 c.e., with the *Hijrah*, because Yathrib was the first *community* of Muslims. Islam understands itself *as a community*, with religion and politics merged, which is a new idea to Western students believing in separation of church and state. Eventually, I asked myself a new question. Why did the Muslims not date their calendar from 630, when they took control of Mecca? After all, Mecca is their most important city, the goal of the *Hajj*, the location of the *Ka’bah*. Why would they not commemorate the time when they controlled Mecca and all of Arabia? The answer, I think, is that Islam understands itself *as a community under*

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<sup>10</sup>Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, ?

<sup>11</sup>Other books by Esposito include The Islamic Threat: Myth and Reality (1999) and, very recently, Islamophobia: the challenge of pluralism in the 21st century (2011).

*siege*. It is a community threatened by a larger power. This is essential to the identity of Islam, although not in Islam's presentation to the public.

Support for this interpretation comes from the fact that Esposito's treatment of *jihad* turns it into a two-part idea: *hijrah-jihad*. The first Muslims fled Mecca, they took *flight*, and then they became a community, the *ummah* at Yathrib, and began to protect themselves from the infidels at Mecca, with both offensive and defensive measures. Even the offensive measures are defensive when your community is threatened, and this is how *jihad* can be supported so widely. This fact about the *flight* before the *attack* has never left their consciousness. The many different expressions of Islamic *jihad* that Esposito shows us repeat the story as they speak of *hijrah*, pulling away from the corrupt society, in order to then address its corruption through *jihad*.

The *flight* idea is in the story in Genesis. Hagar fled Sarah her mistress because of harsh treatment, brought on by Hagar's scorn for Sarah as a barren woman. Later, Ishmael showed scorn for Isaac, the child of promise eventually born to Sarah, and then Hagar and Ishmael were sent out into the desert, nearly to die, but to become a new people, and always with the memory of their expulsion. This we will examine closely in Chapter 14, "Hagar's New Religion."

In the first part of the story of Hagar, God asks her as she flees from Sarah's household, "Where have you come from, and where are you going?" (Genesis 16:8) It is a question that digs deep: "Against what are you reacting? Why have you left it behind? Do you know where this reaction will lead you?" My reading of it as "reacting" may seem prejudicial, but in the context of all we know about this story and its historical connections it is supportable: Islam has breathed in the spirit of this unfortunate encounter of Hagar with Sarah, and it is in a spirit of reaction. Islamist groups like Hamas are not an example of proactive thinking, charting out how to build a nation, but are reacting to the wrong they feel has been done to their people. We do not call them "reactionary," because that term is used in the Marxist context for those in power reacting to the possible loss of their power, or seeking to regain it, while this is a case of those out of power reacting to the power that surpasses them. Such is the *ummah* in its *hijrah*, setting the stage for *jihad*.

So, what was Hagar running from? Harsh treatment? Yes, but it was harsh treatment in response to her own contempt for Sarah as a barren woman. God told her to return and submit to her mistress. She was running from the power of Torah, we might say, which she conceived as barrenness and futility, compared to the natural, human strength she was manifesting in her pregnancy as Abraham's partner. *From* Hagar's strength as a life-giving human being, Sarah looked weak; but in the larger view of things Hagar was threatened by the power that stood over her. We need to understand how humans stand in relation to that power, how the power of nature, for all its boastful dances, is threatened by the power of spirit.

We know what the Palestinians are fighting against: the Zionists. Arab Muslims of the Islamist bent are fighting Zionism and the West, while Muslims everywhere are at least a little sympathetic to the cause itself, though not supportive of the methods. And much of the world is with them, looking suspiciously at the Zionists. Thanks to the instructive example of Islam, we are in a position to understand how the human race stands in relation to the power that is revealed and manifested in Zionism.

[End of Chapter 7, “The Attackers”]