

# WAITING FOR MODERATE ISLAM:

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## ► *THE CIVIL WAR THE WEST CAN NOT SAFELY IGNORE*



By  
**Jay B Gaskill**  
Attorney at Law

## INTRODUCTION

Of course, the militant, bloody-minded Islamist fundamentalism is to be distinguished from the tamer and more humane versions of that faith. As war is to be distinguished from peace, armed militant Islamist regimes and their support systems are to be distinguished from allies. The question of “moderate Islam” resurfaces in the discussions of terrorism and jihad whether we choose to address it or not.

Once upon a time, a Prophet emerged on the world stage, long after the Hebrew prophets of the Torah and just half a millennium after the appearance of Jesus. The 21<sup>st</sup> century followers of that Prophet number about 1.6 billion souls. For context, the total world population is roughly seven billion, of which roughly three billion are Jews and Christians, one billion are secular, and the rest are affiliated with various non-Abrahamic religions.

Those of us who live in the hip, tolerant secular cultures - whatever our personal spiritual beliefs and religious affiliations, are a minority group. Today, during the post-moon landing, pre-Star Trek period of Homo sapiens, some of this Prophet’s latter-day followers have launched a holy war against modernity itself. Five US Presidents proceeded as if this war did not concern us or directly threaten us (Carter, Reagan, Bush I, Clinton, Bush II), until the fifth was rudely awakened on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. President Obama seems to have been pretending that we are not really at war and that violent elements within the Islamic cultural setting should not be identified as Islamic.

We are witnessing a radical Islamic super-state in the throes of gestation and birth. This development was in play before the genocidal Islamic State forces (the so-called ISIS or ISL) began to seize, hold and purge territory in Iraq and elsewhere. The defeat of that particular movement will be small solace, given the prospect of loosely hinged martyrs in

power, Pakistan’s arsenal of nukes, the chilling prospect of the Iranian regime breaking out as an atomic-bomb-deploying nation sooner rather than later, not to mention all the prevalent irrationalities loose in the region.

The West is directly affected by the ongoing civil war among and within the Islamic states. Because the disparate anti-Western terrorist jihad forces are united around a malign version of Islam, “the religion of peace,” a question keeps coming up: When will the Muslims “grow out of” this madness? The deaths of several terrorist leaders have changed nothing of consequence. The situation is still grave.

“When we speak of moderate Muslims as a counterweight to extremists, then, what we seek has nothing to do with the ardor of their religious convictions. Rather, it centers on the acceptance or rejection of pluralism. In this view, Muslims may still hope and pray for the eventual recognition by all mankind of the truth of Muhammad’s message. (Christians and Jews do something similar.) But they may not take up the sword to hasten the advent of that goal or pursue disputes among or within countries by violent means. That implies democratic methods and a spirit of tolerance. “But if this explains what we mean—or ought to mean—by moderate Muslims, where can we find them, and how can we tell the real thing?” *In Search of Moderate Muslims*, in **Commentary Magazine**, February 2008 by Muravchik & Szrom. Joshua Muravchik and Charles P Szrom are resident scholars at the **American Enterprise Institute**.<sup>1</sup>

We hip and tolerant moderns are like the characters in the Star Trek series that land on a primitive planet governed customs and social arrangements that would be totally unacceptable to moderns. No one on the Starship Enterprise would thinking in leaving their own advanced weapons in the hands of the primitive aliens. The militant jihad is being led and conducted by 12<sup>th</sup> century minds seeking more and more advanced 21<sup>st</sup> century weapons. Unlike the crew of the Starship Enterprise, we can’t just up and leave the planet. Will “moderate Islam” come to our rescue? If not, what are our options? Is there a theological prong to the defense of the West? Are there creative solutions? The task of waiting for a Muslim reformation feels like waiting for Godot.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The full article is archived at <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/> .

<sup>2</sup> Referring to Samuel Becket’s play where Vladimir and Estragon wait and talk endlessly while waiting for a character that never arrives on stage.

It seems obvious to me, and many others, that the jihad terror game reveals an overarching crude, but potentially effective strategy: Shake up conditions in the Middle East until a single Pan-Islamist state can emerge. To achieve the status of a pan-Islamic superpower, all non-cooperative governments within the Middle Eastern region, and the “Satanic” powers like the USA outside the region, all that are in the way must be overturned or neutralized. Let’s call this super-power-to-be, **Islamostan**<sup>3</sup> Named or not, its driving purpose is the establishment of a nuclear armed Islamic superpower, an achievement to end all humiliation and inaugurate, if possible, an *Islamist Imperium*.

But unity has eluded the pan-Arab movement, partly because the Iranians are Persian, not Arab, but more importantly because of the long standing of intertribal rivalries in the region. The movement still needs a common enemy and we, in the decadent West, have been nominated. Of course, the pan-Islamist movement still faces daunting sectarian barriers. But the psychological lure of an empowered Islam as a shining rebuke to the decadent West is very strong. Of course, Islam the religion contains strong elements of peace and virtue along with some problematic elements. Islamism is its weaponized form, the fiery core of an ideology that has appropriated a world religion in its service.<sup>4</sup>

Christians and Jews have learned from a long and painful history of abuse, corruption and terror, that mixing religion and political power struggles makes a toxic stew, damaging to both. But the actual prospect of an outbreak of liberal modernity in the Middle East is too much to hope for at the moment. And I note that the potential downside, a major Islamist regional coup, presents a particularly grim scenario, especially if nuclear weapons are ever allowed to fall under the control of the fervid fundamentalists. Yet we can still hope for the emergence of “moderate Islam,” even if the evidence of the moment seems to suggest that is far off. After all, it took Christianity centuries to ‘moderate.’”

For a brilliant regional overview, still relevant, of the state of play in the region, I strongly recommend an older article, *SANDSTORMS, Barack Obama and the Great*

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<sup>3</sup> Should the Islamist extremists ever reach agreement on this or any similar name, beware: That event will have signaled the achievement of a pan-tribal, pan-ethnic unity based on Islam. The suffix, “stan” is derived from the Persian term for nation; as the Middle East “street” knows all too well, Persians aren’t Arabs!

<sup>4</sup> **Please note:** I am not saying that morality and politics are a toxic mix; to the contrary. But the lesson yet not widely learned is that morality is not owned, patented or copyrighted by any particular religious or secular tradition. A corollary principle lurks here, at the very heart of all inter-religious accommodations: No single religious or spiritual sect, tradition, denomination or group can legitimately claim to own, patent or copyright the exclusive path to deity, whether known as Allah, G-d, Atman/Brahman, the Holy, or by any other name.

*Arab Revolt*, in the Weekly Standard by Reuel Marc Gerecht.<sup>5</sup> The author is a former Middle East specialist at the CIA's directorate of operations, now a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies where he "focuses on Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, terrorism, and intelligence.

Millions of disaffected, rootless, humiliated Islamic males are available as willing foot soldiers in a jihad against the West and its putative puppets in the Middle East region. For them, this will be "jihad-as-therapy", a potential vindication for failed lives, a failed economic system and an otherwise discredited ideology masquerading as a major world religion.<sup>6</sup> The entire Middle East is caught up in a series of rebellions that collectively can be described as a regional civil war, the outcome of which cannot be predicted.

Had America been cowed into withdrawal from the region by the successful attacks of September 11, 2001, the resulting power vacuum might have ensured the eventual triumph of the Islamist Imperium. But the jihadist's catastrophic miscalculation on that day shattered America's complacency and changed government policy. But for that shock, this country's foreign policies might well have been dominated by isolationist "realists" in the tradition on WW II's German sympathizers. Instead, the architects of the

It is as if we have been projected by a time machine to pre WW II Europe at the very birth of the Third Reich, yet armed with the knowledge of what might unfold if the train of events is not stopped. The Islamist Imperium must not be allowed to succeed. So we find ourselves pining for something called "moderate Islam." Are we being delusional?

## **DETECTING "MODERATE" ISLAM**

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<sup>5</sup>[http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/sandstorms\\_558499.html](http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/sandstorms_558499.html)

<sup>6</sup> I am not one of those critics of the Islamic jihad who is willing to discredit the entire corpus of Islamic religious thought and practice because some fanatics have taken up arms against the civilized world. But the embedded religious differences are not trivial. Monsignor Walter Brandmüller, president of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences, gave a speech honoring the birth of Pope St. Pius V. As Brandmüller put it: [The] "biggest difference between Christianity and Islam" stems from its view of human nature. "[T]he concept of the equality of all human beings does not exist, nor does, in consequence, the concept of the dignity of every human life." The Islamic view holds to "a threefold inequality: between man and woman, between Muslim and non-Muslim, and between freeman and slave." In this schema, the man "is considered a full titleholder of rights and duties only through his belonging to the Islamic community" [and] "The most irrevocable of these inequalities is that between man and woman, because the others can be overcome — the slave can be freed, the non-Muslim can convert to Islam — while woman's inferiority is irremediable."

What would a moderate Nazi look and talk like, say, in 1944? To ask the question is to answer it. We'll never know because anyone who did that, actually broke with Nazism, was quietly arrested and sent to a camp from which he or she never emerged.

Now, consider how much a member of France's Vichy government in German-occupied Berlin could afford to say, even in private? And ask yourself whether you could ever really trust whatever was said, even in private.

The deadly reach of radical, militant Islam is worldwide. This is why every follower of Islam, however "moderate", is apt to keep his or her head down, in effect behaving like a low level member of the Vichy government during the high water mark of the Nazi occupation. Recall, if you will, that the Vichy government actively participated in the rounding up and delivery to Auschwitz and other German camps of at least 75 thousand Jews, of whom fewer than 2,000 survived. You will not find a list of Vichy government members who actively protested these murders, let alone the complicity of the French government.<sup>7</sup>

As a practical matter, moderate Islam is a meaningless construct unless and until a critical mass of "moderate" members of the faith (however we choose to define that term) appear in the open, courageously identifying themselves in a public differentiation from the radicals. Unless we are willing to protect them, it will not happen very often.

Sticking one's head above the foxhole in a firefight is not habit forming...even if you have a security detail. Anwar Sadat was the Egyptian President who won the Nobel Peace Prize for the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty of 1979. At the time, he said --

"Let us put an end to wars, let us reshape life on the solid basis of equity and truth. And it is this call, which reflected the will of the Egyptian people, of the great majority of the Arab and Israeli peoples, and indeed of millions of men, women, and children around the world that you are today honoring. And these hundreds of millions will judge to what extent every responsible leader in the Middle East has responded to the hopes of mankind."

Sadat was assassinated by an Islamist radical, obeying a fatwa from Omar Abdel-Rahman, the blind sheik associated with Osama bin Laden. Abdel-Rahman was expelled

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<sup>7</sup>See [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/genocide/jewish\\_deportation\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/genocide/jewish_deportation_01.shtml) .

from Egypt, and later convicted was a leader in the World Trade Center bombings of 1993. He is serving a life prison sentence in the USA. Only a life sentence.

## **THE ACCOMMODATION ILLUSION**

The prevalent voices of the moment one hears from the American left seem to have adopted a less rigorous, more self-serving test. In a bizarre amalgam of ideologically saturated perception and staggering naïveté, many of these voices will apply the label of moderate Islam to any Muslim public figure who articulates the left-wing's critique of America as the world's overweening hegemonic power, while remaining silent about everything else, including the virulent anti-Semitism and violent jihadist ambitions of their co-religionists.

This has opened the door to the cynical manipulation of the American left by the politically-savvy Islamist political experts who advise the jihad's terror-central on American politics. Al-Qaeda's public statements and those of other radical Islamist spokesman almost always play to the left's biases.

*“We destroyed the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and Allah ordered us to... punish everyone who stands alongside (US President George W.) Bush.”*

### **Al Qaeda**

*“The U.S. is leading the war against terrorism, which in reality is a war against Islam. Its army is directly invading two Muslim countries and indirectly occupying the rest through its stooges. The heroic act of brother Nidal (Hasan, the Fort Hood shooter) also shows the dilemma of the Muslim American community. Increasingly, they are being cornered into taking stances that would either make them betray Islam or betray their nation.”*

### **Anwar al-Awlaki**

As 21<sup>st</sup> century denizens of cultural modernity, we need much greater clarity about the scope and bite of the actual, on-the-ground authority of non-Islamist religions before we can set the boundaries of our acceptance of large indigenous Muslim populations in our home territories.

And make no mistake about it: This is all about boundaries. What are the permissible limits of religiously motivated conduct within a distinctly Western-civilization's polity? For example, how much, if any, coercion within a religious community can be tolerated by those outside that community? There are other problems, all of which are related to the primacy of secular norms with support from classic Judeo-Christian morality.

Much is made of a government here or there around the world that is or is not "secular" in character. But the very term is elastic. In some places "secular" means something like in the former USSR or current mainland China, settings distinctly hostile to all forms of religion, especially those that establish a moral system that is separate from that of the current regime.

But the notion of secular governance in the United States context implies a wide **inter-religious** acceptance coupled with a generous tolerance of local non-religious and anti-religious elements. The secular ethos of Western Europe is a distinctly different accommodation. A wide **inter-secular** acceptance is the norm, with a grudging tolerance for local religious elements, coupled with a very generous tolerance for anti-religious elements.

At least that was true until the mean Western European birthrate dropped before replacement levels, auguring in the immigrant worker tide. For the Europeans, their "Mexicans" were Muslims from Turkey, Albania, Pakistan, Morocco, Yugoslavia, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Tunisia, Indonesia, Lebanon, Syria and other parts of Africa and South Asia. In both France and England (as well as in the Netherlands), there are huge, culturally isolated, fundamentalist Muslim populations. The resulting tensions have split the European accommodation in two: On one side, the cultural traditionalists in England, Australia and France have moved to a "take us as we are – meaning take our rules or take your leave" policy. On the other side, the multiculturalists have moved to a *de facto* cultural and juridical Balkanization policy, where Sharia Law is allowed to run unfettered (a few extreme cases excepted) within the Muslim enclaves.

**This is no time for the US to forget who we are.**

Recently I listened to an intriguing discussion about a strange phenomenon (strange at least to Western thinkers like myself). How does a seemingly "moderate" or even quasi-secular Muslim mutate into a deadly jihadist, ready and willing to take innocent lives (including those of women and children) as part of in the larger struggle against the

infidel West. I use the word *mutate* intentionally here because the situation implies to me there is something in Islamist thinking itself that resembles a pre-malignant condition.

Then one of the experts in this discussion said that we in the West are likely to get nowhere in the struggle to put out the fires of jihad unless we're also able to meet the problem on the *theological* level. *Surely*, I thought, *that can't be true*. I could just imagine how much credibility *we* would have attempting to tell the devout followers of Allah's Prophet, how *they* should practice *their* religion.

## TO BE, OR NOT TO BE—A CIVIL SOCIETY

What are we to expect from any religion in the context of a peaceful civil order? I think we in the West would agree: We are entitled to expect that religious adherents will peacefully coexist with followers of other faiths and the secularists with no faith at all. When the question is posed that way, it suggests the existence of and adherence to an underlying social contract that is given priority over the demands of faith. Perhaps our problem is to find the essential elements of that underlying social contract and to reconcile them with theology in general, ours included.

We need to address our efforts to a new target for our special support and encouragement within the Muslim world. We should offer quiet - possibly covert - help to *reform* Islam wherever it manifests itself, but we need even more urgently to openly support any *mullah or coalition of mullahs who begin talking about accommodating Islam to civil society*.

In either case, the emphasis on “moderate” Islam is a bit off. Consider that *moderates* tend to have a bad rap among the committed for a reason. Too often the moderates' various positions appear to have been arrived at via *essential* accommodation (i.e., as in the surrender of principle) rather than via conscientious moral reasoning or *practical* accommodation (as in accepting incremental progress without surrendering principle). This is why moderates are often suspected of being timid believers or timid anti-believers. Surely, this is one reason that very few Muslim moderates have poked their heads above the foxhole. After all, who among the moderates are willing to shed “blood, sweat and tears” in the cause of *moderation*?



Many, many more peaceful Muslims are welcome and needed, of course, but I am persuaded that all devout Muslims need to rise up, embrace and defend a new doctrine: “*civil Islam*”.

Yes, I grant the difficulties.

## IMPLICATIONS & ACTIONS

In order to locate the elements in Islamist doctrine and practice that stand in the way of a “civil Islam”, we would do well to examine our own religious histories. Any solution, whether theological, exigent or pragmatic, should apply with equal force to all religious and quasi-religious elements in the culture. We are not likely to persuade a whole people to embrace a set of norms that cannot reasonably be reconciled with the special demands of all faith. As a thought experiment, let me outline some “ifs”, some “thens”, and some implications, in that order:

The “**ifs**”: **If** the conflict is with an authoritarian and unacceptably militant and intolerant subset of Islam; **If** resolution of the conflict is, at least in one critical part, a theological project; **If** this theological resolution requires a measure of authentic reform, as opposed to relying on irresolute Muslims mischaracterized as “moderates”. **THEN:** We need to locate a *theological position* that could be mutually adhered to (by Muslims and non-secular, non-Muslims) that also is sufficient for peaceful co-existence with the larger secular polity.

As a practical matter, we need to identify and endorse working models of governance that are adequate to the accommodation of civil Islam without requiring its adherents to sacrifice their core beliefs; and we must identify, locate and endorse an ethos that can bridge the religionist-secular divide in a way that does not threaten religion, nor coerce secularism.

To move the dialogue with Islam forward (to the extent there is one), the religionists in the conversation need to identify their shared moral ground, recognize the more egregious elements of Western decadence and articulate the set of common moral principles that can reasonably embrace the secular communities as well. This will resemble the Decalogue of the Torah and the reciprocity principle shared by the Jewish, Christian and Asian traditions.

Within the interactions of a civil society, religious adherents also need to explicitly shed the “single path” to G-d (or to salvation, redemption, holiness, submission to Allah – pick the phrase that fits). The “single path” is a fallacy, and the involuntary conversion is also a fallacy.

Both religionists and secularists need to understand that ultimate moral authority naturally lends itself to implementation in a classic legal structure.

The legal model is well known and universally utilized within the existing civil societies and consists of a descending hierarchy as follows: ultimate moral authority, if any; a constitution; the laws; the rules of application and adjudication; the systems for enforcement and adjudication.

Any hierarchical system of moral principles – even in the ecclesial context - more or less tracks the legal pattern. For example every legal system worthy of the name punishes theft, mendacity, assault and murder, differing in the degree and scope of the legal protections and consequences. The less developed systems tend to mirror tribal categories, as in ‘do not steal from your brothers’. Again in a descending hierarchy, we tend to find ultimate normative governing principles, derived moral principles, derived laws and rules, and contextually determined applications.

We need to identify and endorse working models of governance that are adequate to the accommodation of civil Islam without requiring its adherents to sacrifice their core beliefs. Are there such models? I am tempted suggest that both the US and Israel have struck the proper balance, if one could imagine a state with Islam in a limited titular or implicit organizing role, but the same degree of forbearance and protection to non-conforming faith and secular practices as is common in those two democracies.

The application of the civil model to an otherwise Islamic society encounters several problems, not the least of which is Islam’s traditional merger of religious and governmental institutions. Yet this obstacle has been overcome by both Judaism and Christianity. We can be confident that, over time, the power of the theocrats will yield to the democrats. Our hope is that we humans can accomplish that transition without millions of deaths. That hope is not unreasonable. Even in present day Iran, there are nascent civil democratic institutions that exist in tension with the governing mullahs. If there were insuperable *theological* difficulties, we’d not notice anyone playing the democratic game in Iran.

The second level of difficulty is the recognition of human fallibility. The modern religionist would not dispute the proposition that all prophets, seers and saints are subject to some degree of “pronouncement error”. Assuming an authentic encounter with deity or other ultimate authority has taken place, there still are four categories of possible errors (hopefully small errors, but not always so):

- Transcription errors;
- Mistranslation;
- Misinterpretation;
- Application errors.

When deity “speaks” to 21<sup>st</sup> receptive century minds, many of us are responding to something powerful, but inchoate, as in a flash of inspiration or sudden insight or recognition of a presence, as opposed detailed instructions. Our intelligence is immediately engaged as well as our humility. We lack the prophetic hubris to claim that we must be followed because we are in possession of an exclusive pipeline. We tend to think that mere humans can understand the divine, whether a divine message or divine engendered insight) only incompletely. We necessarily communicate using metaphors, and with humility because our attempts to verbalize divine messages or insights are subject to an unavoidable element of accidental distortion.

Recognition of human fallibility does not destroy faith, but it does undermine literalism. This is an extremely important understanding because it contradicts the “single path” fallacy and contributes immensely to the “worship and let worship” ethos of the civil society. It leads us to the single corollary principle in opposition to which the militant branches of Islam have so far been all too willing to shed innocent blood: That is the principle that deity is utterly beyond human ownership, beyond tribe, religion or sect.

The implied line is clear: Civil Islam is free to strongly, even fiercely *teach* that Islam worships God’s Greatest Prophet, but not that he was the *only* prophet (as Allah’s Prophet himself recognized Moses and Jesus as prophets, for example), nor as one whose doctrine should be spread or enforced via coercion.

## **ELEMENTS OF A CIVIL ISLAM**

Therefore we need to define all moderate or moderated forms of Islam in terms of the prevailing ethos against which radical Islam is at war - Western liberal civilization – and pin our immediate hopes on the emergence of civil Islam.

Civil Islam honors and supports the five core elements of the social compact that define modern civilization, commits to respect the boundaries of loyalty to civilization’s health and survival, to wit:

1. Robust protections for free expression.
2. A clear, juridical and practical separation of the authority structures (and canonical demands) of religious institutions from the regular, established institutions of secular government. In plain terms, Sharia “Law” can inform the statutory law, in much the same way that aspects of the Torah ) inform Western jurisprudence (thinking of the portions of the Decalogue that govern interpersonal relations), but leaving Sharia law’s other precepts to the realm of religious practice, and therefore unenforceable by statutory law or private violence;
3. No subjugation or violent retribution or control of individuals (i.e., no women. “infidels”, or anyone else singled out on religious grounds) whether through legal practice, direct government action or via government tolerance of violence or intimidation;
4. Free religious expression, worship and practice, so long these are effectively consistent with 1, 2 and 3;
5. The use of violence, terror and intimidation to undermine the social order is to be actively condemned and opposed whatever its source (i.e., loyalty to the national social compact trumps any fatwa or religious edict).

## **WAITING FOR REFORMATION**

Forms of civil Islam can emerge without any general Islamic reformation as pragmatic accommodations, but the widespread adoption of civil Islam would greatly facilitate the emergence of reformist versions of Islamic faith.

So, what are we to wait for: moderate followers of Islam...or followers of moderate Islam? There is an obvious diversity within Islamic thought and practice (nothing else can explain their fratricide), but the differences are more tribal than deeply theological. I will note an important exception, an interesting and frequently ignored variant (hint: Think of the whirling Dervishes).

**A caution:** If there were a Westernized, version of Islam, one that openly attempted to compete for the allegiance of other Muslims, *a religious war would likely follow*. This is because the baseline foundations of the dominant versions of Islam are in a life-death struggle for the one true faith, the one represented by Allah’s true prophet, Muhammad.

What we Western moderns are really asking for in “moderate Islam” is a new version of Islam that accepts the radical notion that there is NO one true Islam, and not just that: We are asking devout Muslims to accept that there may be more than one true way to understand and relate to God.

This is not moderate in any sense to the fundamentalist mindset. It is radical in the true sense of the word, because it attacks the very root of belief.

**A second caution:** Even in a reformed version of Islam it will be unrealistic to expect any devout Muslim to simply abandon the root belief structure of Islam, i.e., that God really did talk to Muhammad and that Muhammad faithfully accepted what he heard and recorded, and that Muhammad is the greatest of the prophets. Fortunately, there is still some room for interpretation and conceptual reconfiguration. I will return to that topic in a moment.

When a particular Muslim begins to turn “secular”, it is realistic to expect that he or she will start to hold conflicting or parallel belief patterns, eventually evolving into some form of “cafeteria” Islam. But it is very unrealistic to expect a blatant break or rejection of the core faith, especially when he or she is surrounded by angry fundamentalists. For these men and women, silence is grace and tolerant behavior is golden.

The best practical result we can hope for in the near and midterm is not a sudden outbreak of “moderation” but the gradual emergence of a principled accommodation to three key elements of living in a civil society: (1) that Allah does not sanction the punishment of non-converted persons; many are simply innocent, good and honorable; (2) that the unconverted are to be treated with the dignity owed the children of God; (3)

that those who govern must be impartial to the children of God whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims and respect the freedom of religious belief.

*While waiting for a Muslim reformation (and covertly encouraging it) we overtly support civil Islam. We also need to incorporate a stealth theology program into an unprecedented, broadband propaganda war.*

## **EXPANDING CONCEPTUAL SPACE IN ISLAM**

Ideas and ideologies always have consequences. The very belief structures of Islam are no exception.

If there is to emerge a robust critical tradition within Islam (it doesn't much matter what we say) leading to a reformist branch - or twig even, many more Muslim voices will be needed. We may be two generations away from the kind of internal religious leadership necessary to disarm the psychological time bomb we call fundamentalist Islam.

The Q'ran is the product of a single prophetic authority and is particularly resistant to theological criticism because no robust critical tradition has been allowed to mature. Its narrative is chock full of ammunition for intolerance and worse. Its message is delivered with a cumulative poetic force mainlining into the unconscious. A critic finds it hard to say something like, "We'll, that was the second Isaiah, but read this, written by a different sage," or - as Augustine discovered to his delight - "The bible stories are allegory." Even now there are plenty of literal-minded fundamentalists within Christianity, but there is also a thousand year experience of critical discussions.

A second aspect of fundamentalist Islam is its strict stress on moral accountability to Allah after death, with little or no provision to discern Allah's will or wishes in the meantime except through a literal reading of the Prophet's writings. This feeds a fanaticism made of conforming deeds and submission to those who set themselves up as the seers of scriptural commands.

Contrast the mystical traditions and the spiritual and religious disciplines that cultivate receptiveness to the presence of the divine in the moment. Therein we find a hinge of conceptual expansion that has the power to transform any religion. When a devout

Muslim, for example, is inspired by Allah’s message of love and compassion as a message not from the page or sage, but from Allah in real time, arriving alone and bearing its own authority, then important seeds are planted: The flower of creative independence within the larger faith envelope is a divine force; it is the power that renews all faiths...but not without personal cost.

If any current version of Islam is capable of leading to a reformation, it probably will be Sufism. This is the poetical, mystical strain of Islamist worship and thought, the belief pattern of the poet Rumi (Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī ) and of the Dervish (Sufi monks, also the “whirling Dervishes, whose ecstatic dances are a remembrance of God).

According to Idries Shah (1924-1996, a scholar of Afghan heritage, born in India) the Sufi philosophy is universal in nature, its taproots even predating the rise of Islam and other modern-day religions. Some scholars have defined Sufism as “a science whose objective is the reparation of the heart and turning it away from all else but God” (Ahmed Zarruq, Zaineb Istrabadi, Hamza Yusuf Hanson—*The Principles of Sufism*, Amal Press. 2008). Some Islamic scholars have defined sufism as simply the name for the inner or esoteric dimension of Islam. (Dr. Alan Godlas, University of Georgia, *Sufism's Many Paths*, 2000, University of Georgia) Most Muslims agree that Sufism is located within the Islamic tradition.

But for many mullahs, Sufism is strongly disapproved as an unorthodox variant. After all, mysticism and poetry lead to allegory and metaphor, the very intellectual tools that has rescued Judaism and Christianity from rigid fundamentalism. These elements are present in Sufi practice. Let’s pray that from such tiny seeds, something benign can take root and grow. Meantime we have to respect the danger that inheres in the dominant fundamentalist doctrine.

**Note:** Unsurprisingly, Sufism has been suppressed in Iran and elsewhere under Islamic rule. [For more, read “*There is a tolerant pluralist tradition in Islam*” Stephen Schwartz in the Weekly Standard 2/2/05.]<sup>8</sup>

In the course of time, an enlightened Muslim may come to understand that Allah speaks to the children of God in the ways that God chooses at the time God chooses and in the way God chooses. Such a Muslim may come to understand that Allah chose his Prophet

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<sup>8</sup><http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/005/199lssqw.asp>

because that voice would spread through the Arab peoples and tribes like a holy fire, but also understand that God speaks to all people for all times for all occasions and for all reasons. And such a Muslim may come to know that no prophet can live long enough or hear well enough to capture and perfectly relate to all God has to say. This is why Allah's Prophet acknowledged the ancient prophets who came before him.

With the historically brief exception of a worldly, secular phase (CE 929-1009), under the reign of a single Caliph, Abd-al Rahman III in Cordoba, Spain, Islam is still locked in a fierce medieval rigidity. Moderate Islam still awaits a moderate theology, and the world's temperate and civil-minded Muslims remain silently embedded in a larger group of believers to such a degree that we in the secular and reformed-religious West should be forgiven for our inability to separate the two. The partly-secularized Muslims, who live quiet, law-abiding lives among us, are still conflicted and troubled by the many tensions and constrictions between scripture and modernity; they will be among the earliest beneficiaries of an Islamic reformation.

Yes, a Muslim reformation will come...eventually and with great difficulty. The prevalent Western religions have all undergone reformations, processes that took their own harsh measures of time, blood and fire.

We in the West will not (because we cannot) be the authors of a religious reformation for a faith that commands more than one billion adherents world-wide. What we can and must accomplish is something more modest and ultimately more important: to confidently and successfully defend our civilization and to promulgate its virtues as a haven against religious wars and persecutions. Surely moral duty and national self-interest coincide here:

The US should help defend the religiously oppressed within Muslim rule, starting with the Sufis. Inter-religious tolerance is the alpha and omega of any Muslim reformation. Surely, it is the single best aspect of our own culture to export to the Muslim world, and the single best counterexample to those obsessed with images of Western decadence. After all, America is the one island of safety in the world where former blood rivals within Islam are able to live with each other in peace, which gives rise to -

## **THE POWER OF OPTIMISM**



Imagine that highly intelligent and self-confident policies favoring an Islamic reformation are put in place, a policy mix consisting of real politic coupled with a stealth theological outreach and a massive information campaign, all conducted in the calculated expectation that these measures will eventually bear fruit. This massive education campaign would be truth-based, but executed with skill, cleverness, penetration and relentless persistence, something that eclipses anything the West attempted in the Cold war against communism.

The sharp edge of the information spear will be a daily program of exposure: the corruption and follies of the Muslim extremists as contrasted with the tolerance and religious freedom in the USA. While acknowledging (in good humor) some of the American decadence, the message will extol the morally conservative followers of Islam who are living safely in our midst, men, women and children who would otherwise be engaged in bloody sectarian conflict in their own countries of origin. Whenever opportunities present themselves, US Special Forces will rescue oppressed individuals; then, by using our communications technology edge, everyone in the Middle East hears about it in spite of the regimes' attempts at censorship.

When we finally commit to a program like this, I believe that we will eventually prevail. Victory is not meant in the imperial sense, but as the result of adopting a robust model of liberation. If you can just imagine such a program, then perhaps we can also imagine a special day - not tomorrow, but on some electric day after far too much blood and far too many bitter tears have flowed.

We wake up to the news. On that day, a vast crowd of Muslim believers has stormed the gates of oppression once again. Can you see their faces? These are men and women who are sick and tired of their bloody internecine struggles, the meaningless tribal conflicts cynically exploited by their own rulers. They are "mad as hell and they aren't going to take it any more". These men and women are determined to finally dismiss the clique of Islamist ideologues who thuggishly hijacked one too many democratic "experiments".

These men and women are longer willing to tolerate their cynical exploitation by leaders who cynically employed weaponized Islam and the false chimera of a Satanic power in order to bring their obedient subjects back into line. And that have arrived at this place, in part, because the relentless American truth campaign has exposed their lies.

Can you hear the crowd? Their shouts are an angry, excited babble at first, but as the tumult grows in intensity, purposeful chant emerges.

Remember that homemade 30 feet tall white statue of in Tiananmen Square? There must have been an electric moment when its intended meaning came into focus. Those brave Chinese demonstrators called it the Goddess of Liberty (or Democracy) - *ziyóu nǚshén* - but it clearly was the Lady Liberty, a representation of that hallowed statue in the mouth of the Hudson River; the torch and general form were unmistakable in their symbolism.

Can you hear the chants from the Muslim crowd? The meaning slowly comes into focus as a single rhythmic chant emerges. The chanted words may be in Arabic or Farsi, but in the translation, any American who was in Manhattan on September 11, 2001 would readily decode the reference.

If this vision seems like a fantasy, it is only because we are so paralyzed (for the moment) by pessimism and guilt that the very notion of aggressively selling our virtues anywhere, let alone to our enemies, is rejected out of hand as cultural imperialism.

Let's remind ourselves of reality. We are not some aliens from a visiting starship. We are natives, representatives and stewards of the leading edge of the best, most creative, most humane civilization yet to emerge on planet earth.

Hillel the Elder was a “mere” sage, a long time before a certain Prophet was born. Among Hillel's aphorisms (which are generally recorded in Pirkei Avot - Ethics of the Fathers, captured in written form in the Mishnah) was this gem: “If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?”

Well?

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**Jay B Gaskill is a California attorney, lay theologian and author.**

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[] For all comments and permissions, contact the author via email [law@jaygaskill.com](mailto:law@jaygaskill.com).