

Israel, America and the Muslim world: Eric Walberg takes a hard look at the reasons behind the crisis, arguing from the viewpoint of the history of religion, while Youssef Rakha plays the devil's -- Enlightenment -- advocate. They argue against contemporary Jews and Muslims, respectively, but end up reaching the same conclusion 9/8/7 -- Critiques of Israel as the cause of the Middle East crisis and of the Jewish lobby propping it up and censoring debate are now a dime a dozen. In "[The closing of the Jewish mind](#)"

(Al-Ahram Weekly 1/8/7), for example, Egyptian-US intellectual Issa Khalaf points to the "profound indifference of the American Zionists, the Dershowitz-like triumphalism, Jewish political tribalism whose roots extend deep into the past", but can only suggest that Zionist Jews and Israelis should "refrain from killing".

As the Arabic saying goes, the dogs bark but the caravan moves on. Extremist Zionist rabbis continue to "visit" Al-Aqsa Mosque, hoping to provoke war and the destruction of one of Islam's most sacred sites, preaching hatred of Muslims and the non-Jewish world; and all we can say is "Please refrain from killing"?!

It has long been fashionable in popular discourse to criticise Islam as reactionary and the supposed source of terrorism through its doctrine of Jihad. What's left of Christianity -- gay ministers or Rapture-ready millennialists -- is mostly the object of disdain and the butt of off-colour jokes. Yes, Islam has been unique in holding to its traditions, established 15 centuries ago and still vibrant, despite the incessant pressures of modern society. It rejected the transformation in thinking that led to the Western explosion of technology that led, in turn, to capitalism and imperialism, and is roundly dismissed as having "missed the boat" as a result. Now the countries to which the Muslim world has given way are subjecting it to incessant lectures from all sides to hurry up and become "liberal democratic states" and "join the West"...

The third pillar

Muslims' monotheistic siblings, Christians and Jews, embraced the great adventure of liberal secularism, in the process creating a dunya -- the lower, worldly realm, in contrast to the higher hereafter, of incredible material wealth and secularising life in what is now called the "Judeo-Christian tradition". Most odd, considering the millennia of animosity between the two faiths. Pope John Paul II merely acceded to the obvious when he recognised Israel, despite the clear contradiction this entails with Christian theology; he went so far as to call Christianity merely "a new branch from the common root".

Indeed, today, Christmas carols and Hannukah candles live in harmony as quaint rituals, giving some colour to the West's secular wasteland. But while Islam and Christianity are frequently subjected to scathing criticism, what is "beyond the pale" is to dare to criticise this other pillar of the monotheistic trilogy, Judaism. Criticise the implicit racism behind the notion of the "Chosen People", the overt imperialism behind its embodiment in the Zionist project (a land without a people for a people without a land), and you're hoisted on the petard of anti-Semitism. Go further, and argue that the invasion of Iraq and the plans for such in Iran have the fingerprints of Greater Israel on them ("from the Nile to the Euphrates" and "divide and conquer"), and you're dismissed as a neo-Nazi. But with 90 per cent of these ornery, conservative Muslims around the world believing just that, along with increasing numbers of otherwise sane Westerners, little Hans's finger in the dyke is just not doing the trick anymore. And with extremist rabbis plotting to destroy Al-Aqsa Mosque and declare all-out war against the goyim, it's high time for a critique of Judaism and its embodiments in the world today.

Let me suggest a few vital elements of such a critique, starting with the notion of anti-Semitism, the big gun in the Jewish arsenal, and Zionism, the political movement inspired by Judaism. It is fashionable to refer to "the long history of European anti-Semitism" in any discourse about the Jews. Semitism, according to the 1977 Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, was first coined in 1885 to mean "Jewish ideas or influence in politics or society", which was growing by leaps and bounds by the mid-19th century as restrictions on Jews fell away. Anti-Semitism referred to an aversion to this development, which was soon embodied by Herzl's vision of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, called Zionism.

Nationalism was in vogue in Europe at this time; however, unlike

Norwegian or Czech nationalism, the Jewish form of nationalism -- Zionism is, like its infamous German counterpart, not just a celebration of folk customs and history, but a doctrine of race; and it is no surprise that as Europe became more secular and opened itself to the Jews, this racist strain in Jewish thought provoked a negative reaction. After the creation of Israel, anti-Semitism came more and more to be defined as "opposition to Zionism; sympathy with opponents of state of Israel" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary). Israeli historian Israel Shahak argues that modern anti-Semitism is based on the "modern myth of the Jewish 'race' -- of outwardly hidden but supposedly dominant characteristics of 'the Jews', independent of history, of social role, of anything". But so were Zionism and Nazism!

The plot thickens: according to Shahak, "historically, Zionism is both a reaction to anti-Semitism and a conservative alliance with it". This pact with the devil -- Zionism using anti-Semitism to justify and assist the creation of a Jewish state -- eventually led to Zionists actually abetting Hitler in his desire to expel all Jews from Europe, since the Zionists very much wanted all Jews to move to Palestine. The term becomes a farce when applied to Arabs, who are the real Semites and are the very real victims of racism today. It is well known that Muslims and Jews lived in harmony for their entire history until the rise of Zionism. We may hear disparaging remarks about Jews by violently oppressed Palestinians, just as disparaging remarks can be heard about the Americans in Iraq. In neither case do these remarks constitute racism. In *Black Spark, White Fire*, Richard Poe identifies racism as a discourse of power: "Racial prejudice is a natural by-product of military dominance. It is one of the ways conquerors express their contempt for the conquered."

So the real situation is the opposite of what is touted by Israel and its friends. Frustrated, powerless anti-Zionists let off steam by spray-painting swastikas on synagogues or blowing themselves up, not a pretty thing. But the real racism is by the militarily dominant Jews of Israel and America -- the Zionists, the *causus racismi*. The Zionists manage to have their cake and eat it -- use "anti-Semitism" to attack their enemies and promote the continual expansion of a religious, imperialist state. And so far, the world has let them get away with it.

Then there's the devastating socio-economic critique of Judaism by Marx, who saw by the 1840s that the Jewish god was really money. The Jews were the traditional usurers and this had become the touchstone of Judaism over the past 2,000 years. Marx's *Das Kapital* begins with "making money out of money", with usury as the zenith of obfuscation -- a gold coin just sitting there magically reproducing itself. Beats the hell out of the Golden Calf. "Money is the essence of man's life and work which have become alienated from him: this alien monster rules him and he worships it." Who can deny that we all worship money today? A Jew himself, Marx renounced this negative heritage and called for assimilation (and revolution, to be sure).

Add to this economic role the power-behind-the-throne aspect of Jews, who have throughout history surrounded princes and even sheikhs as advisers or -- surprise -- moneylenders, trading with both sides during the many European wars and marrying into royal families. It should therefore come as no surprise if a Jewish agenda creeps into the plans of Christian or secular imperialists, more so today after the spectacular success of Jews in the past two centuries. Just look at the roster of Clinton's and Bush's advisers. Who says politics and religion no longer mix?

Does pointing all this out make me an anti-Semite? I grew up with and cherish my many Jewish mentors, continue to enjoy the best of Jewish-inspired Western culture (Hollywood in the earlier days) and have Jewish friends, albeit anti-Zionist ones. I am often taken for a Jew, suggesting that either Western culture is indeed Jewish in its essence or that unbeknownst to me, my ancestors were Jewish and just decided to assimilate. I really don't care. My only answer to the shrill yapping of name-callers is "sticks and stones..." The world is in permanent crisis and we have the duty in the media to explore why. After all, in Western terms, nothing is sacred anymore, (oh yes, I forgot about money).

Yet we still haven't addressed the possibility that there is a problem inherent in the religion itself, contrary to the soothing words of JP II. The True Torah Jews or Neturei Karta reject Zionism and call for dismantling the state of Israel. They even sent a delegation to the recent notorious anti-Zionist conference in Tehran. But they are a tiny sect which is disowned by mainstream Jews. Their version of Judaism is probably closest to the original Judaism and seems quite harmless. But take a glance at Old Testament texts such as Joshua or Numbers for blood, gore and racism. Yahweh regularly helps the Jews massacre their enemies, including women and children, though occasionally turning his considerable wrath against the Jews themselves for straying.

This is hardly the New Testament or Quran's God of compassion. Then there's the Babylonian Talmud, which boasts of murdering Jesus, who is roundly insulted in the worst possible language and where goyim, especially Christians, are dismissed as less than human. And Jewish holidays, apart from the wonderful Day of Atonement, all seem to focus on massacres of Jewish enemies -- Purim, Hannukah, even Passover.

Could this have to do with the frightful remorselessness which Israelis show in their daily murdering of Palestinians?

Islam came into being as a corrective to the followers of Abraham, Moses and Jesus, whose words -- if you are a believer, the word of God -- were distorted by their followers, resulting in the racist, genocidal bits of the OT, and the exalting of Jesus as the son of God in the NT. This is made crystal clear in such verses of the Quran as 2:79: Then woe to those who write the Book with their own hands and then say, 'this is from Allah', to purchase with it a little price!"

Whether or not you are Muslim (though it is much easier for a Muslim to understand this vital point), the usurious system of capitalism is anathema to strict monotheism, be it the original Judaism, Christianity or Islam, and the refusal by the Muslim world to join in is really the defining moment in this comparison of the three pillars. That is why the Muslim world is being pressured -- at gunpoint -- today to throw in the towel, dump its spiritual core and wallow in the riches that capitalism is so adept at providing.

That is why it is suffering so terribly, ruled by corrupted governments who have thrown or would very much like to throw in the towel, and colonised by first the British, French and now the Israelis. This critique has a religious perspective, though the plight of the Muslims and their "Judeo-Christian" persecutors can be convincingly explained from a more secular standpoint.

It barely scratches the surface but from a political standpoint, it should be clear by now that such a critique, whether religious or secular, is an essential part of the explanation of what is happening in the Middle East and even the world today. Arguably far more important than the critique of, say, US Zionist Christians, who may look threatening but are really just an effect of Jewish cultural hegemony, or a supposedly anachronistic Islam, which despite the currently fashionable propaganda, hasn't been spread by force of arms for 500 years and has really been inward-looking for close to a thousand.

Is there light at the end of the tunnel? We can address the issue of the compatibility of capitalism and monotheism elsewhere. But, yes. It is when Jews accept that they are no better than the rest of humanity, just as the tragedy of the 20th century forced their many enemies to accept them as equals. And what that means for the Middle East is a one-state solution, the land of Canaan or Palestine (sorry, "Israel" has too much baggage), where the indigenous people have full rights, and the millions of immigrants -- secular or religious -- must adjust their lives to make peace with the natives.

Pluralistic creed

Is Judaism why Palestinians are oppressed and the West so insensitive to Muslims? Is it a world or a European problem? One may distinguish between Islam on the one hand and Christianity and Judaism on the other by referring to the Muslims' early rejection of the line of development that led to secular liberalism. Let it be clear at the outset that this writer is no admirer of the latter

brand of thought, which being wholly materialistic has profoundly reduced human prospects. Obsession with matter as opposed to mind, and indeed Descartes's seminal distinction between the two as metaphysical substances, not only breaks with the deeper meaning of monotheism -- which is that all is One -- but results in both the dog-eat-dog world in which we live today (and in said world, by the same token, it is the Muslim dog that is more frequently being eaten by the Western, Judaeo-Christian or secular one) and the erosion of any collective or constructive sense of meaning or purpose. This, in favour of categories like "health", "living standards", "human rights", indeed "environmental awareness" -- all of which do little more in practice than perpetuate the materialistic status quo, suggesting to humanity at large that it has been and is all we really have.

Still, in approaching the distinction between Islam and the Western world two points should be made prior to any argument. First, while the theological basis of Islam really was established a little over 15 centuries ago, its traditions -- up to and including the manner in which scripture was interpreted, the law applied and the very nature of what it means to be Muslim -- has very

definitely altered over time. To say that, in opposing secular liberalism today, Islam is holding to its traditions is in effect to reduce a glorious, multi-faceted and, most importantly, pluralistic civilisation to the abstract Five Pillars (often interpreted in a literalist or reductionist way). In this context it is important to underline the fact that, even prior to the emergence of the first dynasty, Bani Umayya, disputes over power were rampant within the Muslim world, and they encompassed not only questions of governance and economy but also, and significantly for this argument, questions of legality, all of which were theologically rooted. Wildly disparate political systems and ways of life -- the Ismaili Fatimids and the Wahhabi Saudis, for example -- were periodically accommodated within Muslim theology, and they all upheld some version of the Five Pillars. Such is the flexibility of Islam that it is compatible with a whole range of world views, up to and including present-day secularism.

From its emergence in the seventh century until the 16th, Islam was -- far more than an airtight theological system or creed -- a multi-ethnic civilisation and a mode of uniting rather than dividing human endeavour.

Until the European Renaissance, followed briefly by the Enlightenment -- from which secular liberalism is directly derived -- Islam embodied an empire or a series of empires which enjoyed both a technological and intellectual edge over its political rivals in the world at large and as such was able to spread its language and world view. This in turn contributed to both the Renaissance and Enlightenment, giving present-day Muslims every right to claim these two roots of present-day "Western" civilisation as their own; historically, they belong as much to Muslims -- Berbers, Turks, Persians, Frankish converts of every stripe, tax-paying People of the Book as well as Arabs -- as to Europeans. What Islam did not do was incorporate Thomism or Baconian rationalism -- though it did boast a rationalist tradition of its own, embodied most famously in Ibn Rushd, without whose contribution Descartes's work would arguably have been impossible. Had it maintained its edge after doing so, perhaps the world would have ended up a significantly better place. As it is -- and following the complete collapse of communism -- what we have is secular liberalism, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. And the Muslims' contemporary tensions with that are categorically not the result of intellectual or theological difference but rather, among other things, of Muslim failure to engage with the flowering of civilisation in Europe, however inferior that civilisation is compared

to the potential contained within Islam itself -- something no doubt aided and abetted by the Franks who ousted them from Spain and proceeded to subjugate and colonise them, resulting in isolationism, dependence on derivation rather than innovation and a dogged refusal on the part of the Muslim world to change with the times.

In its capacity as a civilisation, Islam no doubt had advantages over Catholicism -- witness the Inquisition; Zionism, which is racist in essence; and capitalism-consumerism -- the ugly face of secularism. All three may be readily if rather ahistorically identified with Judaism or rather the Judeo-Christian tradition. But this is not to say that (a) Islam remained the same, easily definable over the centuries or that (b) it can, in the present-day world, be so clearly distinguished from the Judaeo-Christian-secular civilisation under which everyone, Muslims and non-Muslims, lives. This is of course a contentious point, and one that would require volumes of argument to prove or disprove. A core awareness of fate, ghayb (the unknown) and akherahdunya) may continue to characterise the Muslim as opposed to the Western mind, but in many, indeed most cases, such awareness readily reduces to empty rituals, quasi-fascist superstitions comparable to the

aforementioned categories of "health" and "rights" or else, more recently, identity politics. (the opposite of

Ask a born-and-bread Arab Muslim: our people -- and the interpretation of the faith they have consistently espoused since the 16th century, firmly excluding even the mildest attempt at reform or renovation of thought -- are often no less materialistic, and just as spiritually hollow than their Western counterparts. Indeed there are millions of Muslims who, literally upholding the Five Pillars on the surface, feel perfectly within their rights to amass fortunes within the usury-oriented global banking system, to practise preferential treatment whether to non-Muslims or Muslims of a different class, language or nationality, to wage war on their enemies and rivals or to revel in the genocide of their enemies -- often identified as infidels to justify it. And, gathering hasanat (good deeds which are counted in points, with bonuses, in ways disturbingly reminiscent of university credits or indeed bank accounts), they are convinced that they will go straight to heaven: a lugubriously material heaven, incidentally, as described in the Quran and Hadith, down to rivers of (prohibited) wine and beautiful virgin maidens or indeed boys -- a very far cry from the paradise of the Sufis, for example, which embodies nothing more than

union with the One. Muslims with access to it have embraced world-destroying technology just as readily than said technology's Western inventors; through the ages they have fought just as ferociously, notably even among themselves.

Secondly, to argue against secular democracy in this way sounds disturbingly like promoting Islamic theocracy, a discussion of which may well be beneficial but is somewhat off point here. The fact that the world moved away from theocracy towards one modification or another of the political system applied in Greek city states is something to which Islam has very little to say now. Had the Umayyids of Spain or the Ottomans in Central Asia and the Middle East sustained a position of economic-material or intellectual-scientific prominence in the face of their European rivals, whether or not such prominence resulted in the same problems as those of Western technology, for example, the course of history may indeed have changed, and perhaps some of the qualities that had made Islam appealing in the first place would have survived in a more effective way, resulting in a picture different from and very possibly better than the one we are left with today. But this is not to say that the Muslim equivalent of evangelising or the literal

application of Muslim law so many centuries later could make up a viable alternative to secular democracy. Indeed the possibility of a Muslim renaissance rests on the willingness of Muslims to claim, accept and eventually alter the highest that has been achieved in human civilisation at any given time, however much one or more Muslim individuals may be disgusted with the content or implications of that civilisation, not on their apparently eccentric insistence on aspects of their own difference, many of which are recent political inventions rather than reflections of their distinction from others.

Perhaps the monotheistic peoples are more alike than present-day tensions suggest, but one striking difference between the Muslim period of empire and the imperialism of the post-Reformation Judeo-Christian world is that the latter incorporated a notion of racial difference, presupposing the superiority of the colonising race over the natives. This facilitated, indeed legitimised genocide, whether of the natives in America, the Jews in Germany or the Palestinians -- the former was entirely free of any form of racism; even preferential treatment was never on the cards except in matters relating to the divine message, which was embracing enough to make room for everyone, unlike Catholicism or the notion of a

chosen people. Whether we attribute this to something specific about Islam or not, this is a vital difference when we look at the Western imperial project as embodied in Israel.

In this context it is well to remember that Enlightenment was as much about undoing the damage of racism as separating religion from politics. Enlightenment was also about imperialism, alas. But in being an anachronism of the imperialist project, Israel also betrays that side of the Enlightenment to which Islam contributed most positively: the inclusive, Nature-bound, non-racist world view later subverted by the imperialists. (Recall Ben Gurion: "I'm an atheist but God gave us this land!") Irrespective of the aforementioned difference between Muslim empire and Judaeo-Christian-secular imperialism, however, the answer to the Middle East conflict cannot be sought in a space corrupted with racism. Certainly, the answer to the Palestinian problem is not in yet another nationalist Arab autocracy- theocracy operating "independently" from within Israel. The one-state solution, however farfetched in practical terms at the moment, is inevitable in the long term, irrespective of the balance of power within that state and even despite the best efforts of the Zionists opposed to it. Plans for a

Greater Israel notwithstanding, it is simply not true that Muslims command no power in the world today; and for Muslims (the Arabs, the Turks, though increasingly not the Persians), the tendency to sit back and say "Please refrain from killing!" is no longer viable.

It is well to remember that under the Umayyids in Spain, for example, Jews were highly assimilated into society in the best sense of the word: as philosophers, mathematicians, translators and physicians; until the mid-20th century, indeed, Jews had continued to be an active, integrated part of Muslim societies and indeed the West; it was imperialism -- the Zionist project -- that pushed them out, not the Old Testament or secularism.

Perhaps focussing on the political-economic dynamics that have given rise to the present situation will be more effective in countering American foreign policy -- the most horrific extension of Europe's abortive imperial project of the 19th century, both Christian and Jewish -- than reviewing the history of religion as such. In either case it is time for Muslims to re-engage with the pluralism on which Islam thrives and speak out against

racism.

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/857/focus.htm>