

# Understanding and Interpreting Contemporary Islam in the UK and Russia – The Import of Theology

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## **1. Introduction – Why Theology?**

Islam, like other world religions, tends to be associated with a set of moral values that translate into certain political institutions, socio-economic patterns of behaviour and cultural practices. Religious values are often thought to be conservative, reactionary and oppressive. And not unlike the other monotheist faiths, the Islamic claim to universality and supreme truth reinforces the perception that religion is absolutist and irrational. Insofar as theology is the precisely that discipline which purports to be the word or science of God, it is frequently dismissed as unscientific – not least, so the argument goes, because it must involve a blind commitment to supernatural faith. As a result, Islam is frequently studied from a broad, secular perspective. Accordingly, religion in general and Islam in particular is either a psychological or a social or a political or a cultural phenomenon that is best analysed within the methodological framework of social sciences.

The problem is that this sort of approach is based on questionable presuppositions and dubious conclusions. First of all, there is the risk of assuming that all religions are identical in terms of their nature or essence and that they vary merely according to their historical evolution and cultural context.<sup>1</sup> Second, there is also the risk of essentialising religion and reducing it to one dimension at the expense of all others – religion is primarily either a certain kind of emotion or consciousness or a set of values or a range of cultural practices.<sup>2</sup> Third, such and similar conceptions of religion tend to conclude that traditional faiths like Sunni and Shia Islam (or, for that matter,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the work of Karen Armstrong, in particular her book *The Great Transformation. The World in the Time of Buddha, Socrates, Confucius and Jeremiah*, rev. ed (London: Atlantic Books, 2007). Armstrong draws on Karl Jaspers' notion of an 'axial age' – the seven hundred years between about 900 BC and 200 BC – and extends this to the rabbinical sages in the first century BC, and then through the teachings of Jesus and St. Paul all the way to Mohammed. Whilst there are undoubtedly some surprising parallels in the emergence of the various world religions, Armstrong's thesis (and Jaspers' before her) makes all creeds essentially the same and thus understates the specificity of each faith.

<sup>2</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup>-century influential Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher defined religion in terms of God-consciousness. Similarly, the sociology of religion which we owe to Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim views religion in positivist terms and tends to reduce faith to something measurable that can be analysed in narrow scientific ways.

Roman Catholicism pre-Vatican II) are socially regressive and politically reactionary and that they require some sort of reformation in order to become properly emancipatory and progressive.<sup>3</sup> In consequence, the prescription is for traditional religion to adopt more rational ideas and for society as a whole to implement liberal, secular policies that will help creeds modernise and make believers more tolerant of one another and of those with no faith at all.<sup>4</sup>

In this presentation, I will contest secular analysis, its assumptions and conclusions. Instead, I will argue that the complex reality of Islam is best understood as a religious phenomenon with its own proper logic. As a discipline that studies the logic underpinning religion, theo-logy is uniquely positioned to make a contribution to our understanding and interpretation of world religions in general and monotheism in particular. This is certainly true for Islam which puts forward a unified worldview based on faith in the one true God who revealed himself to Mohammed, his Prophet. Unlike other world religions such as Buddhism that tend to separate faith from politics and social transformation, Islam makes no such division: whilst there is certainly a distinction between the imam and the mosque on the one hand and the caliphate and its rulers on the other hand, politics is not – and cannot be – divorced from religion. Moreover, the emphasis on a universal *umma* provides another indication that Islam is inherently political and transnational. As such, the question of how best to integrate Muslims into different political communities is also – and perhaps above all – a theological question.

Broadly configured, theology is not confined to the reading of scripture and the systematic elaboration of doctrine. Insofar as religious beliefs are embodied in political institutions, socio-economic patterns of behaviour and cultural practices, the field of theology extends to politics, society, the economy and culture. Recent innovations in academic research have led to a

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<sup>3</sup> Since the events of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, there has been a constant media clamour about the need for an Islamic Reformation à la Martin Luther. One prominent international example is of course Salman Rushdie ('Muslims unite! A new Reformation will bring your faith into the modern era', *The Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2005). For an intelligent critique of this sort of argument, see Giles Fraser, 'The idolatry of holy books – The demand for a reformed Islam fails to take into account what the Christian Reformation really meant', *The Guardian*, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2005, and also Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam: The House of Sa'ud from Tradition to Terror* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Curiously, this sort of thesis is not confined to militant atheists and secular liberals but extends to a number of religious commentators too.

more rigorous conceptualisation of contextual, public and political theology. In what follows, I will apply some of the insights that emerge from this work to the case of Islam in the UK and Russia, in particular relations between state and church/mosque and the link between religion and politics.

More specifically, the account of theology that underlies my presentation can be described in the following three ways. First of all, because it is both a unified science but also an umbrella of all sorts of disciplines, theology is in its constitution both multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary – it is an all-encompassing perspective on how religion frames the life of those who believe and worship. In the case of Islam, this tendency towards unity is crucial for the question of integration of Muslims in countries where public life is not Muslim, like in the UK and Russia.

Second, theology consists of the joint study of universal principles and particular practices; as such, it is both theoretical and practical. Therefore, theology can only hope to be equal to its object if it can relate beliefs to actions, and ask how religious communities evolve and what factors induce these changes. For example, how is the resurgence of Orthodoxy modifying the context within which ethnic Muslims in Russia operate? Another example is the way in which mainstream British culture is affecting integration of Muslim communities – are generational or geographical factors as important as religious factors?

Finally, theology thus configured is uniquely positioned to ask the question of how the presence of religious groups is changing the self-perception and perception of nations and their dominant cultures. More fundamentally, it is hard to grasp the current resurgence of religion in politics, international relations and society at large outside a theological framework of analysis.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the growing presence of theology in the domain of public discourse is part of a move towards a post-secular mode that is recasting the terms of debate.

Against this background, I will argue that Islam, in its manifold contemporary guises, is a religious phenomenon that can only be understood

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<sup>5</sup> Pavlos Hatzopoulos and Fabio Petito (eds.), *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: the Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

and interpreted as such. Secular methods will fail, as will secular policies. The challenge is therefore to devise models of political and civic integration that are non-secular without however making religion the norm for those of no religious faith. In the concluding section, I will briefly outline an alternative non-secular model which is perhaps best described as 'organic pluralism' – the idea and reality that contemporary society is descriptively plural but requires a hierarchical structure (based on meritocracy and an ethos of excellence) in order to avoid the twin extremes of aggressive assimilation that relegates religious identity to the private sphere or secular multiculturalism that promotes segregation and relativism.

## **2. The Limits of Social Scientific Conceptions of Religion and Secular Discourses on Islam – the case of Islamic extremism in urban Britain**

The limits of social scientific conceptions of religion and secular on Islam are perhaps most visible in the case of Islamic extremism among urban Muslim youth in the UK. Most accounts of Islamic terrorist attacks on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005 in London, the attempted explosion of transatlantic airlines in August 2006 and the failed bombings in London and Glasgow in the summer 2007 are as blind as the proposed responses are empty. Both Muslim and non-Muslim commentators argue that Islamic terrorism is a fanatical perversion of Islam and as such deviates from its true teachings. They are also united in calling for a combination of military and civil repression coupled with western-style modernisation of the Muslim world, so that Islam will then isolate and exclude this heresy. But these analyses miss the point. The nature of the terrorist threat *is* unambiguously Islamic and is not so much a deviation from Islamic tradition as an appeal to it. Al-Qaeda makes a double claim on Islam, one classical, the other modern. Classically, the revivalists speak to Islamic history and the golden age of its founder and his caliphs. In terms of modernity, the radicals draw explicitly on the absolutist ideology of Wahhabism and European fascism.

Regarding classical Islam, the oft-quoted remark that Islam is predominantly a religion of peace is unfortunately wrong. It is historically illiterate to claim that war is foreign to Islam and it is theologically

uninformed to argue that *jihad* is merely a personal inner struggle with no external military correlate. On the contrary, Islam is linked from the beginning with the practice of divinely sanctioned warfare and lethal injunctions against apostates and unbelievers.<sup>6</sup>

Violence in religion tends to be associated with state formation. States and empires are territorial and as such require armies and warfare to secure and extend their domains. Islam is not alone in inflicting violence via an imperial state. Both Christianity and Judaism have organised warfare utilising state power. But unlike its sister faiths, Islam experienced no peripatetic period of exclusion and marginalisation. Right from the start, it formed a unitary state bent on territorial conquest by military means. The Prophet died a successful military leader who created a single Islamic polity that combined the double logic of a religious community *and* an imperial state.

It is this dual identity that explains how Islam can be both peaceful and warlike at the same time. Whilst the Qurʾan enjoins that there shall be ‘no compulsion in religion’ (Sura 2: 256), Islam still regards it as a holy task to expand the borders of the House of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*) against the demonic world of unbelievers: ‘He who dies without having taken part in a campaign dies in a kind of unbelief’. Coupled with this intense duality between Islam and its enemies is an extreme territorial sense of the sacred. Since the time of the Prophet, the entire holy land of the Hijaz (the land bordering the Red Sea and encompassing Mecca and Medina) was and is forbidden territory for non-Muslims. Hence Osama Bin Laden’s primary demand for the departure of all infidels from holy Muslim lands.

One can chart various traditions of absolutism in Islam. When extremists say they are killing in the name of Islam – they are appealing to Islamic traditions of long standing. As the Muslim scholar Ziauddin Sardar remarks, the violent and exclusive tradition in Islam is not a medieval, modern or contemporary invention but ‘can be traced right back to the formative phase of Islam’.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Al-Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist networks appeal to the legacy of the Kharijites, a radical sect that emerged shortly after the death of

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<sup>6</sup> This has been argued not just by Bernard Lewis (*The Crisis of Islam. Holy War and Unholy Terror*, New York: Modern Library, 2003) and Malise Ruthven (*A Fury for God: The Islamist Attack on America*, London: Granta, 2004) but also Muslim scholars and commentators such as Ziauddin Sardar.

<sup>7</sup> Ziauddin Sardar, ‘The Struggle for Islam’s Soul’, *New Statesman*, 18<sup>th</sup> July 2005.

Mohammed. Accusing all other Muslims of being decadent and unfaithful to the true teachings of the Prophet, the Kharijites practiced unrestrained warfare on both unbelievers and apostates in a quest to restore Islam's original purity and create a universal caliphate.<sup>8</sup>

The origins of Al-Qaeda's modern appeal go back to Wahhabism, named after the revivalist movement founded by Muhammad Ibn ` Abd al-Wahhab in 1744. This revivalism occurred long before European imperialism. Building on earlier forms of absolutism (particularly the work of Ibn Taymiyyah), it called for a return to a pure and unadulterated form of Islam closer to the ideals of the Prophet. Allied with the imperial House of Saud, Wahhabism engaged in the ruthless elimination of all those apostates – whether Sunni, Shi`ite or Sufi – who did not meet its standards of purity and authenticity.

In this, Wahhabism is not unlike some radical Protestant sects: faced with a decadent society, it reduced God's revelation to one literalist interpretation that tolerated no dissent. This diminution is nowhere more visible than in relation to the four traditional sources of legal authority in Islam: the Qur`an, the *hadith* (the sayings and approvals of the Prophet), the *ijma* (the consensus of the community) and *qiyas* (analogy). Wahhabism repudiated discernment by the community as it felt that the social order was itself corrupt. It also abolished analogy as a means of dealing with new events on the basis of reasoning to past experiences and traditions. By abandoning the last two sources of authority, Wahhabism reduced Islam to a scriptural literalism and inaugurated an absolutism utterly hostile to other, more medieval Islamic traditions. In this sense of direct rule by God, Wahhabism is a truly modern theology. Not unlike Descartes and Kant, it argues for the unmediated and total knowledge of its object.

Furthermore, Al-Qaeda blends this modern theology with fascism. The Indian Muslim Abu Ala Maududi (1903-1979) denounced the degraded nature of all contemporary Muslim societies using a "new *jahiliyya*" theory that society had lapsed into barbarism and usurped divine intention by abandoning the language of Arabic and the strictures of Islamic law. He characterised Muslim governments that did not implement strict *Sharia* law

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey T. Kenney, *Muslim Rebels: Kharijites and the Politics of Extremism in Egypt* (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

as actually apostate (*ridda*) and called on true believers to wage *jihad* against them.

Maududi was a decisive influence on Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), chief ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood. Against the 'hideous schizophrenia of modern life', Qutb glorified *tawhid* – the idea that God is exclusively encapsulated by Islam. This led him to proclaim a total *jihad* on apostates and unbelievers alike, whom he accused of exterminating Islam. His targets were loathed for their 'craven desire to live'. Like Maududi, he fused the history of Mohammed's travails with a revolutionary vanguard-type ideology that championed a cult of death in the quest for a revived caliphate.

The *jihadi Salafi* ideology instigated by these two figures is fuelled by fascist dreams of a prior Islamic golden age. Al-Qaeda sympathisers avidly read fascist literature of the 1930s and 40s and pursue rightwing ends via leftist methods. Recruits to the cause are not the excluded uneducated poor – they are Muslim intellectuals who have formed a radical critique of western society and its impact upon Islam. In contemporary Islamic movements from Algeria to Indonesia, this thinking has become dominant. In this unholy alliance of atavistic appeal and radical mobilisation, the new Islamicists repeat the ideology of Nazism and European Fascism.<sup>9</sup>

Here the case of Islamic extremism in the UK and British-born suicide bombers is instructive. If Europe is set to become the new front for *jihad*, then Britain seems to be at its centre. Britain is unique amongst European countries in fostering a whole generation of young Muslims who kill their compatriots in pursuit of piety and martyrdom. Desperate theories abound as to how this has come to pass: the left cannot imagine anything but poverty and social exclusion as the cause of disaffection. Equally puzzled are those on the right who cannot see why Muslims would not endorse free-market values. Others argue that Islamic terrorism can be mitigated by changes in Britain's foreign policy.

The trouble is that none of these explanations work. While some British Muslims are relatively disadvantaged, few if any of the past suicide bombers or current suspects are poor or excluded. Instead, many have been to

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Matthias Küntzel, *Jihad and Jew-Hatred: Islamism, Nazism and the Roots of 9/11*, trans. Colin Meade (New York: Telos Press, 2007).

university and obtained good jobs. Others own or work in successful family businesses; they or their families own property and they tend to be middle-class. With good reason, most Muslims, including many young British-born Muslims, will not wholeheartedly endorse the *laissez-faire* hedonist liberalism that has fragmented the British family and destroyed the wider community. But none of this amounts to a *raison d'être* for the killing of civilians.

The assertion that UK and US foreign policy is the decisive explanatory factor has more merit but even less claim to veracity. If this were so, there would be similar attacks in America by some of the 4-6 million Muslims estimated to be living there. In addition, the majority of Islamic suicide bombing is now internal to Islam, with numerous attacks carried out in Iraq by Sunni fundamentalists against Shia civilians or Shia militia against the Sunni population. Moreover, the foreign policy thesis is itself in large part a product of amnesia and fiction: it ignores the wars undertaken by Britain and the USA to save Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo. As such, it exculpates the murderous regimes of the Islamic polity (Saddam Hussein's chief among them) and ignores the simple fact that the greatest killers of Muslims today are fellow Muslims.

Why then does Britain produce such radicalism? Canada aside, the UK has the most successful cosmopolitan society in the West. Paradoxically, British Muslims are more integrated but – as surveys reveal – more alienated than elsewhere. Young Muslims appalled by the values and practices of secular Britain are separating themselves from the cultural mainstream. Thus the reason for alienation and violence is neither socio-economic nor political. Instead, what drives British-born Muslims to become suicide bombers is a culturally specific form of religious extremism. It is tied to Pakistan from where many of the families of the current suspects originate, and where all the recent British bombers visited prior to attacks. Idealistic, religious and alienated, many youths are recruited at university by extremist groups like al-Muhajiroun which was founded by the radical cleric Omar Bakri and whose members include Rashid Rauf, the alleged mastermind of the current airline plot. Their theology is a violent scriptural literalism allied with the aggressive Islamic nationalism originally preached in pre-partitioned India by Abu Ala Maududi (1903-1979). Moreover, all had been in contact with self-taught

foreign hate preachers like Bakri or Abu Hamza who sanctify suicide attacks in the name of Islam.

The ideology that radicalises British Islam is a blend of perverse puritanism, messianism and nationalism. Martyrdom is held to be a current injunction and when the realm of the unbeliever is seen as demonic – integration with secular values is viewed as cultural ‘rape.’ Immediate salvation through violent death derives from the absolute repudiation of contemporary life. Thus extremist movements prise young men away from the more moderate mosques and local communities that struggle to blend Islam with modern Britain. Nor is this extremism as marginal as has been supposed. A poll for *The Times* in 2006 found that more than one in ten British Muslims thinks that the perpetrators of 7/7 should be regarded as “martyrs”. Moreover, other surveys and

All of which is evidence that Britain is losing the battle of ideas with Islamic fundamentalism. Blair’s recent appeal to ‘moderate, mainstream Islam’ will not work, as he claims – in effect – that only secular Western values are universal and all other cultures and religions can be legitimately overridden. Currently Britons – corrupted by shopping, glamour and celebrity – only believe in individual choice. As such, they are incapable of imagining a different collective life – exactly what religion demands. Britain’s extreme and intolerant secularism is driving a wedge between faith communities and the dominant culture. Ghettoisation therefore seems an increasingly attractive option for British Muslims. Segregation breeds radicalisation. Thus the cause of home-grown suicide bombers *is* religious – it cannot be tackled by secular means.

### **3. A Religious Response to a Religious Problem – a brief argument in favour of an Islamic Renaissance**

Neither the ‘war on terror’ nor diplomatic talk will ever overcome Islam’s totalitarian turn. Western military and civil repression is everywhere fuelling the ranks of radical Islam. Equally, there can be no accommodation with a fanatical ideology that seeks to fashion the whole world in its own image. The essentially Islamic nature of this terror demands nothing less than a reformation in the name of an alternative Islam. With good reason, Islam will

not follow the West and embrace secularisation and the pleasures of the 'free-market' economy. But it could begin to develop a critique of the state in general and of violence in particular. Islam must also privilege true religious conversion over territorial expansion. Part of this must be the recovery of some of its aborted traditions. Islam needs to restore the legislative authority of communal consensus and that of analogy in order to allow Islam to develop along with – rather than against – the future.

After the failed attacks in London and Glasgow at the end of June 2007, Prime Minister Gordon Brown and his ministerial colleagues promised to reinforce the government's campaign "to win the hearts and minds of the Muslim community". However, like Tony Blair's sterile appeal to moderate, mainstream Islam, this strategy is bound to fail because of two fatal assumptions. First, that every culture and every religion wants to become like the secular west. Second, that resistance to western secularisation is fuelled by false grievances and as such can be legitimately ignored.

In practice, this sort of approach marginalizes traditional Islam in favour of an ersatz "progressive" version that robs it of all its distinctive character and vision. The litmus test for integration is whether Muslims are willing to be like "us". Unsurprisingly, many young Muslims are increasingly alienated by an aggressively secular culture that enforces liberal transgression of moral norms and taboos.

Crucially, current policies are not working because they fail to address the real cause of radicalisation and fanaticism. Contemporary Islamic violence is religious in nature. Its origin lies in Islamic scripture and the destruction of the traditional medieval schools that dictated its interpretation. The *Qu'ran* contains clear and lethal injunctions against apostates, idolaters and those who challenge Muslim territorial ascendancy. While the sacred texts do sanctify violence – they also codify it, limiting its range and application. Thus, there is no legitimation in classical Islam for suicide bombing or the wanton slaughter of innocents. That said, warfare and a consequent defence and extension of Islam was both a religious duty and a scriptural requirement, albeit one framed by chivalry and relative restraint.

Moreover, unlike the claims of contemporary fundamentalists, there never really was a unified political and religious authority in Islam. On the contrary,

the role of religious scholars (the *ulama*) was to limit the power of the Caliphs. And since there were four traditional schools of religious interpretation which themselves varied according to time and location, what constituted a proper Islamic practice varied according to local norms and customs. As such, traditional Islam prohibits the very totalitarian state Al-Qaeda seeks to impose. For example, if Islam recovers the traditional practice of *ijtihad*, a process of textual reinterpretation that replaces the scriptural literalism of the fundamentalists with a more medieval allegorical reading of the *Qu'ran*, this would enable the Muslim faithful to distinguish between immutable God-given laws and mutable human interpretations.

It is worth stating all of this because the only force that can challenge Islamic terrorism is not liberal progressivism but Islam itself. Those who have abandoned terrorism did so not as a result of secular injunctions or indeed horror at what they were doing. Rather, it was the realisation that the variant of Islam they were killing for was itself western, modern and secular. The great innovators of Islamic fundamentalism – Sayyid Qutb and Maududi – were deeply influenced by pagan Nazi literature and its supremacist critiques of modern life and culture. Demonstration of the essentially blasphemous nature of contemporary fundamentalism is crucial for the deprogramming of its adherents.

However, the mere rebirth of classical Islam is not enough. Islam in both its Sunni and Shia derivations suffers from an absolutist unmediated relation to God. Since faith is separated from reason and nature, it becomes a self-authenticating phenomenon that invalidates all other perspectives. What is really required is the revival of Sufism – a practice previously common to all forms of the faith and one that stresses the mystical unknowability of God and His transcendence of all forms of human knowledge. Such a recognition deprives Islamic fundamentalism of its primary motivating principle – that it knows the will of God totally and is therefore justified in enforcing it absolutely upon the earth.

A renewal of Sufism could help Islam to broaden its understanding of authority beyond rulers and the *ulama* to include civil society. This would also restore the consensus of the community (*ijma*) and thereby empower Muslim society to challenge the fundamentalist assertions of its heretical preachers

with reasoned belief. Given that we are losing the battle of hearts and minds, we would be well advised to chart a different path. By encouraging an Islamic renaissance and reviving traditions that the fundamentalists have so violently suppressed, Muslim youth might be diverted from their present course. As I argue in the following section, part of this strategy is to be theologically rigorous and not embrace over-simplifications of Islam that have been put forward by a large number of prominent Muslim scholars.

#### **4. Beyond Scriptural Reading – a theological alternative to absolutist monotheism**

In October 2007, 138 Muslim scholars addressed an open letter to Pope Benedict XVI and other Christian leaders, in which they call for a new dialogue between Christianity and Islam based on their sacred texts. Entitled "A Common Word Between Us and You," this document claims that the shared Muslim and Christian principles of love of the One God and love of the neighbour provide the sort of common ground between the two faiths that is necessary for respect, tolerance and mutual understanding.<sup>10</sup>

The publication of this letter coincided with the anniversary of a previous open letter in response to the Pope's controversial Regensburg address on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2006, when he appeared to link violence in religion to the absolute transcendence of God in Islam.<sup>11</sup> In reality, his point was that according to Muslim teaching, God's will is utterly inscrutable and therefore unknowable to human reason – with the implication that divine injunctions cannot be fully understood and must be blindly obeyed.

Against this background, the latest initiative by the Muslim scholars marks an attempt to move interfaith dialogue away from debates about reason and revelation towards scriptural reading. Christian-Muslim relations, so their argument goes, are best served by engaging in textual interpretations that highlight shared commandments and common beliefs. But to suggest, as the authors of "A Common Word" do, that Muslims and Christians are united by

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<sup>10</sup> See the document available online at <http://www.acommonword.org>

<sup>11</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Faith, Reason and the University", 12<sup>th</sup> September 2006, available online at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html)), published as *Glaube und Vernunft. Die Regensburger Vorlesung* (Freiburg: Herder, 2006). An English translation can be found in James V. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2007).

the same two commandments which are most essential to their respective faith and practice – love of God and love of the neighbour – is theologically dubious and politically dangerous.

Theologically, this glosses over elementary differences between the Christian God and the Muslim God. The Christian God is a relational and incarnate God: the word was with God and the word was made flesh (Gospel of John 1:1, 1:14). Moreover, the New Testament and early Christian writings speak of God as both one and three, a single Godhead with three equally divine persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This is not merely a scriptural or doctrinal point but has significant political and social implications. The equality of the three divine persons is the basis for equality among mankind – each and everyone is created in the image and likeness of the triune God. As a result, Christianity calls for a radically egalitarian society beyond any divisions of race or class: as St Paul the Apostle wrote in his first epistle to the Corinthians: “By the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews as well as Greeks, slaves as well as citizens” (1 Cor 12:13). The promise of universal equality and justice that is encapsulated in this conception of God thus provides Christians with a way to question and transform not only the norms of the prevailing political order but also the (frequently perverted) social practices of the Church.

By contrast, the Muslim God is disembodied and absolutely one: there is no god but God, He has no associate (Qur’an 47:19, 6:173). This God is revealed exclusively to Muhammed, the messenger (or prophet), via the archangel Gabriel. As such, the Qur’an is the literal word of God and the final divine revelation – first announced to the Hebrews and later to the Christians, an original revelation which according to many Islamic schools of interpretation was distorted and perverted by Judaism and Christianity.

Again, this account of God has important consequences for politics and social relations. Islam does not simply posit absolute divisions between those who submit to its central creed and those who deny it; it also contains divine injunctions against apostates and unbelievers (though protecting the Jewish and Christian faithful). Moreover, Islam’s radical monotheism tends to fuse the religious and the political sphere: it privileges absolute unitary authority over intermediary institutions and also puts a premium on territorial conquest

and control, under the direct rule of God. These (and other) differences imply that Christians and Muslims do not worship or believe in the same God; in consequence, across the two faiths love of God and love of the neighbour invariably differ.

By ignoring these fundamental divergences, the authors of the open letter perpetuate myths about Christians and Muslims praying differently to the same God. Worse, they exhibit a simplistic theology of absolute unmediated monotheism. In this way, they unwittingly play into the hands of religious extremists on both sides who claim to have immediate, total and conclusive knowledge of divine will by faith alone. The problem with all textual interpretations is that they are, by definition, particular and partly subjective. Without universal concepts and objective standards such as rationality, scholars differ from extremists merely in terms of their honourable intentions. So the political danger of focusing Christian-Muslim dialogue on textual reading is that it neglects each faith's theological specificities and the social implications; as such, this approach undermines the mutual understanding which it purports to offer but fails to deliver.

Thus, Christian and Muslims can no longer eschew the fundamental differences that distinguish their religions. The best hope for genuine peace and tolerance between Christianity and Islam is to have a proper theological engagement about the essence of God and the nature of peace and justice. Otherwise, interfaith dialogue will amount to little more than the polite platitudes of politicians and diplomats. In the name of the shared commitment to truth and wisdom, Christians and Muslims should have robust debates that are theologically informed and politically frank.

Of course, this does not preclude pragmatic cooperation between the faiths on issues and problems of common concern such as aggressive secularism, militant atheism and, most importantly, violence in religion. But the fundamentalists on both sides will only be intellectually defeated and politically marginalized by reasoned belief and rational argument – not by subjective textual interpretation. Pope Benedict's Regensburg address called on all religions to integrate faith with reason in new ways, such that the world's religious cultures could once more debate their universal beliefs. In the following section, I argue that such a theological account is indispensable

to the integration of religious principles into secular law, as illustrated by the debate on shar'ia law in the UK.

## **5. Secular Law and the Integration of Shar'ia**

Back in February 2008, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, ignited a huge controversy in Britain last week when he suggested in a lecture in the Royal Courts of Law that the UK should adopt certain aspects of Islamic sharia law.<sup>12</sup> This was done with the benign intention of integrating into British law the practices and beliefs of Britain's 1.8 million Muslims. However, Dr Williams' apparent suggestion in a radio interview (on the same day a few hours before the lecture) that Muslims could opt out of secular common law for separate arbitration and judgement in Islamic religious courts created the impression of one law for Muslims and another for everybody else.

This peculiar and incendiary idea (subsequently corrected by the Archbishop) provoked a nationwide furore about states within states and a widespread fear that any licence granted to shar'ia law would also licence its more extreme aspects. Unfortunately, the media storm masked the real message of the speech which concerned secular state authority and its impact on religious minorities in general and Muslims in particular.

For the genuine target of Rowan Williams' lecture is the increasingly authoritarian and anti-religious nature of the modern liberal state. Militant secularism has forbidden head-scarves and wall-mounted crucifixes in France. It has also banned Catholic adoption agencies in Britain for not selecting same-sex couples as potential foster parents. Under the banner of free speech, secular Italian leftists recently prevented the Pope from addressing La Sapienza university in Rome on the subject of rational enquiry.

Williams' intervention matters because his legitimate religious concerns with freedom of conscience and practice tie in with wider western worries about the consequences of failing to integrate a growing, devout and alienated Islamic minority within a relativistic and increasingly aggressive secular culture.

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<sup>12</sup> The Most Reverend the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams, 'Civil and Religious Law in England: a Religious Perspective', lecture delivered in the Royal Courts of Justice in London on Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> February, available online at <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1575>

However, the solution proposed by the Archbishop repeats the errors of 1960s liberal multiculturalism. In conjuring up the idea of communities sharing the same space but leading a separate life, he unwittingly endorses a scenario that entrenches segregation and fractures any conception of a common good binding all citizens. Despite this, Williams at least recognizes that Britain is struggling to find a way of accommodating its increasingly ghettoized and radicalized Muslim population.

Clearly, the integration of Islam into secular democracies is a challenge that confronts the Western world as a whole, and Europe in particular. Regrettably, there are problems with all the existing secular models of integration. British and Dutch versions of multiculturalism hoped to ensure the equal rights of all citizens, but both countries – in abandoning the idea of a mutual organic and national culture based around religion – lost the very medium in which majorities and minorities could share.

Germany eschewed its own Christian legacy in favour of an ethnic account of its identity. Thus, Germany reserves national culture for its indigenous population and though it grants generous socio-economic rights the German model still refuses Muslim "guest workers" and immigrants citizenship and thereby participation in political and civic life.

In France, the Republican ideal appeals to immigrants, but its secular instantiation denies the primary religious form of their identity. Moreover, the Muslim population is heavily discriminated against on the labour market and tends to be confined to the no-go areas of the *banlieues*. The French model refusal to accommodate religion prevents France from broadening its account of what French identity is.

The problem with all the European models is that they enshrine the primacy of secular law over and against religious principles. Far from ensuring neutrality and tolerance, the secular European state arrogates to itself the right to control and legislate about all spheres of life; state constraints apply especially to religion and its civic influence. Legally, secularism outlaws any rival source of sovereignty or legitimacy. Politically, secularism denies religion any import in public debate and decision-making. Culturally, secularism enforces its own norms and standards upon all other belief systems. In consequence, the liberal promise of equality amounts to little more than the

secular imposition of sameness. As such, contemporary liberalism is unable to recognize religions in their own right or grant them their proper autonomy.

By contrast, the USA offers a strong integrated vision that allows for the public expression of religion under the auspices of a state that guarantees not just individual rights but also the autonomy of religious communities. Even though minorities in the US suffer race segregation and class discrimination, the American model of religious integration marks an improvement on European secularism by explicitly shielding religion from excessive state interference. Thus loyalty to the state is not necessarily in conflict with loyalty to one's faith. Perhaps this explains to some extent why American Muslims appear more integrated and less alienated than their European counterparts. In part, this is because the European Enlightenment sought to protect the state from religion, whereas the American settlement aimed to protect religion from the state.

Thus, the real reason for Europe's failure to integrate Islam is the European commitment to secularism. Only a new settlement with religion can successfully incorporate the growing religious minorities in Western Europe. Secular liberalism in all of its contemporary variants is simply incapable of achieving this outcome. Paradoxically, what other faiths require for their proper recognition is the recovery of the indigenous European religious tradition – Christianity. Only Christianity can integrate other religions into a shared European project by acknowledging what secular ideologies cannot: a transcendent objective truth that exceeds human assertion but is open to rational discernment and debate. As such, Christianity outlines a non-secular model of the common good in which all can participate.

Rather than trying to defend religion through the guise of secular multiculturalism, the Archbishop of Canterbury should have been defending religious pluralism through Christianity. What Muslims most object to is not a difference of belief but its absence from European consciousness. Thus the recovery of Christianity in Europe is not a sectarian project but instead the only basis for political integration of Muslims and peaceful religious coexistence. As I argue in the following section, the absence of a strong, substantive account of national identity is in large part responsible for the lack of integration of minorities in Europe, not least Muslim communities.

## **6. Conclusion – Organic Pluralism**

In the preceding section, I briefly argued that the dominant models of integration in Europe are failing for essentially the same reason – the primacy of a secular logic that subordinates religion to external standards. However, it is unlikely that this secular consensus will continue to prevail. Across Europe, Muslim communities are rightly demanding that their religion be recognised as legitimate and that they be able to express their faith in the public sphere. Likewise, Muslim and other religious communities are right to question all the secular ideologies that attempt to privatise religion and relegate to the private sphere. Moreover, Christian communities are right to insist that it is crucial to preserve the heritage of Christianity in Europe and to extend this legacy in ways that augment the integration of people of all faiths and none.

A longer critique of British and Dutch multiculturalism, French assimilation and German toleration will have to be developed elsewhere. But in conclusion I would like to sketch the contours of a new model of integration that is perhaps best described as organic pluralism. As I have already argued, multiculturalism and toleration prevent the formation of a widely and mutually shared culture, whereas assimilation tends to enforce a conformist culture that cannot integrate difference. Any genuine alternative needs to blend the diversity of difference with the unity of an overarching culture in which all can share.

In fact, the pluralism which the advocates of multiculturalism purport to defend is best secured by an organicist and corporatist model: organic conceptions emphasize that society is not the sum of its individual parts but rather like a social body where all members are equal yet also hierarchically ordered. Applied to the present day, organicism shifts the emphasis away from abstract legal rights and the language of economic opportunity to a genuine meritocracy and an ethos of excellence. Likewise, corporatism – far from being exclusively right-wing – is in fact indebted to the Christian tradition of a multitude of free associations and complex varying jurisdictions that originated from the Papacy and its efforts to create a variety of monastic bodies, universities and mendicant orders and subsequently lay fraternities and trade guilds. As such, corporatism binds together a strong emphasis on

locality and an outlook towards the global commonweal. Such a vision is able to recognise contributions to the common good from all communities and traditions and also dissent from particular legal measures in the name of this common good. Taken together, a theologically framed account of civic integration on the basis of organicism and corporatism can overcome the impasse in which multiculturalism, assimilation and toleration find themselves at present.