

The War on Terror and the Islamic Reformation

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The spectacular eruption of Islamist terrorism on 9/11 not only provoked the American-led war on terror but deepened the rift within Islam over fundamentalism and reformation. But, is this war fueling further terror while undermining spiritual reform? Will the impulse for reformation come mostly from the Muslim diaspora in the West instead of from Muslim lands? In this section, the most prominent voices for reform speak out.



Inside the Mind of Jihadists

SALMAN RUSHDIE is author of *THE SATANIC VERSES* and, most recently, *SHALIMAR THE CLOWN*. He spoke recently with NPQ editor Nathan Gardels.

NPQ | It happened again recently in Jordan, this time with suicide bombers. Before this there was Bali, London, Madrid and 9/11. There was the murder of Theo Van Gogh on the street in Amsterdam and the brutal beheading of Danny Pearl in Karachi.

In your newest novel, *Shalimar the Clown*, you've imagined what is inside the minds of jihadists. Is there a common motivation for these different acts? Is it the "absolutism of the pure"; striking out against the hybrid impurities of cosmopolitan culture, as you've often written?

SALMAN RUSHDIE | In their minds at least, it is not a very theoretical or intellectual thing except for a few at the top of these terror networks.

The most essential characteristic of the person who commits terror of this kind is the idea of dishonored manhood. I try to show this in my novel. The character Shalimar picks up the gun not just because his heart gets broken, but because his pride and honor get broken by losing the woman he loves to a worldly man of greater consequence and power. Somehow he has to rebuild his sense of manliness. That is what leads him down the path to slashing an American ambassador's throat.

Living in the West, where there is no "honor culture," it is easy to underestimate its power. Judeo-Christian culture has to do with guilt and redemption. In Eastern cultures, with no concept of original sin, the idea of redemption from it doesn't make sense. Instead, the moral poles of the culture have to do with honor and shame.

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Interestingly, in researching *Shalimar*, one of the things I discovered was a kind of bizarre class differential between the warriors and the suicide bombers. Strapping on a suicide belt is looked down upon by some who think it is more manly to kill face to face with a knife. Fighting is manly. Suicide bombing is cheap.

Those drawn into the act of suicide are malleable personalities. Hezbollah, for example, has developed a quite detailed psychological profile of the kind of person who can be persuaded to be a suicide bomber. You have to be a weak personality to be a suicide bomber. You have to accept the abnegation of the self. If your father or sister needs a medical operation, the handlers will say, "You do this, and we'll take care of that." There is a whole range of appeals, few of which have to do with ideology.

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of collective humiliation and dishonor of Islamic culture at the hands of the West. As V.S. Naipaul has written, they blame their failure on the success of another civilization.

RUSHDIE | The birth of Islamic radicalism is relatively new. Fifty years ago, during decolonization and the early post-colonial days, Gamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt and the (National Liberation) Front in Algeria, for example, were completely non-religious phenomena. Some movements were led by Marxists. The cause was national liberation from imperialism.

In time, leaders of many of those movements turned into corrupt fat cats, and the Islamists, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, could present themselves as the clean, virtuous alternative to secularism. That gave them a big rhetorical advantage. The nationalists often used the language of the Islamists, though they didn't mean it, because it offered a legitimizing rhetoric for the decolonizing period. However, by giving away their own tongues, they laid the groundwork for those who came behind them, who really did mean what they said. That is how Islamist radicalism grew.

But it grew differently in different places. In Iran, Khomeini was, in effect, a creation of the Shah because the Shah had killed all the other political voices. It wasn't like that in Kashmir. The presence of the Indian army for so long created a great deal of general unhappiness, the fertile soil from which radicalism could spring, even though it was alien to the Kashmiri spirit. Then, when the jihadists starting coming in from Pakistan, they targeted moderate Muslim voices because they wanted a polarized situation. The Kashmiris themselves were squeezed between two forces, neither of which they had much affinity for.

There is a tendency to look at the jihadist movement as a monolith globally. The only really global idea they have is this laughable fantasy of “the return of the Caliphate.” Inevitably they are disappointed that this doesn't happen, and thus there is more resentment.

The whole phenomenon is much more comprehensible when you look at local sources. Suicide bombing in the Middle East is not the same as suicide bombing in London.

NPQ | The French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy argues that, despite the considerable diversion of Iraq, the center of Islamic radicalism is moving east to Asia, where most Muslims live. He argues that “Kashmir is the new Palestine.” Do you agree?

RUSHDIE | He says this because he is concerned about Pakistan. What he is right about is that, behind General Pervez Musharraf, there is the possibility of a really terrible situation where radical Islamists get control of nuclear weapons. If that happens,

it would dwarf any other problem in the world. If Musharraf is assassinated and some radical from the Pakistani intelligence services takes over, then you essentially have the Taliban with the bomb.

NPQ | After the London bombings, Iqbal Sacranie, the head of the Muslim Council of Britain, condemned the acts of “our children” and said they presented a “profound challenge” to local Muslims. Yet he also had professed sympathy for the fatwa against you, saying “Death is perhaps too easy” for the author of *The Satanic Verses*. Isn’t that double standard precisely what created the space for the children of the Muslim community in Europe to commit acts of terrorism in their own homeland?

RUSHDIE | Yes. I think so. (British Prime Minister Tony) Blair is making a real mistake believing that these ultra-conservative, ultra-orthodox, non-modernizing—non-terrorist, to be fair—voices like Sacranie are in some way representative of British Muslims. You don’t fight radical conservatism with not-quite-so-radical conservatism. Blair has put Sacranie’s main deputy, who is on record denying the Holocaust, on some committee supposedly fighting Islamic radicalism!

These are not the people to get in bed with. Unfortunately, Blair’s own faith-based instincts lead him toward other people of faith as being the solution.

One problem is that there is no truly representative institution for British Muslims. Most Muslims in England are not ghettoized, or particularly Muslim. They deal with their faith in a much lighter way. They are citizens first and Muslims second or maybe seventeenth. The conventional wisdom of Blair’s government seems to be that everyone is a Muslim first and must be dealt with on that basis.

The question is how you persuade this majority to organize. Given the demonization about what I’m supposed to be, I’m certainly the wrong person for this job. But still, the job needs to be done. At least I can talk about it.

NPQ | Tariq Ramadan, the controversial Geneva-based scholar who is a leading voice of European Muslims, says something similar. He says the problem is the narrow teaching of the Koran by imams in the closed communities of big European cities who are trained in the Arab world. They tell alienated youth they should be ashamed of not being good Muslims because they are contaminated by the “un-Islamic environment” in which they live.

Yet, most Muslims, he argues, are engaged in a “silent revolution” led substantially by women, who have committed themselves to democracy, freedom of conscience and worship and diversity. They are both citizens of the West and look to Islam for their meaning in life. This silent revolution is the real enemy of the London bombers because it refuses to accept the “us vs. them” worldview.

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Do you agree?

RUSHDIE | Oddly, because it comes from Tariq Ramadan, I more or less agree with that. The central issue here is interpretation, or *ijtihad*. Conservative Muslims say that only Islamic scholars, *ulema*, can interpret the Koran. The religious power elite thus maintains control because theirs is the only interpretation that is acceptable. And because they have a literalist reading of the Koran, they never question first principles. It is from this kind of interpretive process that so many atrocities are committed, like the one in India recently where a woman was told she had to leave her husband because she was “unclean” after being raped by her father-in-law!

One of the reasons my name is Rushdie is that my father was an admirer of Ibn Rush’d, the 12th-century Arab philosopher known as Averroes in the West. In his time, he was making the non-literalist case for interpreting the Koran.

One argument of his with which I’ve also had sympathy is this: In the Judeo-Christian idea, God created man in his own image and, therefore, they share some characteristics. By contrast, the Koran says God has no human characteristics. It would be demeaning God to say that. We are merely human. He is God.

Ibn Rush’d and others in his time argued that language, too, is a human characteristic. Therefore it is improper—in Koranic terms—to argue that God speaks Arabic or any other language. That God would speak at all would mean he has a mouth and human form. So, Ibn Rush’d said, if God doesn’t use human language, then the writing down of the Koran, as received in the human mind from the Angel Gabriel, is itself an act of interpretation. The original text is itself an act of interpretation. If that is so, then further interpretation of the Koran according to historical context, rather than literally, is quite legitimate.

In the 12th century, this argument was defeated. It needs to be raised again in the 21st century. The sad thing, as I discovered in my research for *The Satanic Verses* and other books, is that so much scholarship was already done on the Koran in past centuries, including on the dating of verses and the order they are placed. When you read the Koran as a writer, you immediately notice places where the subject changes radically in the middle of a verse and then picks up several passages later. Obviously, in this “sacred” text, an editor’s hand was at work.

Today, in a lot of the Muslim world, such historical study is prohibited. That is why the place to start today is with a new Islamic scholarship.

I have called for an Islamic Reformation, but that may give the wrong connotation because of Martin Luther’s puritanical cast. Enlightenment might be a better term. The point is, Islam has to change. The dead hand of literalism is what is giving power to the conservatives and the radicals. If you want to take that away from them,

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you must start with the issue of interpretation and insist that all ideas, even sacred ones, must adapt to new realities.

All other major religions have gone through this process of questioning, but remain standing. An Islamic questioning might well undermine the radicals, but it won't undermine Islam.

NPQ | **Where will the impulse of this Islamic enlightenment come from? From the “silent revolution” of Western Muslims? From Asia? Problematically, the “dead hand of literalism” reigns most severely in the Arab world, the cradle of Islam.**

RUSHDIE | It is very improbable that it would come from the Arab-speaking world. It is more likely to come from the diaspora where Muslims in the West or India have lived with secularism. Muslims are well integrated in India, having long known the secularism to which they adhere protects them and their faith from the dictatorship of the Hindu majority.

In Europe, integration has been held up as a bad word by multiculturalists, but I don't see any necessary conflict. After all, we don't want to create countries of little apartheid. No enlightenment will come from multicultural appeasement. This is very evident today in Holland, for example. Contrast that with the French model of secular integration. The headscarf controversy of a year ago is now a non-issue because a broad agreement emerged there across the spectrum that secularism is the best for everyone—from Muslims to Le Pen.

NPQ | **Those who favor Turkey's accession to the European Union argue it is critical for bridging the gap with Muslim civilization. But Muslim leaders like (former Malaysian Prime Minister) Mohamad Mahathir say Turkey cannot be a model for the Muslim world precisely because it is committed to European secularism. What would it mean for better West-Muslim relations if Turkey joined Europe?**

RUSHDIE | Not much. It is a mistake to make it such a big symbol.

Turkish secularism also seems a little rocky right now, though still holding. But they have big problems they haven't begun to address, starting with a penal code that is used against writers and publishers—some 14 or 15 who are up for trial right now. Orhan Pamuk, the novelist, has been charged for merely saying there is something to the Ottoman massacre of Armenians. The power of the Islamists is still far too great.

So, skepticism is warranted about Turkey in Europe. If Turkey wants to join Europe, it will have to become a European country, and that might take a long time.

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