THE END OF EMPIRE AND
THE ERA OF MISTRUST

Richard J. Sudworth

Colonialism and its discontents

Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign (1798–1801) customarily marks the beginnings of Islam’s encounter with modernity. The Christian West’s reflections on Islam had, until then, been dominated by apologetic and polemical exchanges. Alexander Ross’ comment on his own English translation of André du Ryer’s French translation of the Qur’an for King Charles I is indicative of the tone of inquiry: ‘There was no harm in reading the Qur’an as long as the reader bore in mind that he was first and foremost a Christian; he would not perjure his soul, but on the contrary, would learn what real heresy was’ (Khairallah 1988: 13). The Christian–Muslim encounter of modernity, though, is characterised by the forensic scrutiny of Islamic culture and anthropology by French scientists inextricably linked to the colonial aspirations of empire. The age of empire tended to confute the Christian West’s religious and cultural condescension of Islam. That Muslims were deemed to be on the wrong side of any intellectual inquiry was compounded by the evidence of colonial expansion into Islamic lands that frames the Christian–Muslim engagement of the age of empire.

While France was campaigning in Egypt and Syria at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain was beginning to extend its empire into India, and Austria and Russia were winning victories in Turkey. As the Muslim world began to modernise through this European colonial expansion, the accompanying drive towards nationalism was to presage the slow decline and fragmentation of the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century. The Crimean War (1853–6) was emblematic of the West’s engagement with the Muslim world, for which the increasingly enfeebled Ottoman Empire was merely a bystander in the fight for strategic territory by French, British and Russian governments. By the time of the eventual collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, the effective dominance of Western nation states over large swathes of Islamic populace in places as disparate as India, Palestine and Morocco was already established. With the formal abolition of the caliphate in 1924, the crisis for Islamic political identity was assured.

For the Church, the beginning of the twentieth century seemed to herald the inevitable Christianisation of the world. In 1909, an Anglican missionary in Cairo declared that ‘The British Empire has more Muslim subjects than the Ottoman and Persian empires combined’. Confident of the persuasive power of the combined projects of colonialism and the mission of the Church of England, he signed off his letter to a fellow missionary with the rhetorical flourish: ‘Who would
doubt the issue of this glorious conflict?’ (Ward 2006: 3). The first World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, in similar vein, marked the ‘all-time high-water mark in Western missionary enthusiasm’, with its symbiotic relationship between Enlightenment principles and Christian proselytism (Bosch 1991: 338). But contemporary accounts of mission in Muslim lands at the beginning of the twentieth century are noticeably more equivocal about the likelihood of success. Temple Gairdner writes of Islam as a ‘unique problem to the Christian Church . . . it is more difficult to concede to it what is gladly conceded to other religions’ (Gairdner 1909: 311). His diffidence faced with the complex relationship between Christianity and Islam now seems prescient. Estimates are that by 2050 Muslims will almost equal the number of Christians around the world and that Europe, the cradle of modernity and Christian missionary endeavour, will be able to number 10 per cent of its own population as Muslim (Pew Research Center 2015), figures that would have been inconceivable to the delegates in Edinburgh in 1910.

The optimism of Christian Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century was to be dampened with the onset of the First World War in 1914, which witnessed geopolitical manoeuvrings along Christian and Muslim fault-lines that would continue to reverberate into the next century. To the Germans, the Ottoman Empire was an object of *Islampolitik* which could help facilitate a declaration of *jihād* that would galvanise an insurrection among Muslims in British India and Egypt. To the British and French, defeat of the Ottomans would deliver the security of oil trading routes through the Suez Canal. To the Russians, the Ottomans offered the strategic attractions of Istanbul and Anatolia. The expanded caliphate hoped for by the Germans did not materialise, however, and the eventual break-up of the Ottoman Empire that ensued meant that its dismemberment followed the imperial designs of the British and French. The arbitrary borders of the nation states that resulted from this postwar settlement provide the shape for the contemporary instability of the Middle East and a reminder to Muslims of the far-reaching impact of colonial interference (Rogan 2015).

This signal of the triumph of modernity was by turns the humiliation of Islam. Thus, there was no space for the archetypal vision of Islamic governance as the necessary interdependence of faith and politics: the *dīn wa-dawla* fusion of religion and state. In such circumstances, the Muslim world had two broad trajectories open to itself: modernisation or religious renewal (Lewis 1993: 174–86). For Kemal Atatürk, presiding over the new Turkish republic in 1923, the solution was to lie in the embrace of the secular nation-state. Salafi Muslims would, alternatively, seek a return to the apparent purity of the earliest Islamic scholars for a vision of the faith unsullied by modernity, represented in groups like the Wahhabis and the Deobandis. These groups, among others, would represent a withdrawal from western, secular systems of politics and education and be as much a rebuke to apparently decadent and errant manifestations of Islam as they would be to western ideologies.

Out of the independence struggles for India and Pakistan, Abu l-A’la Mawdudi (1903–79) argued for a ‘theo-democracy’ where an Islamic constitution could realise the full implementation of *sharīʿa* law. Such a constitution would enable the reinstatement of a universal caliphate and be the blueprint for the Jamaat-i-Islami movement. In Egypt, Sayyid Qutb (1906–66) would articulate an Islamic alternative to what he saw as the moral emptiness and injustice of western democratic systems. As part of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, Qutb sought a revival of Islam that it might fulfil its role as ‘leadership of mankind’ to provide a framework for individual, family and public life in dialogue with western principles. These movements are among a range of responses that sought religious renewal rather than modernisation. Islamic identity in the Muslim world was to regain its confidence and true purpose not by aping the secularism of the West but through their respective retrievals of political models directed towards a very religious vision.
Old suspicions, new challenges

The still largely Christian empires of Europe would be gone within a generation following the financial exhaustion of the Second World War and the growing demand for political autonomy in the Indian subcontinent, Middle East, Africa and the Caribbean. With the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, Commonwealth links enabled the United Kingdom to bring in cheap labour from the Indian subcontinent through immigration from the 1950s and 1960s onwards. This population migration was illustrative of a broader pattern across Europe with its former colonial subjects that would bring, for example, North Africans to France and Turks to Germany. It is what Jørgen Nielsen describes as a narrative of ‘the empire striking back’ through the immigration and settlement of rural communities of the Muslim world in the towns and cities of Europe (Nielsen 2009: 145). Muslims who had previously been ‘over there’ as objects of Christian mission were demonstrably now ‘over here’. The older empires of Britain, France and Germany would be eclipsed by the United States of America, for whom the postwar ideological challenge to its economic and cultural hegemony would come not from Islamic countries but from the atheism of the Soviet Union.

The oil crisis of 1973 served to put the oil-producing states of the Middle East into the forefront of global affairs as well as providing a source of wealth to underwrite the propagation of more conservative manifestations of Islam, such as Wahhabism, to the increasing numbers of European Muslims. It was the Iranian Revolution of 1979, though, that witnessed the first clear reversal of the secularising trend in the Muslim world, when the secular, American-sponsored government of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi was toppled in favour of a new theocratic-republican constitution under the religious leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. Once again, the self-centred interventions of western governments, in this case Britain and the United States of America, had successively sown the seeds of a religious resurgence by propping up an unpopular, autocratic regime sympathetic to Western interests. The new regime would seek to dispense with the corrupting ideals of the ‘Crusader’ West in favour of a shariʿa system of government under the regulation of Shiʿa Islamic scholars.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signalled the beginning of the end of the Cold War and the eventual break-up of the Soviet Union, leading Francis Fukuyama to write of the triumph of Western liberal democracy and its status as the endpoint of humanity’s socio-cultural evolution (Fukuyama 1991). In the same year that the Berlin Wall fell, though, British Muslims were burning editions of Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses novel on the streets of Bradford. The Satanic Verses controversy suggested that the onward march of secular modernity was far from inevitable. Rushdie’s portrayal of the prophet Muḥammad drew accusations of blasphemy from Muslim communities, eventuating in the issue of a fatwā against the author from Ayatollah Khomeini. The issue served to focus attention on the existence of seemingly incompatible notions of free speech and blasphemy held by some of the respective Christian and Muslim communities within Europe, not just across continents.

In the void that the Soviet Union left during its break-up in 1991, Samuel Huntingdon developed a thesis about a ‘new enemy’: Islam. Seeing the world as blocks of ‘civilisations’, he saw that Islam presented an inexorable ‘clash’ with the broadly Christian West (Huntingdon 1993). Instead of the ‘Iron Curtain’ of the Cold War, there is the ‘velvet curtain’ of culture between a premodern Islam and an enlightenment Christianity embodied in the liberal democracies of the West. With the media spectacle of the terrorism of 11 September 2001, the currency of such a polarisation has grown. As David Kerr notes, 9/11 led to ‘a deepening of mutual suspicion and mistrust that has invoked the medieval metaphors of jihād and crusade’ (Kerr 2002: 81). The Salafi-inspired terrorism of al-Qaeda has revealed the paradox of a particular anti-Western
religious conservatism harnessed to modern technology and fanned through the internet and social media. Some of the very fruits of globalisation have been used to fuel the interests of extremist Muslims intent on attacking perceived symbols of Western materialism and militarism.

While it is tempting to see confirmation of the clash of civilisations in the rise of jihadist philosophies, the complexity and diversity of Islam belies such binary categorisations. Indeed, the extremism of al-Qaeda has in fact represented a new manifestation of Islam in dialogue with secular ideologies (Kippenberg and Seidensticker 2006). Designating Islamic terrorism as a pre-modern phenomenon at odds with the enlightened West seems to overlook the novel ways in which Islamist groups are refashioning Islamic identity. That the perpetrators of some of the most notorious acts of Islamic extremism, whether 9/11 in New York and Washington (2001), 7/7 in London (2005) or the Charlie Hebdo murders in Paris (2015), were educated and brought up in western countries points to the interpenetration of influences that go beyond the simplistic clash of civilisations theory. Furthermore, the political Islam of Qutb and Mawdudi are arguably mythic reconstructions of the idealised Islamic state that are dependent upon very modern conceptions of nationhood and governance (Afsaruddin 2006). In the same vein, Pankhurst would rebut the binary notion of a clash of civilisations as a discourse that obscures the pragmatic principles of representation, freedom and accountability that have always been at the heart of debates within Islamic polities (Pankhurst 2010). The contestations over Islam’s place in public life and geopolitics are thus evident within the Islamic world and among Muslims in the West.

The rhetoric of jihād and crusade remain persistent, though, and serve to reinvigorate the antagonism between Christianity and Islam. When George W. Bush invoked the word ‘crusade’ to initiate the so-called ‘war on terror’ after 9/11, the popular imagination of Muslims could not but be reminded of the spectre of religious imperialism. The invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and the Iraq War (2003–11) were ostensibly justified by the need to apprehend and disarm those supporting the Al-Qaeda network, but the disastrous consequences of these actions for the ongoing security and freedoms of these countries have only served to deepen the rift between the West and the Muslim world. That al-Qaeda proved not to be protected by the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein underlined the perception that the crusading West would only intervene in the Muslim world when its own interests were served: in this case, the protection of valuable oil supplies from Iraq.

The self-styled ‘Islamic State’ (IS) has stepped into the vacuum of postconflict Iraqi government to project the threat of a new caliphate that would consume Christians and all deviant Muslims in its wake. As countries across North Africa and the Middle East experienced a popular movement for democratisation known as the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2010, hope for greater freedoms in the Muslim world has rather been replaced by the fears of greater repression, as extremist religious groups have gathered around the banner of IS in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Video images on social media of Syrian Christians, captured western journalists and development workers being beheaded by IS combatants have sharpened accusations that Islam cannot defend its portrayal of a nonviolent, plural vision of public life. Together with the photographs of Ethiopian Coptic Christians beheaded in Libya and made to dress in the orange jumpsuits familiar to images of al-Qaeda prisoners in the infamous US Guantanamo Bay naval base, it is hard to avoid the uncomfortable narrative of a Christian–Muslim conflict played out in global geopolitics.

Allied to the IS presence in the Middle East and North Africa, and also al-Shabaab in East Africa and Boko Haram (literally ‘western education is forbidden’) in West Africa, there seems to be a coalescing of extremist groups terrorising Christians in the name of Islam. The need for constructive dialogue across Christian and Muslim communities has perhaps never been more pressing in the light of the all-pervading power of 24-hour news channels and social media to communicate atrocities apparently motivated by religious fervour. It seems that as old suspicions
are reawakened familiar patterns of interrelating are being played out again, at least in the public imagination: Christians viewing Muslims as fodder for conversion and material exploitation and Muslims struggling to affirm freedom of religion for Christians.

The Regensburg Address of Pope Benedict XVI (2006)

Pope Benedict XVI’s speech to his alma mater, the University of Regensburg, in September 2006 encapsulates the complexity of this era of mistrust between Christians and Muslims. The lecture has become notorious for the pope’s quotation of the fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus’ denunciation of the violent path of Muḥammad:

‘Show me just what Mohammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.’

(Pope Benedict XVI 2006)

Across the Muslim world, there was a strong reaction to the aspersions cast on Islam by this reference, resulting in protests in several cities. The Pakistani Parliament voted to censure the pope, and a number of leading Muslim scholars urged him to apologise for his remarks. In Somalia, a Roman Catholic nun was murdered in some of the protests that followed the lecture.

It is important to point out the relevance of this quotation to the thrust of the pope’s argument. The lecture was not about Islam specifically but about the nature of faith and reason. The object of critique was all forms of religion that were voluntarist, including manifestations of the Christian faith, and secularists who would separate faith from rationality. For the pope, belief in a God who was unreasonable was a path leading to religious violence. The Catholic Christian tradition had helped provide a fusion of Hellenistic philosophy with biblical teaching in western Europe that could affirm a natural law conducive to a shared discourse of the common good across different religious groups. The Regensburg Address was essentially a reclamation of a Christian European tradition of liberalism on the basis of a fusion between faith and rationality. The uncritical quotation about violent Islam may have revealed political naivety and insensitivity, but it was not the point of the lecture.

What the furore over Regensburg highlights, though, is the delicacy of contemporary Christian–Muslim relations and the speed with which statements and images (and one recalls the cartoons of Charlie Hebdo magazine here) can fuel resentment and violence: a careless word in New York can have devastating consequences in Peshawar. In one sense, this very fact goes some way to confirming the pope’s thesis about the need for rational faith, for considered reflections on how Christians and Muslims are to ‘defend’ their beliefs.

Aside from the political clumsiness of the pope, the truly controversial aspect of the lecture is the inference that it is the Christian tradition that has fostered religious rationalism and thus liberal freedoms in the West. In making this move, the pope has occluded the contribution of Islam to the Enlightenment project. That Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sīnā could have so influenced Thomas Aquinas, who provided the great synthesis of faith and reason for the Catholic Church, is ignored by the pope. The great contributions of Islam to European civilisation during the convivencia in Spain and the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 together provide a more complex counternarrative of Islamic rationality and a reminder of Catholic Christian excesses and violence. Though the mainstream of Sunnī Islam has rejected the Muʿtazilite school of Islamic rationalism in favour of Ashʿarite voluntarism, reason remains a significant element in the practice of jurisprudence and is evident in progressive reformulations of Islamic public life. How faith can make itself
reasonable and defensible to the other seems to be a legitimate quest for Muslims considering the profusion of Islamic extremism; but this is a quest where resources are evidently available within the Islamic tradition. Conversely, how the Christian faith can make space for Islam in its midst without totalising or occluding the Muslim is a corresponding challenge to the western world. Christians cannot afford to regard Muslims in the West as ‘the infidel within’ any longer (Ansari 2004). It would seem that Pope Benedict XVI would have had a surer base for being heard by Muslim communities if there had been, in turn, a humble acknowledgement of the violence perpetrated by the Christian faith. Though he was speaking to former colleagues, and indeed friends, in an academic environment, the hard truth of this episode is that in our global village, conversations ‘about the other’ are invariably heard by that other and can be all too easily misunderstood.

The need for sensitivity by religious leaders in their public pronouncements, both Christian and Muslim, is evident. That so few Christians and Muslims know and understand the other’s beliefs and histories is a deficit in learning that is likely to be filled, however inadvertently, with narratives of violence if education across the communities is not prioritised.

Another observation arising from the Regensburg Address is that the Christian–Muslim interface cannot remain a bilateral encounter. The absent third party to the lecture’s controversy was the atheist. The pope was concerned about the place of religion in public life, and, following the pattern of earlier lectures and writings (Pope Benedict XVI 2005), he mused on the pernicious power of secularist ideologies to divorce faith from reason. In doing this, he said, secularists corralled religion into the private sphere but ran the risk of releasing the extremisms of political Islam, which can never be privatised, without any concomitant constraint of rationality. The Christian–Muslim encounter has implications for the dialogue with secularism, a dialogue which highlights the ambiguities which now exist over the association between ‘the West’ and ‘Christianity’. The attenuation of public religion is an issue for both Christians and Muslims, and it behoves the future of Christian–Muslim dialogue to offer constructive accounts of the complexity of the West and not just the complexity of global Islam. There is much that remains of Christian culture in Europe and North America, and it can be argued that the characteristic liberal democracies of the West are charged with the residue of Christian influence (Siedentop 2014). However, Christianity is now most prevalent in Africa, South America and Asia and is decidedly a religion of the South. By 2050, four out of every ten Christians in the world will live in sub-Saharan Africa (Pew Research Center 2015). Christians and Muslims alike need to be alive to the developing nature of their own communities and the shifts in power across the globe as well as the shift away from religion in Western public life.

Points of tension, pointers to hope

One account of the end of empire, typical of Edward Said’s Orientalism (Said 1979), is that the Christian West would put an end to their projected fantasies and fears of Islam. These fantasies and fears had helped to keep Muslims subservient to the wealth and power of the West. The beginning of the twenty-first century has demonstrated a much more variegated reality to Christian–Muslim relations. The motifs of Islamic violence and Christian imperialism remain persistent, but they reflect much more nuanced power-relations across the respective communities. The beleaguered Christian communities of the Middle East and the vibrant black-led churches of European inner cities expose a different narrative to the postcolonial reading of the Church’s white, Western privilege. The way that Islam is changing and adapting in the West should alert Christians to the diversity of the faith and divert them from monolithic readings of Islam that stray into Islamophobia. For Tariq Ramadan, Islamic religious principles are already a part of European cultures; it is just the customs and ethnicities that require adaptation. For Bassam Tibi,
there is need of a reformation of Islam according to the liberal values of the West (Cesari 2015). In both cases, there is change and development, and there remain opportunities for Muslims in the West to model examples of freedom of religion and the embrace of plurality in concrete terms with their Christian neighbours. The untrumpeted good news is that so much of this ‘dialogue of life’ is happening already.

In this era of mistrust when the rhetoric of enmity between Christians and Muslims seems all too pervasive, a further glance beyond the two faiths might suggest the potential for collaborative endeavours for the common good. Christian and Muslim resources from the tradition that challenge usury are arguably relevant to a global economy exposed by the financial crisis of 2007–8. Community organising groups such as Citizens UK in London have paved the way for faith groups, with leaders from churches, mosques and synagogues, to work together in shared causes of justice such as the Living Wage campaign. Christian and Muslim beliefs about the created world and its stewardship before a God who calls humanity to account in a relationship of viceregency offer rich possibilities for concerted action for conservation and ecological responsibility. Whilst events such as 9/11 have heightened the sense of a gulf between Christians and Muslims, there remain sufficient resonances of faith to warrant collaboration in transforming the lives of the oppressed from both communities. Political theologies of the common good that acknowledge and celebrate difference whilst enabling action over shared concerns are perhaps the pragmatic hope for Christian–Muslim relations in an era of mistrust.

References


Pankhurst, R. (2010), ‘Muslim contestations over religion and the state in the Middle East’, *Political Theology* 11, 826–45.


**Further reading**


