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Reforming Scholarship on Islam: An Interview with Ibn Warraq

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Editor's Note: *Ibn Warraq is the pen name of the author/editor of seven books about Islam, including* Why I Am Not a Muslim *(1995),* The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book *(1998),* The Quest for the Historical Muhammad *(2000),* What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text and Commentary *(2002) and* Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism *(2007), all published by Prometheus Books. He is a visiting fellow at the Center for Law and Counterterrorism, a project of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies*.

Iannone: **What term do you prefer for the problem the West confronts today—Islamic radicalism, Islamic extremism, Islamic fundamentalism, Islamofascism, Islamism, jihadism, just Islam, or something else?**

Warraq: Unlike the Obama administration (and the Bush administration as well), I have no problem with using the adjective "Islamic" in front of "radicalism," "extremism," or "fundamentalism," since, if we are to understand the nature of the threat we face in the West, we cannot possibly leave out Islamic theology or Islamic doctrines in explaining the actions and the long-term goals of the terrorists.

I also find "Islamofascism" a fairly accurate term used by many respectable Western Islamologists such as Maxime Rodinson [1915–2004],

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and historians and sociologists such as Manfred Halpern [1924–2001]. The term *fascist* is legitimately applicable to a range of movements on the basis that they share a common ethos. In a speech given at Columbia University, Umberto Eco spelled out fourteen features—such as hostility to democracy, egalitarianism, and the values of the liberal Enlightenment; the cult of the leader; a respect for collective organization—that he considered to be typical of what he calls "Ur-Fascism." He added that some of these features contradict others, but the presence of even one of them can be sufficient for fascism to germinate.

I wrote an essay that showed that Islam lends itself to such a characterization—all fourteen features are present in one form or another in Islam—as a host of Western scholars have noted since the beginning of the twentieth century. Far from being of only recent usage, the application of either *totalitarian* or *fascist* to Islam goes back nearly a hundred years and furthermore, far from being a loose term of abuse, has been used precisely. G.H. Bousquet [1900–1978], one of the foremost authorities on Islamic law, distinguished two aspects of Islam that he considered totalitarian: Islamic law itself and the Islamic notion of *jihad*, which has for its ultimate aim the conquest of the entire world in order to submit it to one single authority.

Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje [1857–1936] was another great scholar of the field and a longtime professor of Arabic at the University of Leiden. He, too, recognized that Islamic law, or *shariah,* aimed at complete control of the religious, social, and political life of the believer and the Islamic community, in addition to keeping those of other faiths in submission. The all-embracing nature of Islamic law can be seen from the fact that it does not distinguish between ritual, law (in the European sense of the word), ethics, and good manners.

Iannone: **Please tell us a little about your background, as much as you wish to reveal—your upbringing, what you studied, what kind of career you pursued before entering into your present work**.

Warraq: I was born, in 1946, into a Muslim family in Rajkot, in the state of Gujarat, a town where Gandhi also grew up (though he was born elsewhere—Porbandar, also in the Gujarat). The year is significant. One year later, my father,

his mother (my own mother had died of tuberculosis a few months earlier), my brother, a year older than I, and I moved to Karachi, the capital of the newly created country of Pakistan. I therefore grew up in Karachi.

My earliest memories are of my circumcision and of my first day at Koranic school. I only have the vaguest of memories of learning rote-fashion at the age of seven or eight the *Fatiha*—approximately fifty words—that is the opening chapter of the Koran, which is often described as the Muslim equivalent of the Lord's Prayer. My brother and I carried some sections of the Koran called *sipirahs*, which is the Persian term for the thirty *juz* or divisions of the Koran, in a simple bag we hung round our necks and shoulders. We learned to read the Koran rather easily, since the national language of Pakistan was Urdu. Urdu is an Indo-European language, but it was/is written, like Persian, in a modified Arabic alphabet, though Arabic belongs, like Hebrew and Syriac, to the Semitic group of languages. We had already mastered the Urdu alphabet, and our reading of the Arabic Koran was entirely with an Urdu pronunciation, with, for example, the Arabic "th," as in "think" becoming "s" as in English "sweet." We had to follow our teacher with our fingers on the Koranic text as he read aloud from the Koran. We did not stay very long at the Koranic school, since we were soon enrolled at a secular school, where I do not remember receiving any religious instruction.

Sending us to Koranic school was a surprising decision on the part of my father, since he was not at all religious—though paradoxically, he always took pride in the achievements of Islamic civilization. Most of his friends in Rajkot were Hindus, whom he found more progressive, and he attended the mosque only during religious festivals such as Eid al-Fitr.

Then, suddenly, at the age of ten, I was sent with my brother to an English preparatory school in Tenbury Wells, Worcestershire. In rural Worcestershire, I began to acquire an English education and also unconsciously to absorb an Englishness, a deep response to things peculiarly English. I loved the English countryside, especially its bird life (among my early heroes were the bird artist C.F. Tunnicliffe and the bird photographer, Eric Hoskins) and the descriptions of the natural history and village life in Northamptonshire in the writings of "BB," Denys Watkins-Pitchford. Then there were the English folk songs we learned at school, "The Lincolnshire Poacher," "The Vicar of Bray," and "Early One Morning." But I was also acquiring an Englishness of manner,

and feeling, the same typically English awkwardness about sex, money, and clothes.

Iannone: **What prompted you to start writing critically about Islam and scholarship about Islam?**

Warraq: It was undoubtedly the Rushdie Affair that finally brought into unequivocal focus where my real allegiances lay, what values I was prepared to live by, and which, I knew with absolute certainty, I had to defend. In February 1989, the Ayatollah Khomeini delivered his fatwa on Salman Rushdie. Immediately in its wake came articles and interviews with Western intellectuals, Arabists, and Islamologists, many of whom blamed Rushdie for bringing the barbarous sentence on himself. Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper (Lord Dacre) [1914–2003] even seemed to encourage violence against Rushdie: "I would not shed a tear if some British Muslims, deploring his manners, should waylay him in a dark street and seek to improve them. If that should cause him thereafter to control his pen, society would benefit and literature would not suffer."[1]

I avidly read the Western press in Britain, France, and the United States, looking for support for the values I held so dear. So often I was disappointed. In many of these articles there was no unequivocal support for Rushdie or the principle of freedom of speech. Political and literary figures who were critical of Rushdie included the former American president Jimmy Carter, who wrote in the *New York Times* that *The Satanic Verses* vilified Muhammad and defamed the Koran: "The author, a well-versed analyst of Moslem beliefs, must have anticipated a horrified reaction throughout the Islamic world."[2] To his credit, Carter affirmed Rushdie's right to freedom of speech, but went on to argue that his book "is a direct insult" to millions of Muslims. In effect, Carter was tacitly calling for self-censorship to protect the tender sensibilities of Muslims.

John Berger, writing in *The Guardian* in February 1989, advocated giving in to intimidation, and advised Rushdie to withdraw *The Satanic Verses*

[1]Fred Halliday, "The Fundamental Lesson of the Fatwa," *New Statesman and Society*, February 12, 1993, 17.

[2]Jimmy Carter, "Rushdie's Book Is an Insult," op-ed, *New York Times*, March 5, 1989, at http://www.cartercenter.org/news/documents/doc1381.html.

because of the danger to the lives of those involved in its publication. In a letter to *The Times*, Roald Dahl dubbed Rushdie "a dangerous opportunist" who, aware of how he was offending Muslims, did it deliberately to sell books. Fellow novelist John le Carré said in an interview, "I don't think it is given to any of us to be impertinent to great religions with impunity."[3] Another writer refusing to side with Rushdie was Germaine Greer, who in an extraordinary outburst described Rushdie as "a megalomaniac, an Englishman with a dark skin."[4]

There were also many intellectuals and politicians who supported Rushdie and his right to free speech, among them Fay Weldon, Christopher Hitchens, Harold Pinter, Susan Sontag, Norman Mailer, and Stephen Spender. I wrote my first book, *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (most of it in 1993, but which did not appear until 1995), to add my name to the latter distinguished group, and as a response to the pusillanimous reaction of so many other Western intellectuals who seemed incapable of seeing the implications of the Rushdie Affair for the future of democracy and hard-won Western freedoms.

Twenty years later, the West still seems unable to defend robustly the values that are more than ever under attack from militant political Islam. What I argued in "Islam in the West," my last chapter of *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, was that we in Britain but also in Europe had generally been betrayed by our intellectuals, educators, and politicians.

During the 1970s, I was a primary school teacher in inner London and fully subscribed to the prevailing philosophy of "multiculturalism." I believed then that children from immigrant families would perform better scholastically if their own culture was promoted in the classroom, making them feel proud rather than ashamed of their parents' background. But I gradually became aware of the disastrous consequences for our society of what has become an ideology. Education ought to have played an important part in the assimilation of the children of immigrants into the mainstream British culture. But something has gone drastically wrong. Assimilation is no longer considered a respectable social policy. Multiculturalism and bilingualism have been the fashion for thirty years. The notion that one could actively encourage integrated individuals subscribing to a minimum of common core values is now

[3]Berger, Dahl, and le Carré are cited in Rachel Donadio, "Fighting Words on Sir Salman," *New York Times,* July 15, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/15/books/review/15donadio.html?ex=1342152000&en=33e31db36c2f93b7&ei=5088.

[4]See Paul Lewis, "'You Sanctimonious Philistine'—Rushdie v Greer, the Sequel," *The Guardian*, July 29, 2006, for a discussion of the quotation; http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2006/jul/29/topstories3.books.

condemned as chauvinism, racism, cultural imperialism, or even cultural genocide.

But multiculturalism is based on some fundamental misconceptions. First, there is the erroneous and sentimental belief that all cultures, deep down, have the same values, or, if these values are different, that they are all equally worthy of respect. Multiculturalism, being the product of relativism, is incapable of criticizing cultures, of making cross-cultural judgments; it emphasizes differences but fails to teach immigrants allegiance to common values or even to the country that has received them with such generosity. Furthermore, the truth is that not all cultures have the same values, and not all values are worthy of respect. There is nothing sacrosanct about customs or cultural traditions; they can change under criticism. After all, the secularist values of the West are not much more than two hundred years old.

Respect for other cultures, for other values than our own are a hallmark of a civilized attitude. But if these other values are destructive of our own cherished values, are we not justified in fighting them by intellectual means—that is, by reason and argument and criticism—and by legal means—by making sure the laws and constitution of the country are respected by all? While religious beliefs are to be tolerated, religious practices and institutions must not automatically or necessarily be accorded the same freedom if they conflict with the law or constitution of the wider state.

Iannone: **In your book, *Defense of the West*, you show how Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) contains errors, misrepresentations, and lapses in historical knowledge. And yet you say it has exerted an enormous influence in the academy and even contributed to the rise of a generation that does not wish, or does not know how, to fight the encroachments of Islamic radicalism into our society. How can we account for a book having that kind of influence in spite of such faulty scholarship?**

Warraq: There are several reasons for the success of *Orientalism*. It gave those unable to think for themselves a formula. Said's work had the attraction of an all-purpose tool his intellectually unsophisticated acolytes could apply to every cultural phenomenon without having to think critically or having to conduct any real research, master languages, or learn methodology. *Orientalism* is a lazy, arrogant book deriving from fashionable postmodern

French theories, from the existentialists, structuralists, deconstructionists, and postmodernists, grandiose in claims but all based on flimsy historical or empirical foundations.

Post-World War II Western intellectuals and leftists were consumed by guilt for the West's colonial past and continuing colonialist present, and they embraced any theory or thesis that seemed to champion the putatively oppressed. *Orientalism* came at the precise time when anti-Western rhetoric was already being taught at Western universities, and when third-worldism was at its most popular. Jean-Paul Sartre preached that all white men were complicit in the exploitation of the third world, and that violence against Westerners was a legitimate means for colonized men to re-acquire their manhood. For Said, any Westerner or European speaking about the Orient, was necessarily a racist and imperialist.

As I have argued, Western civilization has been more willing to criticize itself than any other major culture. These self-criticisms, even short of Said's savage strictures, were enough for a new generation to use for berating and blaming the West. This fashionable game in the 1960s and 1970s that impressionable youth took seriously had the results we now see when the same generation appears unwilling to defend the West against the greatest threat that it has faced since the Nazis.

When shown that Said is indeed a fraud, his friends and supporters in academia sidestep the criticisms and evidence, and pretend, as did several reviewers of *Dangerous Knowledge*, Robert Irwin's book on Said, that Said may indeed have got the "footling details" wrong but he was, nonetheless, onto a higher truth. Said's influence, thus, was a result of a conjunction of several intellectual and political trends: post-French Algeria and post-Vietnam *tiers mondisme* (third-worldism); the politicization of increasingly postmodernist English departments that had argued away the very idea of truth, objective truth; and the influence of Michel Foucault, who was an admirer of the Iranian Revolution.

Said makes much of the notion of a discourse derived from Michel Foucault, who argued that supposedly objective and natural structures in society, which privilege some and punish others for nonconformity, are in fact "discourses of power." The putative "objectivity" of a discipline covered up its real nature. Said wrote that Orientalism was such a discourse, an "enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily,

ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period."

Iannone: **How have scholars been at fault in recent times in their approach to the Koran, to Islam, and to Islamic history, in your view? Could you mention a couple of figures and where they have been remiss? Why do you think Koranic scholarship has not developed as fearlessly—we might even say as ruthlessly—as biblical scholarship has?**

Warraq: In 2008, Bernard Lewis pointed out how Middle Eastern studies programs have been distorted by restrictions on freedom of expression and a level of thought control reminiscent of the eighteenth century and before, making Islam and Islamic values more immune from comment and criticism than other religions. Richard Landes of Boston University noted how Middle Eastern studies in the United States and more so in Europe have been politicized by Muslim and Arab scholars who intimidate Western scholars into "respecting" Islam on its own terms.

However, the first modern apologists of Islam—even in its fundamentalist mode—were Christian scholars who emerged mainly in the post-WWII era and who perceived a common danger in the increasing skepticism, atheism, secularism, and materialism in the West, as well as in the rise of communism. There is the tendency among Christian scholars to be rather uncritical, a tendency not to wish to offend Muslim friends and Muslim colleagues. Sir Hamilton Gibb [1895–1971] writes of Islam as a Christian "engaged in a common spiritual enterprise." Laments Norman Daniel: "Both Christianity and Islam suffer under the weight of worldly pressure, and the attack of scientific atheists and their like."

Both Gibb and William Montgomery Watt [1909–2006], an ordained Episcopalian minister, and one of the most influential Islamic scholars in Britain of the last fifty years, hoped for spiritual inspiration from the East to counter what they saw as the excessively man-centered West.

In his article "Religion and Anti-Religion" Prof. Watt discusses the work of Manfred Halpern, who takes note of neo-Islamic totalitarianism movements (such as the Muslim Brethren [Brotherhood] in Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere, and movements like Fida'iyan-i Islam in Persia and Khaksars and Jama'at-i Islam in Pakistan), and points out their resemblances to fascism,

including the National Socialism of Germany under Adolf Hitler. Yet Watt goes on to characterize these developments as a positive resurgence of religion which he imagines will not only not lead to Nazism and fascism but will serve as a bulwark against them.

The Muslim Brethren was a terrorist organization whose founder, Hassan al-Banna, made no secret of his admiration for Hitler and Mussolini. After the end of the Second World War, Hassan's Muslim Brethren engaged in terrorism against civilian targets in Egypt and elsewhere, bombing or setting on fire cinemas, hotels, and restaurants. Incorrectly dressed women were attacked with knives. There was also a series of assassinations.

Watt reveals even more disturbing qualities—a mistrust of the intellect and a rejection of the importance of historical objectivity and truth. He asserts that "symbolic" truth may be more important than "historical truth." As he put in *Islamic Revelation*, "Each [great religion] is valid in a particular cultural region, but not beyond that." Thus he would not hold Islamic ideas up to criticism or universal standards of inquiry, but accepted them on their own terms.

The sentimental ecumenical tradition established by scholars such as Watt and Gibb continues to this day. We can follow the gradual introduction of this tradition in the pages of *The Muslim World* (originally titled *The Moslem World*), a journal founded in 1911 to promote the work of Christian missionaries in the Middle East. Since 1938 it has been edited by the Hartford Seminary.[5] The first issues of the journal were highly critical of various aspects of Islam (for example, the description by Charles Watson [1871–1948] of Islam as totalitarian in a 1937 number). Its first editor was a committed Christian and a considerable scholar, Samuel Zwemer [1867–1952]. In 1929, Zwemer was appointed professor of missions and professor of the history of religion at the Princeton Theological Seminary, where he taught until 1951. He died a year later. He had an almost perfect command of Arabic and a thorough knowledge of the Koran, and was often referred to as "the lion-hearted missionary who tried to confound the Muslims out of their own scriptures using the Christian Bible."[6]

By the late 1940s, however, *The Muslim World* began publishing articles very favorable to Islam, and by 1950s its pages were dominated by scholars

[5]See "Islamo-Correctness at Hartford Seminary," by Andrew Bieszad, in this issue of *Academic Questions*.

[6]*Wikipedia*, s.v. "Samuel Marinus Zwemer," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Marinus_Zwemer, accessed 15 November 2007. The quotation is no longer included in the Wiki entry.

such as Watt. It is now co-edited by a Muslim and a Christian—converting Muslims to Christianity is no longer considered respectable by liberal Christians who instead bend over backwards to accommodate Muslims—as, for example, calling on all Christians to use the term "Allah" instead of God: generous gestures not reciprocated by the Muslims.

In more recent times we have John Esposito, professor of international affairs and Islamic studies at Georgetown University and a Catholic. He is also the director of Georgetown's Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. While studying for his doctorate at Temple University, Esposito came under the influence of the Islamist, Ismail R. Faruqi, a Palestinian pan-Islamist and theorist of the "Islamization of knowledge," around whom Martin Kramer argues that a personality cult had developed. Esposito tries to present Islam and Islamism in Western categories, thereby hoping to create a more favorable attitude to them in the West. He suggests thinking of Islamism as a movement for democratic reform! It was sheer "Orientalist" prejudice that prevents Westerners from seeing this. Esposito writes that Americans would "have to transcend their narrow, ethnocentric conceptualization of democracy" to understand "Islamic democracy that might create effective systems of popular participation, though unlike the Westminster model or the American system."

Iannone: **What has happened to your life and your career since you became an opponent of radical Islam?**

Warraq: My friend, the late Anwar Sheikh, the great apostate and critic of Islam, saw in me a kindred spirit. He would telephone me from his home in Wales and proclaim in his booming lusty Punjabi voice, "Ibn Warraq, we are lucky, you and I. We have a mission in life, fighting Islam. Not many people can say that."

While I am suspicious of people with missions, writing my books on Koranic criticism and Edward Said does get me out of bed in the morning. But I should dispel the myth that I have become rich as a professional critic of Islam—I have not. All my books combined have earned less than the average annual salary of a research fellow at a Washington think tank. Though, of course, it is true that I would not have got my previous job with the Center for Inquiry, and my present job as visiting fellow at the Center for

Law and Counterterrorism, a project of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, without my publications.

Iannone: **Do you think Islam can be compatible with modern liberal democracy, either in Muslim majority lands or in countries where Muslims form a minority?**

Warraq: We in the West tend to use the term "democracy" synonymously with "liberal democracy," but we should distinguish between a *democracy*, meaning the rule of the people, involving free and fair elections, and a *liberal democracy*, whose liberal constitution enshrines the principles of rule of law, equality before the law, the right of minorities, a separation of powers, freedom of expression, religion, assembly, and the right to property—in other words, a Bill of Rights that limits the power of the central government and protects the rights of individual citizens against arbitrary arrest, and protects the rights of due process. Democracy takes many forms: representative democracy, direct democracy, and may include a greater and lesser use of referenda.

Historically, democracy and constitutional liberalism, or liberal democracy, have followed different paths, and contrary to one's expectations liberalism has *preceded* democracy. Greece gave us democracy, Rome gave us the notions of limited government and the rule of law, but it was the rise of the Christian church that was the source of liberty in the West, since it was *the* first major institution in history that was independent of temporal authority and willing to challenge it, as Fareed Zakaria points out in his book, *The Future of Freedom*. Jumping ahead to the nineteenth century, I should like to add, as noted earlier, while biblical criticism led to the abandonment of a literal reading of the Bible, it was also Christian religious tolerance and religious pluralism that eventually led to tolerance and pluralism tout court. As the British historian of Christianity Owen Chadwick put it, "Christian conscience was the force which began to make Europe 'secular'; that is, to allow many religions or no religion in a state, and repudiate any kind of pressure upon the man who rejected the accepted and inherited axioms of society. My conscience is my own."

The American diplomat Richard Holbrooke said about the situation in Yugoslavia in 1990, "Suppose elections are free and fair and those elected are

racists fascists, separatists. That is the dilemma." Similarly, free elections in many Islamic countries could well usher in an Islamic theocracy. For instance, in the elections in Algeria in 1992, the Islamists were set to win the elections when the army stepped in. The Islamists are quite capable of using the democratic process to destroy "liberal democracy": their philosophy is summed up in the pithy saying, "One man. One vote. Once." We also know that Hitler became chancellor of Germany via free elections. Thus, unless there are constitutional safeguards that prevent even a majority—the tyranny of the majority as the great British philosopher John Stuart Mill put it—from threatening the rights and freedoms of its citizens regardless of race, gender and religion, democracy will clearly not be enough. As the great medieval scholar Alcuin wrote to Charlemagne in 798, *Nec audiendi qui solent dicere, Vox populi, vox Dei, quum tumultuositas vulgi semper insaniae proxima sit*, which roughly translated reads as: "And those people should not be listened to who keep saying the voice of the people is the voice of God, since the riotousness of the crowd is always very close to madness."

The cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* depicting the Prophet Muhammad in a mocking light raise the classic question of freedom of expression. Are we in the West going to cave in to pressure from societies with an intolerant mindset, or are we going to defend our most cherished freedom, the right to speak freely?

A democracy cannot survive for long without freedom of expression, the freedom to argue, to dissent, even to insult and offend. It is just this freedom that is sorely lacking in the Islamic world. Without it, Islam will remain in its dogmatic, fanatical, mediaeval fortress; ossified, totalitarian, and intolerant. Without this fundamental freedom, Islam will continue to stifle thought, human rights, individuality, originality, and truth. A liberal democracy proceeds by tentative steps after deliberation, debate, and compromise, and is able to adapt to changing circumstances. This is precisely how an Islamic theocracy does not proceed.

Iannone: **What is your major goal in writing about reforming Islam and Islam's relationship with the West and Western scholarship?**

Warraq: Jonathan Israel in his two magisterial studies of the Enlightenment points out over and over again the importance of Spinoza and his *Tractatus*

Theologico-Politicus in ushering secularism into the West. I hope that my anthologies on Koranic criticism will, in the long term, play the same role in helping Muslims to look at their foundation texts in a critical manner in the same way as biblical criticism helped Christians move away from a literal interpretation of the Bible, to adapt, and to assimilate scientific advances in archaeology, textual studies, history, physics, and biology. I prefer to talk of an enlightenment rather than a reformation.

I also try in somewhat more polemical essays to warn about the expansion of Islam with the help of Saudi money and influence into the West. I am particularly concerned about the influence of Saudi money in the universities that are pushed to teach a certain ahistorical and sanitized version of Islam.