

## Americanism vs. Islamism: A Personal Perspective

12th Annual Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs by Zuhdi Jasser

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My venturing into public discussions on the intersection between religion and politics is not something that I chose, but rather something I felt obliged to do after 9/11. Prior to then, I'd been dealing with many of the pathologies within the Muslim community, but as I began to see who was emerging as “spokespersons” for my faith after 9/11, I had to do something; hence the formation of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy.

More than six years after 9/11, we're starting to figure out that terrorism is just a tactic. The tactic has a goal, a mission, and a dream. Terrorism is simply a means to an end. The only way to defeat a tactic is either to defeat the source completely or to take away the dreams of the enablers. Those dreams, when they are wedded to religion, become the biggest liability for those of us who are embarrassed even talking about religion and politics. What greater incendiary mechanism could there be to manipulate Western society than to cover a fascistic dream in a faith that is a spiritual path for over a billion people? And what better way to insulate itself from criticism than to cover itself in a spiritual guise?

Non-Muslim and Muslim alike, Americans, guided by the Constitution and First Amendment, have always been protective of our faith. One of my heroes growing up was Thomas Jefferson. The Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom, drafted by Thomas Jefferson, engrained in our society a respect for the free practice of religion. Jefferson said, “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” This idea that a person's relationship with God is his or her own and not the role of government to impose upon citizens is one of the main quarrels that the Islamists and those who ideologically feed the terrorists have with the West.

Unfortunately, many Americans have forgotten that America was founded by people who were escaping religious persecution. America is not just a flag, it's not just our media, MTV, rock and roll, or blue jeans. It's an idea of religious and political freedom and the freedom to be and achieve what you want, with equal access to everyone. That access is not dictated by wealth, religion, or any other immutable characteristic. That is what the Islamists fear the most.

“Islamist” does not necessarily mean only terrorists, and the simple condemnation of terror does not make someone necessarily compatible with American and Western ideals. Condemning terror—the targeting of women, children, noncombatants and non-uniformed people for the achievement of political ends—simply brings one to the table of humanity.

The root cause of terrorism is the dreams of the political Islamic state, and we need to understand what that state is. It can be either the fascistic state that believes in the totalitarian or authoritarian imposition of Islamic law throughout society or the democratic Islamic state, which believes in parliaments, elections, and discourse and debate. These two different types of government share the identification of being an Islamic state because the source of law is the same: the Quran and the tradition, or *sunnah*, of the Prophet.

The *sunnah* guide my personal life—my last will and testament, my marriage, our marital contract. But that's something we chose in our own home. To transfer that into government gives clerics exclusive access to law, legislation, and public and legal discourse. If non-clerics want to gain access, they have to become schooled in *sharia* law. As important as the West's initiative to democratize the Middle East is, we're missing the boat if we think we're going to solve the problems in the Middle East by simply getting those countries to have elections and parliaments. We need to bring forth the ideas of freedom, liberty, and respect for individuals, sometimes over the community. That last principle is one that came in the West's Enlightenment.

Until Muslims understand that their faith is not threatened by the Enlightenment and respect for the individual, we cannot win this war.

Sometimes when we present these ideas, we present them behind the American flag. But being patriotic doesn't necessarily mean that someone is looking out for the best interests of freedom and liberty in America. Islamic organizations that purport to represent Muslims may have a vision for America that simply takes our flag and adds a little crescent, turning it into an Islamic state. Some in the Muslim community may call this fear-mongering or exaggeration, but that Islamist community should not be allowed to circle the wagons and rally themselves behind victimization. Rather, they should be engaged on these ideas of the role of religious law in public life. For while the vast majority of Muslims have assimilated and reformed their own practices, by virtue of the way that they live in America, ideologically they have often been given the freedom but not the means, the task, and the challenge to understand what it is that they are living day to day.

As a result, most of the texts on Islamic bookshelves are pre-14th century. Most of the Islamic texts on law, penal codes, civil codes, etc., are based on 14th century law at best—it could be 11th or 12th century. Hence the corporal punishment, the severing of hands for theft, the stoning of women for violation of marital laws, that is still part of Saudi law. This to Westerners is barbaric, but the religious law hasn't been reformed or advanced to bring it into the 21st century.

One of the primary problems with Islamic reformation issues is the clerical leadership and the imams. Most Muslim families would be dismayed if their son or daughter wanted to study to become a cleric or imam, which is not of the same value to a family as studying medicine, law, or engineering. So the hold upon religious, theological discussion of jurisprudence in faith has been given over to less than the intellectuals in society.

My own family escaped Syria to come to America for ideological, not economic, reasons. After the French pulled out in 1946, my grandfather had tried to be part of the democratization of Syria, which did have democracy for a few years. Then unfortunately, as we saw in many Middle Eastern countries, coup after coup occurred from the early 1950s until finally the last military coup led by the Baathists which ultimately brought Hafez al-Assad to power around 1970. The secular dictatorships are deeply wedded to

radical Islam and the Islamist threat in the world. They may seem to be diametrically opposed entities, but the evolution and history of radical Islamist or theocratic movements has been an equal and opposite reaction to the dictatorships in the Middle East— whether they are the monarchy in Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabis who came out of them, or the dictatorships in Egypt and Syria, for the Muslim Brotherhood, which also fed Hamas in Israel. This is what happened in Iran, with the Shah initially in power, which empowered the radical Islamist movement. All of this is very symmetrical, and that’s why we will not be able to bring Islam into modernity without the removal of many of these governments.

We do not have to do this militarily. We changed Eastern Europe without invading any of those countries and defeated communism without invading Russia. But we need to turn our attention to the dissidents, to those who believe in freedom and liberty, not only democracy. If we align ourselves only with democratic movements, we may end up ushering in parliaments based on Quranic law and facilitating the establishment of Islamic states that may in the short term be more peaceful to us from a strategic standpoint, but in the long term could end up dividing the world into a triangular fashion of China, Islamic states, and the secular Western states.

The conflict is over the correct source of law—Is it the Constitution and natural law or *sharia*; the lay individual or the clerics, or the individual vs. tribalism or Muslim collectivism?

I’ve tried to go to prayer every Friday, I attend the Ramadan holiday prayers and have probably 70-80 percent of the time found mosques that were not solely about spirituality or about teaching children morality and character, integrity, service, and humility, but rather about politics—domestic and foreign policy, issues that I believe have nothing to do with my relationship with God but rather concern things on this earth. My response in many of the debates I’ve tried to no avail to have with imams is to tell them that if God wanted us to discuss these things, the Quran would have been filled with injunctions about how to run government. But there’s nothing in the Quran about how we should run government. Yet they will take passages that do talk about war, for example, and transpose them out of context, which I believe is about history far more than it is about religion.

Back to my story. Once in the early 1990s, on leave from the military, I went to an Islamic medical association meeting. One of the only other Muslim medical officers was the head of endocrinology at Bethesda. He and I were going to present a paper on hormonal regulation and some endocrine issues at the Islamic Medical Association, which was being held in conjunction with the Islamic Society of North America annual conference. I had never been to a meeting of ISNA, the largest Muslim organization in America. Its annual meetings are attended by 15,000-30,000 Muslim activists. The keynote address was given by Siraj Wahhaj, Imam of Al-Taqwa Mosque in Brooklyn, New York, who was originally with the Nation of Islam and then converted to Sunni Islam. I was pulled into listening to this magnetic speaker, until he began talking about the constitution. He picked up the Quran and said “You know, I was on an airplane and imagine, a Jewish passenger sitting next to me asked me about the Quran I was reading—if Muslims became a majority in America, would we replace the U.S. constitution with the Quran.” He laughed and said, “Can you imagine someone wondering if a document made by humans would be superior to a document made by God?”

I got lightheaded, I sat down, and after he was done I went to the Q-and-A microphone and said, “I’m not sure if you understand American law, but you have just violated the Sedition Act as I understand it. You’re free to disagree with foreign and domestic policy, but you cannot talk about the overthrow of the U.S. constitution and its replacement by another document.” I encouraged other military personnel in the

audience to leave, because they were violating their oath to this country. It was in some ways traumatic for me. I had just joined the Navy. But yet they felt that I was overreacting. I feel that it is not overreaction. There are certain things we have to know as a community and as a nation that take priority over other things.

A German judge recently gave a man the right to beat his wife because the husband maintained that it was out of his religious law that he is allowed to practice domestic abuse on his wife. That's not the Islam I was taught, but if we become a society where once someone raises the flag of religion we stop critiquing it and stop holding him accountable to values that we share as a community, that is the day we begin down the slope of defeat.

As much as some Muslims could say I am mischaracterizing Islam or am too harsh, I think it is important to have the debate. Five years after the ISNA meeting, I met my wife and her family in Cleveland and told them that story. They said "We were there! We heard you say that." Yet nobody did anything. Nobody stood up and agreed with me, nobody said "We may have a problem." That same imam then became an alleged unindicted coconspirator in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and later, in 1995, testified in defense of Omar Abdel-Rahman.

There's a tribal mentality; somehow individuals want to create and advance the ideas of the tribal leaders. The Islamic community has reverted back to pre-Islamic Arabia, to a tribalism that has lost its values. Any time you take an idea in which the ends justify the means, it is basically corruption. Alija Izetbegovic, the president of Bosnia-Herzegovina, said that he was never more Muslim than when he was in solitary confinement under Marshal Tito for 15 years. A Muslim can hear that and think "My rights and freedoms in society are not related to my being Muslim. I have more time to sit and talk to God and be closer to God when I have absolutely no rights and I'm sitting in solitary confinement. Therefore my religion and my piety are unrelated to this earth."

Actually, the idea that we should be selling—not on the U.S. station Al Hurrah, which actually gets very low ratings in Iraq, but on Al Jazeera, on Syrian TV—is that the way for individuals to be closest to God is to live in freedom. When you live in an environment where people around you are not fasting in Ramadan, where they are not praying five times a day, where I choose to separate from the group and go pray on my own, not in the middle of a gate at the airport demanding for everyone to see me but actually on my own, that actually is more of a demonstration to the God of Abraham, that I'm choosing to do that of my own free will. Thus, the day of judgment, if you believe in a day of reckoning, has more meaning to God. That is to me the message of our founding fathers. The most pious nations and individuals are those who can freely decide whether to act or to practice their faith without coercion from government.

Muslims will say, this is ridiculous, you don't want religion to inspire what we do? There's this equivalency where they then give me ten other religious lobbies in America that supposedly mix religion and politics. I'll say that there's absolutely no comparison, there's no moral equivalency between religiously inspired political groups and Islamist groups that have a constructive law as a goal—the nucleus of which is completely different from one based on a human document. The key is that we hold Muslims accountable to what they view the concept of law would be if they became a majority. One finds few or no Christian, Buddhist or Hindu groups who want to bring, e.g., canon law or religious jurisprudence into American jurisprudence. Yet they may be inspired and empowered by their faith, which is very different.

I would then remember de Tocqueville, who said that military dictatorships do not need God, but democracies and lands based on freedom do. Because as you know, in the Middle East, and we see this in Iraq, when countries have lost their values after decades of dictatorship and become corrupt, there's such a loss of values that corruption has guided and taken over that society making freedom difficult to take hold.

As a result, you have wanton destruction and lawlessness. The only thing that would control that society is some form of martial law. So you need to transition states from oppression to freedom, but that transition needs to be inculcated with values.

At the end of the day, if we believe that those values they're going to use to drive their ideas are going to be based on morality, that morality has to come from somewhere. If it's not going to come from Islam, then we're going to have to convert over 1 billion people to another faith, and that's not going to work. So that source of values is going to have to be their faith of Islam, which we as Muslims believe is a message from the God of Abraham to Muslims. But that message has to be put in a way that's consistent with modernity and pluralism.

What can we do as a Western society within our community and what can we do, especially for non-Muslims and other organizations, to help this process along and move it along faster than the five hundred years of stagnancy that we've been under?

First, in our own societies, we need to be cautious about permitting parallel societies, parallel courts such as sharia courts where Muslims are given the "freedom" to set up their own legal court system. They would become an incubator for radical Islamism. Canada tried this, and the most vocal voice against sharia courts were Muslim women, even though they were told by the non-Muslims in Canada that "You don't have to, it's voluntary." Once you get swept into this, it's like fighting domestic violence in our own country. We must prevent the establishment of institutions that cater to that and allow the incubation.

Second, we see many examples like the taxicab drivers in Minneapolis who wanted to be separate from the society, not to carry people who were carrying alcohol, to impose their values on the passengers they picked up. Some may say that making a lot out of these issues is an exaggeration—"you need to lighten up." But every opportunity I have to highlight examples, of what in medicine we would call pathognomonic symptoms, of the pathology of Islamism, I will exploit that. Because *they* are doing the same thing. They are exploiting victimization issues and politics to use what we have now been calling law-fare to get us distracted, to sue individuals who are the biggest threat to their ideas. So that we're all so busy fighting lawsuits such as the flying imams case (the six imams who filed suit against U.S. Airways in March 2007 for having been removed from a flight in November 2006 after behavior that many have called provocative) to distract us, to continue to divide society between Muslim and non-Muslim and to allow the continued inculcation of this Islamist ideology via Muslim collectivism.

A good example is Carver Elementary School in San Diego, which because of the third of its students who are Muslim wanted to move the lunchtime from 12:30 to 1:30 pm so that they could have their prayers. I wrote a column and on CNN talked about the fact that many of us grew up in public elementary schools praying and doing our own practices of faith without asking for the entire school to change its time schedule. You can step away during a break and practice your faith. Certainly I would not want schools to prevent Muslims from praying, they should be given the space to pray if they need it. Because that's a personal faith practice. But once that personal faith practice crosses the line into society and starts

changing the schedule of the general society or changing the cost to general society to the taxpayers, as we saw with the footbath incidents where the University of Michigan was paying \$30,000 to install footbaths, that crosses the line of the founding principles of America. I don't have a problem with private funding for that if they need it, fine. But not from the taxpayers. For once it comes from the taxpayers, then they should have allotted \$30,000 for every other faith group in that university at the same time.

When I was growing up in the 1970s, I don't remember Muslims asking for any of these things. It has almost become a tool of self-segregation and separating Muslims from non-Muslims so that they can continue this issue of minority politics. It's becoming very potent and we have allowed it to take over the debate. It soaks up the bandwidth of American attention instead of allowing us to fight for freedom.

Islamic organizations today have only come to notoriety because of America's fear of terrorism. If terrorism disappeared tomorrow, nobody would care about footbaths, schedules in schools, etc. Focusing on those issues would be the same as if a patient came into my office with lung cancer and I spent my whole time focusing on their cholesterol, headaches, and every other issue except the cancer. The Muslim community for credibility needs to start focusing most of its resources on the root cause of terrorism as a tactic, which is political Islam.

The methods of reform are manifold. First, engage the Muslim community on these issues, get informed about the difference between sharia law and constitutional law, and start to have discussion panels, not the interfaith, "kumbiyah" discussions that legitimize most Muslim communities' leaders.

I have Frank Gaffney, executive producer of the documentary *Islam vs. Islamists*, to thank for connecting me with Dr. John Templeton and others. After his film, originally scheduled as part of PBS' "America at a Crossroads," was pulled from that series, it was shown on Fox News a couple of weeks ago. Ahmed Shqeirat, the imam who's one of my main Islamist adversaries in Phoenix, in that documentary alluded to me (though not by name), claiming that I'm a "liberal extremist". He went on to say that "people like me think we can somehow separate religion and politics and don't want to acknowledge that every Muslim wants to live in an Islamic state, under sharia law."

After the showing of the film locally, one interfaith celebration I knew of was cancelled in Phoenix. So people are starting to understand that there is a veneer of moderation from the Islamists. They know how to play the game outside the mosque, but these organizations are lacking on civil rights within their community. It's a corruption that needs to be exposed. Ultimately, these institutions will disappear quickly once they start to be exposed to the regular American community that pays attention to hypocrisy.

So second, the Muslim community needs to be held accountable to its concept of *umma*. *Umma* is a word that is very prevalent in the Quran. It means "nation" or "community." When an imam talks about *umma*, in Arabic and in his sermons, it is a threatening concept, because you then wonder at what point does an American Muslim follow the needs of the Muslim nation vs. the needs of the American nation to which he or she is a citizen. The Muslim community needs to "de-*ummatize*" itself, to really restrict the mechanism by which the *umma* is invoked. I would personally limit it to our study of theology and learning about the Quran and scripture; to charity that obviously all of our faiths seek to give; to socialization, obviously marriage within the faith is something all of our faiths try to do; and then last facilitating our hajj, our pilgrimage, and other aspects of practice and spirituality including mosques and community worship.

**Third, we need to change the dreams. The dreams of most Muslims today are still wedded, because they have come from oppression and dictatorships, to religion, because the mosque was the last institution where they had a little freedom of speech, as long as they didn't speak against their own government. That's why the Muslim Brotherhood took over the mosques in Syria, and why the Wahhabis were able to spread texts into most of the mosques in the world, at a cost of \$80 billion that they spent on spreading the radical word of Wahhabism. They were able to inculcate this literature into a lot of mosques, under the guise of most of these dictatorships.**

**We need to change those dreams from dreams of the utopian caliphate or Islamic states that bring them supposedly Islamic freedom to dreams of Western, individual freedom, where access to government and society is open to all. Much of the leadership on this must come from Muslim business leaders, who can argue for the kind of education that is needed.**

**Next, help us establish institutions. The Western enlightenment happened with the establishment of enlightenment institutions, classically liberal institutions that queried the church and government and began to question authority.**

**Hold some litmus tests and standards for the Muslims you engage with organizationally. They need to recognize Israel as a state, to stand against radical Islamist groups by name, not by theory, tactic, or condemning terrorism, but by name— Hamas, Al Qaeda and other groups. If they don't have the moral courage to name the Saudis, the Syrian government, as an oppressive dictatorship, then you have to wonder where their allegiances are. These types of litmus tests are not being done enough even by our own government and the people they attach themselves to.**

**We need help in what I would call a *counter-jihad* that is still in its earliest, mitotic cell divisions. There are so many factors affecting the ability of Muslims to really contribute and get involved. One is because of fear—moderates are actually the first to be attacked; because of tribalism, because of the lack of knowledge. There are probably more people in this room who understand sharia than in most of the Muslim groups I've spoken to. That's sad. It's because the reins of understanding intellectual theology in Islam are just given up by most Muslims.**

**I will conclude with another Jefferson quotation that talks about the patience with which revolutions happen. "The generation which commences a revolution rarely complete it. Habituated from their infancy to passive submission of body and mind to their kings and priests, they are not qualified when called on to think and provide for themselves; and their inexperience, their ignorance and bigotry make them instruments often in the hands of the Bonapartes and Iturbides to defeat their own rights and purposes." (Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 1823)**

**Jefferson was talking about our country's founding. He didn't end slavery, but Lincoln, who did decades later, probably said it best: "America is the world's last greatest hope for mankind." We have to remember the ideas America stands for, that there are millions of Muslims who came here because of those ideas, and if we tell them that Islam is the problem, we will not win the war.**

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