

ESSENTIALISM AND ISLAM

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INTRODUCTION

We live in an age of polarization. The political centers in many western societies seem to have vanished. “Right” and “Left” seem to be pulling further and further apart. This dichotomy is nowhere more obvious than in the realm of the study of Islam. Is Islam a religion of peace, or is it a religion of violence? Are Muslims a terrorist threat, or are they the victims of a hijacking of their religion? Is the present world-wide struggle the result of western neo-colonialist imperialism or is it the result of Islam’s inherent doctrines. Are you a follower of Edward Said or are you a follower of Bernard Lewis? Are the problems we associate with Islam complex or simple?

In one sense the matter is obviously complex. We are looking at 1.6 billion people living in every country on earth representing many cultures, doctrines, degrees of secularization and speaking hundreds of different languages. The issue is not whether the Muslim world is complex or not. The question is whether Islam is simple to explain and understand in terms of its “essential nature”. Is there an “essence” to Islam? Is there an “essence” to Christianity or to any philosophy? Edward Said thought that there was an “essence” to “Orientalism” and he had a reason for thinking so¹. How else could you explain it? How else could you criticize it? The importance of “essentialism” lies in its ability to explain, to make sense of events, ideas, and people and to show distinctions. Apart from essentialism, I believe, one lacks the tools to truly understand.

Edward Said clearly thought that there was no “essence” to the Arab/Muslim world. His narrative was based on complexity, difficulty of explanation, and rejection of the “western neo-colonialist” narrative of Islam and the “orient”². Some scholars of the western world have accepted Said’s narrative. But there has been a cost. The primary intellectual response to the

¹ Khawaja, Irfan, “Essentialism, Consistency and Islam: A Critique of Edward Said’s Orientalism.” *Israel Affairs*. Oct 2007, Vol. 13 Issue 4, p. 694. Khawaja demonstrates the essentialist nature of Said’s discourse stating “Said simply tells us, obligingly enough, that Orientalism has an essence—sometimes explicitly using the word ‘essence’, sometimes using a cognate term or series of them.”

² Khawaja, p. 697. He notes in Said’s own statements that “Orientalism is a ‘book that to its author and in its arguments is explicitly anti-essentialist, radically sceptical about all categorical designations such as Orient and Occident’”

turmoil in the Muslim world today is one of confusion or recrimination of the West. The common person simply cannot make sense of what they see. I would argue that they do not have the tools to do so. On the other hand, rightist political movements see Islam in the essentialist view and react to it as an existential threat to western civilization. That viewpoint, perhaps best typified by Donald Trump's declaration of a moratorium on Muslim emigration to the U.S., has significant problems as well.

I AM AN ESSENTIALIST

This author is essentialist in viewpoint. The alternative, in my opinion, is chaos and confusion not effective action. This is not to deny the complexities of Islam but to recognize that there is an ideological foundation to Islam as there is with every other philosophy. It is that foundation we must understand. There is an essence to Communism even though there are complexities of other forms of "Socialism". There is an essence to Christianity, even though there are the complexities of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox. These essential aspects enable us to understand these movements and to distinguish them from other movements. That ability to perceive differences is "essential" to knowledge.

Let me illustrate this with a discussion of what is "essential" to Christianity. Christianity, whether Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant teaches that Jesus is the Son of God sent to save the world from sin through his vicarious death on the cross and resurrection. All denominations within the three main branches of Christianity would agree with this. Further, those groups within Christianity that begin to deny these truths eventually, inexorably, begin to drift out of any connection with Christianity. The Unitarian Universalist movement is a good example of this. They began as deists in the 18th century denying that Christ was the Son of God. Eventually they came to deny everything that historic Christianity stood for and in the 20th century they declared themselves to be a non-Christian movement and even removed the name "church" from their houses of worship. Clearly they understood that there was an essential nature to Christianity and that they no longer held to its beliefs³. Other movements, such as the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses made similar changes in their views of the nature of Jesus and this clearly cut them off from historic biblical Christianity immediately. These kinds of developments indicate that there is an essential nature to Christianity and when you deny important features of "essential Christianity" you eventually drift out of Christianity, if not leaving it immediately.

Another example of this is the view of the Bible as God's Word. Those movements within Christianity that question this invariably begin to shrink in size and lose their sense of legitimacy as a Christian movement. Numerous examples of this can be seen in the so called "Mainline Denominations" of Protestantism. As these denominations have increasingly questioned the

³ Daniel Burke. "Can Creedless Unitarians Make it Another 50 Years". Christian Century. 7/26/2011, Vol. 128 Issue 15, p20-21. Burke notes the denial of essentialism in the Unitarian Universalist movement and asks, "Questions are raised wondering whether or not the group will still exist in the future, due to its lack of a cohesive, identifying doctrine."

authority of Scripture they have lost their evangelistic focus and their memberships have declined catastrophically⁴. People have shown their understanding of “essential” Christianity by voting with their feet. This is not to say that traditional Christian denominations do not experience downturns in membership, such as has happened with the Catholic Church but this is related to other issues such as scandals and the general trend to secularism in the West. The mainline denominations have largely followed the trends of the secular world albeit with some delays, and nevertheless declined in membership and influence.

ESSENTIALISM AND ISLAM

Islam is in the midst of the greatest religious revival in world history. It is an “essentialist” revival clearly defined by a return to primeval Islam, a return to “essential” Islam. What is, then, the essence of Islam? Clearly Islam as a religion focuses on two things. First, the Qur’an as the dictated Word of Allah is “essential” to Islam. You simply cannot make sense of the Muslim world apart from that. Second, Islam is “based” on the “Sunna” or behavior of the Prophet. Muslims believe in a Holy Book and in the Holy example of a perfect person, Muhammad. You simply cannot be a Muslim without accepting both of these foundations without reservation. Even slight variations from this theme puts you outside of Islam. Ahmadiyya Muslims simply changed a small part of the Qur’an and declared that Ghulam Mirza Ahmed brought something new beyond Muhammad. They have been universally declared to be non-Muslim by every Sunni and Shia Islamic council on earth⁵. No matter what Edward Said believed, every Muslim council on earth believes in “essential” aspects of Islam. These clearly delineate between Muslim and non-Muslim and that “ilm” or “knowledge” is essential to Islam.

With that in mind, we can make sense of what has been happening in the Muslim world for at least the last 50 years. The Muslim world, as I said before, has undergone the greatest religious

⁴ I realize that there are those who argue against this view. Andrew Greeley in his article, “The Future of Religion in America”, (Society, March 2001) argues that there has been no decline, neither in Mainline Denominations, nor in the Catholic Church. He neglects, however, to mention the membership decline which is obvious in mainline denominations. Joseph Harris provides a helpful corrective in his article “Are American Catholics in Decline” (America, June, 2000, pages 11-14) where he notes the massive membership loss in Protestant mainline Churches stating “The nine major mainline denominations lost 22 percent of their membership between 1970 and 1997, a decline of 5.8 million”. Greeley argues that a similar process is not happening in the Catholic Church. I would argue that Catholicism still holds to the “essentialist” viewpoint on Christianity.

⁵ An example of this is the Muslim World league’s declaration of Ahmadiyyas to be “a subversive movement against Islam and the Muslim world, which falsely and deicetfully [sic] claims to be an Islamic sect; who under the guise of Islam and for the sake of mundane interests contrives and plans to damage the very foundations of Islam.” (<http://ahmadiyyawatch.com/declaration-by-the-muslim-world-league/>) I have found similar declarations from places as diverse as the Islamic Council of the Bahamas and Gambia. The Muslims World League goes on to describe the three main reasons Ahmadiyyas are not Muslims: 1. Its founder claimed that he was a Prophet. 2. They deliberately distort the meanings of the verses of the Holy Quran. 3. They decalred [sic] that Jihad has been abolished [sic].”

One could add to this that Ahmadiyyas also abolished the law of apostasy in Islam, the death penalty for those who leave it.

revival in human history. 1.6 billion Muslims across hundreds of nations and speaking hundreds of languages have, to a remarkable degree, become more religious, more devout. Their devotion has been primarily increased towards the Qur'an as the Word of God and towards Muhammad as the perfect example of a man of God. One may argue as to what the Qur'an means. One may argue as to what behaviors Muhammad enjoined. But one may not argue against the Qur'an. One may not argue against the example of the Prophet. Doing so is forbidden with the full power of the state apparatus through blasphemy laws all across the Muslim world. The punishments enjoined range from imprisonment to death.

Part of this Islamic revival involves reviving everything that the Prophet ever said or did. Some of this seems highly relevant. The Prophet's conflict with the Jews of Medina and Khaybar becomes a lens for the present conflict of the Muslim world with Israel and points to the proper way to deal with the issue by the military domination and in some cases eradication of the Jews. Muhammad's rejection of Christian trinitarianism and belief in Christ as the Son of God, becomes paradigmatic for all Muslim dialogue with Christians. "They do blaspheme who say Allah is Christ, the son of Mary...the fire will be their abode" (5:72), "They do blaspheme who say Allah is one of three in a trinity...Christ the son of Mary was no more than a messenger." (5:73, 75)

Muhammad's rejection of any critique of his person is reflected in Muslim blasphemy laws that punish those who criticize the Prophet. Allah states, "Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the Praise of Allah." (Qur'an 33:21) Muslims have increasingly gone back to the behavior of the Prophet as the paradigm for Muslim society. Muhammad (Allah) himself encouraged this in the Qur'an. "Obey Allah and Obey the Messenger". (4:59) Muhammad also set the precedent for Muslim communities in the West when he declared that they must not entertain friendships with the unbelievers. "O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians for your friends and protectors" (5:51) This adage goes a long way in explaining the Muslim ghettos that now dot the western world.

Perhaps the greatest test of this comes when we consider some of the more troubling aspects of Muhammad's behavior. The Islamic State has revived the practice of sex-slavery justifying it by reference to both the teaching and practice of the Prophet. They have entitled this "Manhaj al-Nabua" or "methods of the Prophet" and they cite chapter and verse both from the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet to justify these actions. How would a moderate Muslim respond? They can argue that these texts are being "misinterpreted" but they cannot argue against the texts. To argue that Muhammad did something wrong is to step out from the "essence" of Islam. This is why no Sunni Islamic council on earth has condemned ISIS for its systematic rape of Yazidi women⁶. That would be a critique of Muhammad. To criticize Muhammad is tantamount to leaving Islam, a crime defined as punishable by death in all schools of Islamic law, whether Sunni or Shia.

⁶ It is difficult to demonstrate such a broad assertion. I have searched high and low for an Islamic council that states this clearly. Most seem to condemn ISIS for the killing of Muslims and certain other misdeeds. I have not found any that state clearly that the rape of kuffar women in Jihad is against Islam. It clearly is not.

Understanding this helps us also to see the difference between Islam and Christianity. There are similar pronouncements made in the Hebrew Bible that include both sex-slavery and genocide. Joshua 6:21 states “Kill everything that breathes”. Does that mean Judaism and Christianity are genocidal religions? I have not been able to locate any references within Jewish or Christian writings to anyone advocating the literal practice of these passages⁷. Indeed, they are universally rejected as any kind of moral adage for today. In every commentary I have ever read both from Jewish as well as Christian interpreters these passages are no longer considered applicable in any literal sense. Why the difference? If you are an essentialist this is easy to explain. There is a progressive revelation both for Jew and Christian that says these were policies for a specific time and age that no longer apply today. Islam cannot say this. Muhammad is the last and “seal” of the Prophets. Everything that he did is canonical and cannot be rejected. To reject is to leave Islam, a crime punishable by death. There is an essentialism in Islam and it is impossible to understand Islam apart from accepting this. The present Islamic revival which has crossed hundreds of language and cultural barriers witnesses to that essential nature.

Those who reject essentialism end up making statements about Islam that are manifestly false. A good example is Karen Armstrong’s book “Muhammad”. In one case, despite engaging in a 300 page cover-up, she does admit that Muhammad slaughtered an entire tribe of Jews, the Banu Qurayza. She admitted the historicity of this but provided a typical non-essentialist argument that “it is not correct to judge the incident by twentieth-century standards.”⁸ This smokescreen argument can only lead to massive confusion for a simple reason. No one in the Muslim world would agree with her argument. It implies that Muslims have some sort of progressive revelation like Jews and Christians which would consign this to a past era. They do not. Muhammad is the perfect exemplar for today and no Muslim living in the Muslim world today would dare make the argument that Karen Armstrong makes. Making such a statement, which is a tacit critique of Muhammad as a non-universal standard, would get you executed in many Muslim countries today.

CONSEQUENCE IN THE DENIAL OF ESSENTIALISM

The denial of essentialism, which is typical of post-modern western thought, is an intellectual disaster. It steals from the western world the ability to understand, to make sense of the Muslim revival. It also makes it impossible for western thinkers to arrive at a sensible response to the Muslim revival. Instead of the ideological critique that Islam so desperately needs we hear nonsense phrases about Islam as a “religion of peace” and the need for tolerance for all forms of Islamism as long as they don’t directly advocate terrorist violence. We label all critics as

⁷ As an example I consulted Matthew Henry’s commentary from the late 17th early 18th century on this verse (<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/matthew-henry/Josh.6.17-Josh.6.27>). In response to this verse Henry states: “[Josh. 6:21](#). If they had not had a divine warrant under the seal of miracles for this execution, it could not have been justified, nor can it justify the like now, when we are sure no such warrant can be produced. But, being appointed by the righteous Judge of heaven and earth to do it”. Even in the 1700’s Henry could see no warrant for such behavior apart from a once only warrant from God himself for that particular situation.

⁸ Armstrong, Karen, *Muhammad, A Biography of the Prophet*, Harper, 1992, p. 207.

“Islamophobes” in order to silence all critique of Islam. This leaves a gaping hole of double standards in western thinking, since other religions such as Christianity and Judaism are fair game for critique. Ultimately this fits perfectly into a pattern to encourage extreme rightist thinking. I think the election of Donald Trump indicates this. Trump knows nothing about Islam, but he knows enough to know that he is not being told the whole story. So do a lot of Americans. The old expression “no smoke without fire” comes to mind. The ideological commitment to non-essentialism so rampant in our universities today can only cover up the reality of “essential Islam” for so long. Eventually the essential nature becomes obvious to everyone. The fact of the cover-up makes this dangerous.

It is perhaps most troubling for me, as an evangelical, to encounter the non-essentialist viewpoint amongst fellow evangelicals. There are those who would say, along with many Muslims, that there are “many Islams”. Having spent years studying and working with Sufis in Bangladesh, I am well aware of the diversity that some use to justify the idea of “many Islams”. But this is a false notion.

Sufism is based on a concept utterly foreign to essential Islam, the immanence of God. 300 years ago this expressed itself in a syncretism in Bengal that was quite astonishing. Muslim poets wrote hymns in praise of Krishna and indicated their devotion to him. I translated a work entitled “The Ocean of Love” which was a 18th century Vaishnava Sahajjiya text suffused with the concept of the immanence of God, yet written by a Muslim. The text was reprinted in the 1980s however now stripped of all Hindu terminology and maintaining only a bare minimum of the concept of immanence. Even that was too much and the book was declared as heretical by all the Wahabi madrassas that now dot the landscape in Bangladesh. The Sufi “majmas” (congregations) in Bangladesh today are a shadow of their former size and populated by old men. Most of the young men, increasingly trained in madrassas, have returned to essentialist Islam. The reason for this is simple. When the immanence concepts of Sufi syncretism are subjected to the inquisition of those who actually know Arabic and essential Islam, they haven’t a leg to stand on. Apart from the freedom to critique Islam itself, there is no grounds for a Sufi “Islam”. It simply isn’t Islam, and it is being eradicated across the Muslim world.

There is one final aspect of evangelical non-essentialism that is troubling. I believe it enjoins an internalized set of double-standards. Do not Evangelicals believe that there is an “essential Christianity”? In fact, I would argue that, as in the case of Edward Said’s essentialist viewpoint on “Orientalism”, everyone agrees that there is an essential Christianity. That is why it is so easy to attack Christianity. There are essential truths that everyone understands are inherent to Christianity and may attack. Mainline denominations of Protestantism call it the “hermeneutic of doubt”, rejecting the Bible as authoritative. Secular scholars forge documents purporting to tell the story of the true life of Jesus (Da Vinci Code) or the wife of Jesus recently championed by

Karen King of Harvard Divinity School⁹. These would be unimportant were it not for the fact that Christianity stands for a divine Jesus who by his very nature had to be celibate. Clearly Christianity stands in the cross-fire as it always has, because it has essential truths that it stands for.

But what of Islam? If there are only “Islams” and no essential “Islam” then there is nothing to criticize. Everything is a mass of complexity where nothing categorical can be said. Indeed, to say anything against the ideology of Islam is equated with stereotyping, racism, Islamophobia, and hatred for Muslims. An offshoot of this attitude is the evangelicals who believe we can work within Islam as in “C5 evangelism”. They are encouraged by the non-essentialist viewpoint to believe that this can fit into the “complexity” of Islam. But Islam is essentialist, and these movements will not survive the inquisition of Islam any more than the Ahmadiyyas have survived within Islam.

Is this not an untenable double-standard? Christianity may be attacked in its essential beliefs even by means of outright forgeries and lies. But one is not allowed to even quote the Islamic source texts about Muhammad? Christianity is fair game and Islam is off the analytical hook. This double-standard is exactly the double-standard that has existed in the Muslim world for 1400 years. Some secularists have noted the double-standard and argued against it primarily for the sake of keeping a revival from breaking out in the Christian world¹⁰. If Christianity is to compete on a level playing field with the other philosophies of our time we must have a common ground for analysis. To say, as Edward Said did, that “Orientalism” may be understood in essentialist terms but Islam may not, is intellectually incoherent. As long as this untenable intellectual double-standard is maintained across the western scholarly world, and even within Evangelicalism, we will not be able to understand our struggle. Worse, once the essential nature of Islam becomes clear to the point of no longer being able to be covered up, there is likely to be a far worse backlash where a true Islamophobia and a deep seated hatred for Muslims will become endemic. I think we are beginning to see this already.

CONCLUSION

The Western world, and Evangelical Christians must understand Islam “as it is”, not as they imagine it to be. There needs to be a thorough-going critique of Islam in which the clear issues

⁹ Ariel Sabar published an expose on the manuscript concerning the wife of Jesus (Atlantic Magazine, July/August, 2016) indicating that it was the product of a sometime scholar of Coptic and pornographer named Walter Fritz probably produced in the late 1970's/early 80's. The evidence was strong enough that King herself admits in a post to the Atlantic Magazine (June 15, 2016) that the document is probably a forgery. This follows a similar pattern for the document at the center of the DaVinci Code nonsense. There is a lot of money to be made forging documents purporting to tell the truth about Jesus, because Jesus clearly stands for something essential. There is something to be attacked and it is financially lucrative to do so. Those who criticize Muhammad based on what the source documents of Islam clearly teach not only don't make money, they take their lives into their hands. Such is the extent of this double standard.

¹⁰ Anthony Browne in his article, Church of Martyrs (The Spectator, March 2005), makes this argument. He was concerned that the double standards being pursued by media/academia were actually fueling a return to fundamentalist Christianity.

with Muhammad's behavior and the clear problems of the Qur'an receive the kind of scrutiny they deserve. Further, our view of Muslims, in keeping with the teachings of Christ, must not be to blame them for Islam. They are the primary victims of this medieval and unreformable totalitarian religio-political system that masquerades as a religion. Only by showing them another and different way can we hope to help them to the solution. There is no other solution than departure from Islam, whether into secularism or some other religious faith. Islam itself remains as unreformable as Fascism or Communism.