

## Reading: “Islam & the West”

The following reading is adapted from an essay by William Pfaff which appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine in January, 1991, at the time of the Persian Gulf War. Pfaff offers a hypothesis which attempts to explain why Islamic and Western civilization are so different today.

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Islamic civilization possessed a rich literature and philosophy and an advanced theoretical science (to which we owe modern astronomy and also the zero,<sup>1</sup> hence modern mathematics). It also possessed the high technology of the period and more advanced military organization than medieval Europe. It defeated the West in the crusades, and it won most of the battles of Islam’s expansion in Spain, France, and Eastern Europe. . . . [However] The remarkable Arab philosophical flowering of the early Middle Ages faded away toward the end of the twelfth century, in a revival of religious orthodoxy and intolerance associated with the rise in influence of the recently converted Turkish peoples from Central Asia. The Islamic thinkers associated with classical Greek influences were silenced. . . .

There is considerable irony in the fact that Arab scholars preserved Greek philosophy from the ninth to the twelfth centuries and transmitted it to medieval Europe, thereby making it possible for Aquinas to develop a rationalist theological and philosophical system that reconciled pagan Greek with Christian thought—the very kind of reconciliation that they themselves had tried to bring about between Greek and Islamic thought. Aquinas held that the sources of knowledge are human reason, which Aristotle exemplified, and divine revelation; and while the latter must be privileged, the former is totally valid in itself. This validation of secular intelligence provided it with independent authority and made possible a philosophical response to the development of the modern world for which there was no equivalent in Islam. . . .

The scientific and technological failure of Islamic civilization reflects the fact that nomadic technology, on the whole, is fixed; it lacks a capacity for development because, except in the military sphere, it has no need for it. The Christian world of the Middle Ages was urban, agricultural and sea-going. These qualities created technological demands and therefore compelled technological evolution. Yet the science and mathematics of medieval Arabia were more advanced than Europe’s. The failure of Islam occurred between the late Middle Ages and the seventeenth century. Whatever the explanation—and there is no simple one—the West decisively surpassed Islamic society in its capacity for scientific development and social organization and administration, creating a modern industrial technology and modern forms of government.

The real reason for the West’s victory over Islam, however, was not its military capacity. It was the ability of Europe . . . to reexamine the fundamentals of its own religion and civilization in the light of the thought of pagan antiquity and a philosophical and scientific rationalism. With respect to material power, Europeans passed from a religion-centered science and an artisan technology to experimental science and industrial technology. Why this transition should have occurred in Europe and not in the Islamic world no doubt has to do with the ups and downs of history and of intellectual development in different societies. It must also connect with the social

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<sup>1</sup> The Arabs got the zero from India.

and cultural roots of the two civilizations. The Jewish and Christian Bible begins with God's commission to Adam to rule over the earth and its creatures, and Western civilization has since been characterized by an exploitative approach to the animal kingdom and the material universe. The Western belief that the world and history itself are to be mastered has its origin there. Hence the great Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and English voyages of exploration, and the intellectual adventurousness that even in the Middle Ages produced secular explanations of astronomical and physical forces, harnessed natural energy, put forth ideas about flying machines. . . .Such ideas obviously also existed among the ancient Greeks. Icarus<sup>2</sup> belongs to a convergent Western tradition of defiance of limit, described by another Greek mythological figure as well—Prometheus.<sup>3</sup> The Greeks' theft of fire has brought the West to the nuclear explosion. It is, one concedes, an ambiguous legacy.

The identification of religion with civilization in Islamic society blocks a solution to its contemporary problems. From the beginning Christianity distinguished between religion and the political, or secular, order. There were "things that are Caesar's"—legitimately due to Caesar, ruler of autonomous political and social order. Because of this distinction, it was possible for Europe to develop secular government, secular knowledge, and a secular culture, and, eventually even largely to cast off the influence of religion.



<sup>2</sup> Mythological figure who made a set of wings for himself, then flew too high and fell to his death.

<sup>3</sup> Mythological figure who stole fire from the gods and shared it with men.