

THE TERRORS OF ISLAM



ANTONY FLEW

Great and terrible systems of divinity and philosophy lie round about us, which, if true, might drive a wise man mad.

Walter Bagehot, 1879.

Before accepting any belief one ought first to follow reason as a guide, for credulity without enquiry is a sure way to deceive oneself.

Celsus, about 170 A.D.

Everyone concerned to promote emancipation and enlightenment has been exhilarated by the historic changes of these last five years: first among the self-styled peoples' democracies; and then within the former USSR itself. Spectacular developments within what was until only yesterday the Socialist Bloc came at the end of two decades during which, first in Greece, then the Iberian peninsula and later generally throughout Latin America, military dictatorships and other authoritarian, but not totalitarian regimes were replaced by elected governments. All this, along with some signs of similar developments even in Africa, led Francis Fukuyama to ask in a much talked of article (published in *The National Interest* in Summer 1989) whether we are witness to 'The End of History?'

By this, of course, was not meant either an end of all historical events — such as the subsequent Gulf War — or that there will never again be an authoritarian or totalitarian regime anywhere. It was, rather, that such regimes as do survive or emerge will never again be seen as elements in an

irresistible wave of the future. And that, from now on, rulers who have not been elected, and — what should be seen as much more important — rulers who cannot in due course be removed through an equally free election, will everywhere be accounted aberrant and radically illegitimate.

I

There is, however, another totalitarian ideology which needs to be considered here. For many of its ever more numerous adherents see themselves as militants of a movement of which the eventual worldwide triumph is guaranteed not just by an impersonal hypostatized History but by an omnipotent intending Agent. When in 1920 Bertrand Russell visited the USSR — decades before the Politburo found it convenient to present itself as the Protector of the Arabs — he discerned similarities between Bolshevism and Islam: "Bolshevism combines the characteristics of the French Revolution with those of the rise of Islam";¹ and "Marx has taught that Communism is fatally predestined to come about; this produces a state of mind not unlike that of the early successors of Mahomet."² So Russell himself concluded:

Mahomedanism and Bolshevism are practical, social, unspiritual, concerned to win the empire of this world ... What Mahomedanism did for the Arabs, Bolshevism may do for the Russians.³

As a clear, commendably honest and altogether authoritative epitome of the totalitarian character of Islam consider this manifesto issued in Leicester, England, on behalf of the Islamic Council of Europe:⁴

Atheist Notes No. 6

ISSN 0953 7791 ISBN 1 85637 292 8

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance, 25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1995: Libertarian Alliance; Antony Flew.

This essay has also been published in P. Kurtz and T. Madigan (eds.) *Defending the Enlightenment* (Prometheus, 1994).

Antony Flew is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Reading. He is one of Britain's leading defenders of the atheist position, having written, among many other books and articles on philosophy, politics and sociology, *God, Freedom and Immortality* (1984) and the forthcoming *Essays in Atheist Humanism*. He also wrote *Atheist Notes No. 5, Arguments to Design*.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait

Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb



FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

The religion of Islam embodies the final and most complete word of God ... Departmentalization of life into different watertight compartments, religious and secular, sacred and profane, spiritual and material is ruled out ... *Islam is not a religion in the Western understanding of the word.* It is a faith and a way of life, a religion and a social order, a doctrine and a code of conduct, a set of values and principles, and a *social movement to realize them in history.*⁵

In this we have an statement which satisfactorily transcends all differences within and between various Muslim communities, such as those between Sunni and Shi'a or between the so-called Fundamentalists and their opponents. The term 'fundamentalist' is anyway in the present case peculiarly inappropriate. It is derived from the title of a series of tracts — *The Fundamentals* — published in the USA in 1909; and it is defined as the belief that *The Bible*, as the Word of God, is wholly, literally and infallibly true — a belief which, notoriously, commits fundamentalist Christians to defending the historicity of the accounts of Creation given in the first two Chapters of *Genesis*. To rate as truly a Christian it is by no means necessary to be in this understanding fundamentalist. It is instead fully sufficient wholeheartedly to accept the Apostles' and/or the Nicene Creed. But in order to be properly accounted a Muslim it is essential to be a fundamentalist with regard to (not *The Bible* but) *The Koran*.

The crux is that, whereas only a very small proportion of all the propositions contained in the Christian *Bible* are presented as statements made directly by God in any of the three persons of the Trinity, *The Koran* consists entirely and exclusively of what are believed to be Divine revelations made through the Prophet Muhammad, and made therefore in Arabic.⁶ These revelations are supposed to have been

... received, in circumstances of a trance-like nature, over a considerable number of years intermittently, the first ... dating from about A.D. 610 and the last shortly before Muhammad's death in A.D. 632 ... Tradition relates that a few years after his death the scattered fragments were collected together ...

But it was only

... during the reign of the third Caliph Uthman (644-56) that the definitive canon was established by a panel of editors directed by the Prophet's amanuensis Zaid ibn Thabit.⁷

As might be expected, given this method of compilation, the resulting book is extremely repetitious. Although, except for the first and one of the shortest, the 114 surahs or chapters are arranged only in descending order of length it would be difficult if not impossible to suggest a better alternative. Unlike the Christian *Bible*, which contains several sorts of writings — historical essays, collections of psalms and of proverbs, four separate accounts of the preachings and eventual martyrdom of Jesus, letters to branches of his young and growing church, and so on — *The Koran* is a collection of recorded teachings coming from or through a single mouth. One consequence is that the theologians of Islam have little room for manoeuvre; either for softening harshnesses which prove embarrassing; or for developing doctrines found or supposedly implicit in some books but not in others. So the history of Islam provides no parallels to the disputes about, for instance, the nature of the Trinity⁸ which have riven Christendom.

The Prophet Muhammad appears as the final Messenger from the Mosaic God of Judaism and Christianity. A total of 28 predecessors are named in *The Koran* as having previously been assigned to spread the message of obedience to Him. One of these, mentioned frequently and always respectfully, is "Jesus Son of Mary". But the crucial Christian claim that Jesus was the Son of God is categorically repudiated, and those who persist in maintaining that claim are condemned to "a painful chastisement":

They are unbelievers
who say, God is the Third of Three
No god is there but
One God
If they refrain not from what they are say, there
shall afflict those of them that disbelieve
a painful chastisement ...
... and in the chastisement they
shall dwell forever.⁹

That "painful chastisement" will thus clearly be for the offence of heretical belief, and, as *The Koran* asserts repeatedly, it will not only consist in the infliction of extremes of agony but also — infinitely more severe — continue eternally. Every surah begins "In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate", while the first proceeds forthwith, as sooner or later do most of the rest, inconsistently to indicate that there is to be a Day of Doom on which the mercy and the compassion of "The All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate" will be revealed to be strictly and very narrowly restricted:

Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being
the All-merciful, the All-compassionate,
the Master of the Day of Doom.

Thee only we serve; of Thee alone we pray for succour.
Guide us in the straight path,
the path of those whom Thou hast blessed,
not of those against whom Thou art wrathful
nor of those who are astray.

The central, fundamental, continually and emphatically repeated message of *The Koran* combines a promise with a threat. The promise is to "Those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness — theirs shall be forgiveness and generous provision";¹⁰ a generous provision including among other attractions not only "Gardens of Delight" but also "wide-eyed houris as the likeness of hidden pearls".¹¹ The threat is to unbelievers "those who strive against Our signs to avoid them — they shall be inhabitants of Hell";¹² a habitation in which "garments of fire shall be cut for the unbelievers" and where "for them await hooked iron rods as often as they desire in their anguish to come forth from the eternal fire".¹³

Since no attempt is ever made to reconcile these threats of eternal torture for too belatedly repentant unbelievers with the endlessly reiterated assertion that Allah is "the All-Merciful, the All-compassionate" it becomes appropriate to recall a very characteristic observation made by Thomas Hobbes, in his *Leviathan*, that

... in the attributes which we give to God we are not to consider the signification of philosophical truth, but the signification of pious intention, to do him the greatest honour we are able.¹⁴

The Koran calls for belief and consequent obedience. It is, surely, calculated to inspire fear, indeed abject terror, rather than love. So it is altogether appropriate that the apologetic

argument since attributed to and named for Pascal was employed centuries earlier by the famous Sufi theologian al-Ghazzali, who died in A.D. 1111.¹⁵ Allah is presented in *The Koran*, notwithstanding “the attributes ... of pious intention”, as a Cosmic oriental despot who penalises perceived disobedience and crushes perceived opposition by eternally extended exercises of uninhibitedly and total power.

The qualification ‘perceived’ has to go in since actually to oppose or to disobey we should need to believe in the existence and orders of the despot, while any who actually knew that opposition or disobedience was to be rewarded by eternal torture and yet chose to disobey or to oppose would, by simply engaging in such egregiously and inordinately insane behaviour, show themselves not to be fit and proper subjects of punishment.

The sentences which Allah is to hand down on the Day of Doom are alleged to be just, despite the inordinate disparity between finite offences and infinite penalties, because “every soul earns only its own account; no soul laden bears the load of another”.¹⁷ By the hypothesis that is no doubt correct, but only so long as “the load of another” is construed as the load of another human being. Yet *The Koran* contains an abundance of passages, paralleling those notorious hard sayings of St. Paul which insist that God, conceived not only as the omnipotent initiating and sustaining cause of the entire Universe and of everything in it, but also as punishing some of its creatures, must therefore be recognized to be punishing those creatures for offences for which, by the hypothesis, God alone cannot escape the ultimate sole responsibility. All such Divine discriminations have therefore to be seen as arbitrary exercises of total power:

Therefore hath he mercy upon whom he will have mercy and whom he will be hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, ‘Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?’ Nay but, O man, who are thou that replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, ‘Why has thou made me thus?’ Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?¹⁸

The first parallel passage in *The Koran* comes at the very beginning:

As for the unbelievers, alike it is to them,
whether thou has warned them or hast not warned them,
they do not believe.
God has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing,
and on the eyes is a covering,
and there awaits them a mighty chastisement.¹⁹

Christian apologists never cease from arguing that by endowing humankind with the dangerous attribute of freewill God breaks the chain of causation and thus escapes responsibility for our actions. A similar attempt was made in the early days of Islam.²⁰ But the overwhelmingly dominant position is that argued in ‘A Popular Theological Statement’.²¹ Reasonably enough, since the fact that we are indeed creatures who can and cannot but make choices, some of which are made of our own free will and others only under various degrees of compulsion or constraint, does not preclude the possibility, and on these assumptions the necessity of Divine causation making us the particular creatures who actually make whatever choices we do in fact freely make in whatever senses we do indeed freely choose to make those choices.²² Thus this Statement insists that “it

is the duty of every Muslim to believe” that “Both good things and evil things are the result of God’s decree”. Nevertheless it continues,

Modern theologians sometimes teach that God has the duty to be good, to do good for people, to will the good ... God has no such duty. If He had ... His free will and power would be limited, which is clearly contrary to the dogma of omnipotence and the divine will.²³

The same Statement grasps the key to understanding what it is to have a choice; and why it is impossible for those who have acquired the concept of choice to deny that they are members of a kind of creatures which can, and cannot but, actually make choices: “Any person discovers a difference in moving a hand and when the air moves it.”²⁴ The distinction between these two fundamentally different kinds of bodily movements is, of course, that the former — label these movings — are, while the latter — label those motions — are not, under the direct control of the person, the agent, whose movements they are. But although our movings are thus always and necessarily under our direct control, and although alternative movings or an abstention from moving must therefore always be possible, none of this provides any guarantee that it is not the agency of God which makes us all the different people who choose in the various senses in which we do severally choose. However, if it were, then it would not do to respond by maintaining that, for that reason, we really and truly could not have done other than we actually did. For the crucial expression “could do otherwise” is, surely, definable itself only ostensibly and by reference to movings?

II

It should by now be obvious that Islam is one of those “Great and terrible systems of divinity ... which, if true, might drive a wise man mad.” So are there evidencing reasons for concluding that it is certainly or even very probably true? If we were forced to conclude that it is more probable than any non-hell-threatening alternative, then that conclusion would surely constitute a powerful motivating reason to persuade ourselves of its certain truth.²⁵

The question whether Muhammad was a Messenger from the Mosaic God must be distinguished from the logically prior question whether there is such a sender of Messengers. The affirmative answer to that logically prior question *The Koran* takes absolutely for granted, presupposing in the reader or hearer knowledge of or derived from both *The Bible* and “some sort of native Arabian tradition”.²⁶ Of the twenty eight predecessors mentioned most attention is given to Moses and after him to Jesus and, curiously, Noah. Moses too is the one who is alleged to have been supplied with the most spectacular credentials in the shape of the Plagues of Egypt.

To those familiar with traditional Christian apologetic it is remarkable that no claims are made about miracles allegedly worked by or on behalf of Muhammad himself — at any rate if we except the contention that the composition of *The Koran*, which is apparently agreed by all those competent to judge to be the supreme masterpiece of Arabic literature, itself constitutes a miracle.²⁷ This omission gave purchase to the objection which Aquinas took to be decisive. Muhammad, Aquinas wrote:

... did not bring forth any signs produced in a supernatural way, by which alone divine inspiration is appro-

priately evidenced; since a visible action which can only be divine reveals an invisibly inspired teacher of truth. ... It is thus clear that those who place any faith in his words believe frivolously.²⁸

The only contemporary supposed signs to which *The Koran* appeals as evidences are various familiar facts of nature described as the achievements of Allah. For instance:

Those are the signs of the Book;
and that which has been sent down to thee
from thy Lord is the truth, but most men
do not believe.

God is He who raised up the heavens
without pillars you can see,
then He sat Himself upon the Throne,
He subjected the sun and the moon,
each one running to a term stated,
He directs the affair ...

It is He who stretched out the earth
and set therein
firm mountains and rivers,
and of every fruit he placed there two kinds,
covering the day with the night.

Surely in that there are signs for people who reflect.²⁹

And, after some more of the very similar, "surely in that are signs for people who understand". But a reflection which thus proceeds immediately from visible facts to their Invisible Cause, and an understanding which is manifested in this inference, must be prejudiced. The prejudicially drawn conclusion may be correct. For prejudices are not necessarily and as such mistaken. But, absent the prejudicial assumption, such arguments are manifestly unsound. For they proceed directly, as Aristotle might have put it, from actuality to impossibility: from descriptions of what to all appearance occurs normally and naturally; to the conclusion that these phenomena cannot really be what they appear to be but are instead the products of supernatural agency.

Some lines from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are more revealing here than perhaps the authoress recognized. For, unlike the Yankee Miss Ophelia, poor Topsy had never been theologically indoctrinated by either parent or preacher. Yet she had had abundant opportunity to learn from rural observation what in my young day urban fathers used to reveal to schoolbound sons as "the facts of life". So it is Topsy who answers for unprejudiced common sense and common experience:

"Do you know who made you?" "Nobody, as I knows on," said the child with a short laugh. The idea appeared to amuse her considerably; for her eyes twinkled and she added: "I s'pect I grow'd. Dont thin' nobody ever made me."³⁰

NOTES

1. *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, Allen and Unwin, London, Second Edition 1962, p. 7.
2. *Ibid*, p. 27
3. *Ibid*, p. 74. For a critique of this book compare my "Russell's Judgement on Bolshevism", in George W. Roberts (ed.), *Bertrand Russell Memorial Volume*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1979, pp. 428-454.
4. I chose a statement from this organization, rather than anything from a traditionally Muslim country, in order to draw attention to the fact that there has since World War II been a massive and still continuing Muslim immigration into the UK, France, Germany and other countries of Western Europe. Both by natural increase and through further immigra-

- tion all these minorities are growing both absolutely and relative to the non-Muslim majorities. Compare, for instance, Mervyn Hiskett, *Some To Mecca Turn to Pray*, Claridge, London, 1993; also the publications of Majority Rights, B.M. Box 3515, London, WCIN 3XX.
5. Quoted in Whitefield Foy (ed.), *Man's Religious Quest*, Croom Helm/Open University, London, 1978, emphasis added.
6. That is why a proper Islamic education has to include the learning of Arabic and the consequent study of the original and only authentic text of *The Koran*.
7. Quoted from the first paragraph of A. J. Arberry's Introduction to his translation, first published by Allen and Unwin in London in 1955. Subsequent references will be to the OUP World's Classic paperback edition of 1985, giving the number of the surah in Roman and of the page in Arabic numerals.
8. Any such doctrine, of course, as a defection from austere, absolute, unequivocal monotheism, is utterly repugnant to Islam.
9. V, pp. 112 and 113.
10. XXII, p. 339. Nowhere can I find any suggestion that unbelievers who "do deeds of righteousness" might be excused resurrection and hence damnation.
11. LVI, p. 560.
12. XXII, p. 339
13. XXII, p. 335
14. Chapter XXXI.
15. Compare "Is Pascal's Wager the Only Safe Bet?", in my *God, Freedom and Immortality*, Prometheus, Buffalo NY, 1984.
16. Uninhibited, that is to say, by any enlightenment objections to torture or other cruel and unusual punishment. The notorious this-worldly punishment of manual amputation is specifically prescribed by *The Koran*: "And the thief, male and female; cut off the hands of both, as ... a punishment exemplary from God" (V, p. 106). To reject it as the outrage which it is must therefore be to become less of a Muslim, albeit a somewhat more enlightened human being.
17. VI, p. 142.
18. *Romans*, IX, 18-21.
19. II, p. 2. Compare VI, pp. 123, 125, 134 and 136; VII, pp. 161 and 166; LX, p. 194; XVI, p. 269; XXIV, p. 357; XXXIX, p. 474; and LXXXI, pp. 632-633.
20. See, for instance, Andrew Rippin and Jan Knappert (eds.), *Textual Sources for the Study of Islam*, Manchester University Press, 1986, pp. 17ff.
21. *Ibid*, pp. 126-134. I have been assured by one of the editors that "it is found in many Islamic countries ... it has been accepted as dogma for a long time among Shafeitic and Hanafitic scholars. Divine predestination and (the absence of) human responsibility are discussed almost verbatim in many other tracts and treatises in Islamic lands. Islamic theology is homogeneous."
22. For further discussion see Antony Flew and Godfrey Vesey *Agency and Necessity*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1987. This work quotes Luther's comment upon this necessity: "Now by 'necessity' I do not mean 'compulsorily' ... a man without the Spirit of God does not do evil against his will, under pressure, as though he were taken by the scruff of his neck and dragged into it, like a thief or a footpad being dragged off against his will to punishment; but he does it spontaneously and voluntarily." It also cites his desperate response to the challenge quoted earlier from *Romans*: "The highest degree of faith is to believe that He is just, though of his own free will he makes us ... proper subjects for damnation and seems (in the words of Erasmus) 'to delight in the torments of poor wretches and to be a fitter object for hate than love'. If I could by any means understand how this same God ... can yet be merciful and just, there would be no need for faith." (pp. 88-89)
23. Rippin and Knappert, 1986, p. 133. Islam therefore spares itself the Problem of Evil: the insoluble problem, that is to say, of reconciling the actual existence of evil and the putative existence of a God who is not only all-powerful but also all-good.
24. *Ibid*, p. 134.
25. For development of such an argument, distinguishing evidencing from motivating reasons for belief, see the article referenced in Note 15, above.
26. Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, vol. 1, p. 15.
27. I am reminded of a column in *The Times* of London in which, during the Mozart Bicentenary celebrations, Bernard Levin urged canonization, naming what he judged to be suitably miraculous compositions.
28. *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book 1, Chapter 6, Section 4; pp. 73-74: in the first volume of the Doubleday Image edition. For the difficulties of evidencing such naturally impossible occurrences, see my *Essays in Atheist Humanism*, Prometheus, Buffalo NY, forthcoming, chapter 3.
29. XIII, p. 239. And compare XLII, p. 502; XLV, p. 516; and LXXVII, p. 642.
30. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Basic Books Inc., New York, undated, p. 206.