

# The Crisis Within Islam

Richard W. Bulliet

The battle between different versions of Islam points to a crisis of authority that must be resolved.

Islam is a religion of peace, President George Bush has declared. The imam at the local mosque has likely offered the same assurance, as has your Muslim neighbour or co-worker. Yet many in the West remain suspicious that Islam is not at all a peaceful faith, and that the conflict sparked by the September 11 attacks is not just a war against terrorism but a 'clash of civilisations'.

It is not hard to understand why. Osama bin Laden, who became the world's best-known Muslim during the 1990s, declared that there is no path open to a believing Muslim except jihad, or holy war, against the West in general and the United States in particular. Islamic authorities who refuse to join him, bin Laden said, are betraying the faith. At the same time, the few prominent Muslims who have disowned the terrorism perpetrated in Islam's name on September 11 and actively affirmed its peaceful character have been drowned out by the silence of the many others who have not, or who have in their confusion failed to condemn unequivocally bin Laden's acts.

This strange silence does not reflect the attitude of traditional Islam but is a painful manifestation of a crisis of authority that has been building within Islam for a century. It is this crisis that allowed bin Laden, despite his lack of a formal religious education or an authoritative religious position, to assume the role of spokesman for the world's Muslims. The crisis has undermined the traditional leaders who should be in a position to disqualify or overrule a man who does not speak—or act—for Islam.

Today's crisis grows in part out of the structure of Islam itself—a faith without denominations, hierarchies,

and centralised institutions. The absence of such structures has been a source of strength that has permitted the faith to adapt to local conditions and win converts around the world. But it is also a weakness that makes it difficult for Muslims to come together and speak with one voice on important issues—to say what is and what is not true Islam.

Islam's structural weakness has been immeasurably magnified by a series of historical forces that have gradually compromised the authority of its traditional religious leaders in the Middle East and elsewhere. The imams and muftis (legal scholars) who once shaped the worldviews of ordinary Muslims and confidently articulated the meaning of the faith have been overshadowed by more innovative and often radical figures with much shallower roots in tradition. Hundreds of millions of ordinary Muslims feel that they understand their religion perfectly well, and that it provides no justification for the murderous crashing of airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. But until Islam's crisis of authority is resolved, these people will have no voice, and public confusion about what Islam really stands for will persist.

## Causes of the crisis

The crisis has three related historical causes: the marginalisation of traditional Muslim authorities over the past century and a half; the rise of new authorities

---

**Richard W. Bulliet** is Professor of History at Columbia University. Reprinted with permission from the Winter 2002 issue of the *Wilson Quarterly*.

with inferior credentials but greater skill in using print and, more recently, electronic media; and the spread of mass literacy in the Muslim world, which made the challengers' writings accessible to vast new audiences.

The deepest roots of the crisis go back to the early 19th century, when the Muslim world was forced to begin coming to grips with the challenge of European imperialism. Governments in these countries responded by embracing a variety of reforms based on European models. This response began in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire (which both escaped the imperial yoke) in the early 19th century; spread to Iran, Tunisia, and Morocco by the end of the century; and was then embraced in many countries during the era of decolonisation after World War II. In subject lands—including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Algeria, and West Africa—European colonial governments imposed similar reforms from above.

Strongly influenced by the example of European anticlericalism, which seemed to 19th century leaders in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire to be an essential element in the making of European might, these leaders moved to strip traditional Muslim religious authorities of their institutional and financial power. Later, popular leaders such as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) in Turkey and Hafez al-Assad (1928-2001) in Syria, continued the attack in the name of secular nationalism. By secularism, however, they meant not separation of church and state but suppression of the church by the state.

For centuries, the traditional religious authorities had interpreted and administered the law in Muslim lands. The reformers replaced Islamic sharia law with legal codes of European inspiration, and lawyers trained in the new legal thinking took the place of religiously trained judges and jurists in new European-style courts.

The 19th century Egyptian and Ottoman reformers also established new schools to train military officers and government officials. These elite institutions, which were to serve as models for most mass school systems in the Middle East after World War II, taught modern subjects such as science and foreign languages—though, significantly, little in the way of liberal arts—and worked to instil a secular outlook in their students.

The traditional Islamic schools were discontinued, downgraded, or stripped of funding.

Another traditional element that lost prominence in 19th century Muslim society due to the opposition of reformist governments was the ubiquitous Sufi brotherhoods—mass religious organisations that held out the promise of a mystical union with God. The secular leaders of the modernising nations feared that the Sufi sheiks, with their otherworldly perspectives and intellectual independence, might become a significant source of resistance to reform. But the decline of Sufism left a spiritual vacuum that nationalist zeal ultimately fell far short of filling.

In many parts of the Islamic world after 1800, governments took control of the financial endowments that mosques, seminaries, and other religious institutions had amassed over the years from the contributions of the faithful. Many of these endowments were considerable, and in Egypt, Iran, and other countries had had the effect of gradually concentrating a significant share of the national wealth under religious control. Confiscating this resource, as Egypt did early in the 19th century, or centralising its administration in a government ministry, the later Ottoman practice, put financial control in the hands of the state.

Mosque officials, teachers, and others employed in many religious institutions now were subject to government pressure.

This slow but persistent assault on the foundations of religious authority diminished the stature and influence of traditional religious leaders in public life. Many ordinary Muslims grew to distrust the pronouncements of their religious leaders. Were their views shaped by religious conscience and learning, or by the need to curry favour with the government officials who controlled their purse strings? By the 1930s the sun clearly was setting on the old authorities.

Even as governments in the Middle East and elsewhere were hammering at the sources of traditional religious authority, a powerful technological revolution struck a second blow. Printing technology, which had begun to transform European society in the 15th century, had its first impact in the Islamic religious world only in the second half of the 19th century (though government and the technical fields were

**A slow but  
persistent assault  
on the foundations  
of religious authority  
diminished the  
stature and influence  
of traditional  
religious leaders.**

affected somewhat earlier). For centuries, the lines of religious authority within Islam had been formed by personal links between teachers and their disciples. Now this traditional mode of preserving, refining, and transmitting ideas faced competition from writers, editors, and publishers with little or no formal religious training and few ties to established teachers. They became authorities simply by virtue of putting their words into print. A Muslim in Egypt could become a devoted follower of a writer in Pakistan without ever meeting him or anyone else who had met him.

*Al-Manar* (The Minaret), a magazine published in Cairo by Rashid Rida between 1898 and 1935, provides a typical example of how this new trade in religious ideas worked. Rida had studied in both an Ottoman state school with a 'modern' curriculum and an Islamic school, but he wielded his influence as a writer and editor. In the pages of *Al-Manar* thousands of Muslims around the world first encountered the modernist ideas of Rida's mentor, Muhammad Abduh, an advocate of Islam's compatibility with modern science and of greater independence in Muslim thought. But Rida soon took the magazine in another direction, advocating Arab nationalism and eventually embracing the religious conservatism of Saudi Arabia.

#### The rise of new Islamic thinkers

By tradition, a Muslim teacher's authority rested on his mastery of many centuries of legal, theological, and ethical thought. But as lawyers, doctors, economists, sociologists, engineers, and educators spewed forth articles, pamphlets, and books on the Islamic condition, this ancient view lost force. After World War II, the most popular, innovative, and inspiring thinkers in the Islamic world boasted secular rather than religious educational backgrounds. (This is still the case. Bin Laden, for example, was trained as an engineer; his associate Ayman al-Zawahiri was a surgeon; and their ideological predecessor Sayyid Qutb was an Egyptian schoolteacher.)

Because radio and television were under strict government control in most Muslim countries, these new thinkers expounded their ideas in print—at least until the advent of audio—and videocassettes made other mediums possible. The Islamic Revolution of

1979 in Iran brought worldwide prominence not only to Ayatollah Khomeini, an authority of the old type who used books and audiotapes to spread his views, but also to the sociologist Ali Shariati, whose writings and spellbinding oratory galvanised Iran's university students, and the economist Abolhasan Bani Sadr, who was elected president of the new Islamic Republic in 1981. In Sudan, lawyers Mahmoud Muhammad Taha and Hasan Turabi gained large followings; the philosophers Hasan Hanafi in Egypt, and Muhammad Arkoun in Algeria both propounded influential interpretations of Islam.

The new thinkers of the past half-century have offered a wide variety of ideas. Some have called for a return to life as it was lived in Muhammad's time (though they often disagree about what 7th century life was like) and disparaged the teachings of scholars from later centuries. Others have joined bin Laden in preaching terrorist violence as the solution to Islam's problems. Still others, such as Rashid Ghannushi in Tunisia and Abbassi al-Madani in Algeria, have called for the creation of Islamic political parties and for their open competition with other parties in free and democratic elections. In Iran, President Muhammad Khatami leads a powerful, democratically oriented reform movement.

It is also true, however, that some of the leaders who capitalised on the new media to build large followings were both extremists and formally trained religious figures. Khomeini is the most obvious example; Egypt's Sheik Umar Abdurrahman, who is languishing in an American prison since being convicted for his role in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, is another.

The final element in the making of today's crisis was the decision by the newly independent states of the post-World War II era to pursue compulsory education and mass literacy. The young Muslims who came of age in the developing world during the 1960s thus had the tools to read what the new authorities were writing. Because their schooling included minimum exposure to the traditional religious curriculum and texts—and in many cases admonitions by their government teachers not to put too much stock in religious scholarship—they did not feel obliged to follow the dictates of the old authorities. And they

**Some of the  
leaders who  
capitalised on the  
new media to build  
large followings were  
both extremists and  
formally trained  
religious figures.**

appreciated the contemporary vocabulary and viewpoints of the new Islamic writers. So long as nationalism offered them the promise of a better future, they remained loyal to their political leaders and governments. But when the nationalists' dreams failed and the future dimmed, as it did in most Muslim countries during the 1970s, people looked elsewhere for hope and inspiration, and they didn't have to look far.

Traditional Islam is far from dead. Many Muslims still stand firmly by the legal opinions (fatwas) and moral guidance of traditionally educated muftis and the orthodox teachings of the imams at their local mosques. But the momentum seems to be with the new authorities. This has created an unusual dynamic within the Muslim world. While the new authorities seldom defer to the old, the old feel compelled to endorse some of their rivals' ideas in order to seem up to date and retain influence. The locus of debate thus has been steadily shifting in favour of the new authorities.

Local imams and other religious officials are also dependent (in a way their rivals usually are not) on their national government. They are caught in a three-way squeeze between government interests, their religious training, and the popular teachings of their rivals. This helps explain the strange silence that has prevailed since September 11. Some traditional religious figures have chosen to say nothing. Some have tacitly admitted the evil of terrorism while denying that Islam and Muslims had anything to do with the attacks. Some have resorted to anti-American rhetoric. And some have condemned the terrorist acts but stopped short of recognising and condemning the instigators.

#### **Will the centre hold?**

This failure of the traditional leadership has left Muslims everywhere in a quandary. They know what their faith means to them, and they think this meaning should be obvious to everyone. They do not pray five times a day, fast during Ramadan, make the pilgrimage to Mecca, and live modest, peaceful, hard-working lives for the secret purpose of destroying Western civilisation and slaughtering Americans. They find the association of such violent ideas with their religion odious and preposterous—and threatening if they happen to live

in the United States. Yet nobody seems to speak for them.

This is not to suggest that giving voice to the feelings of ordinary Muslims would somehow release a hidden reservoir of support for America's global pre-eminence and its policies in the Middle East and other regions. Many, if not most, Muslims are highly critical of these policies. Those with the strongest anti-American feelings applauded the events of September 11 and praised bin Laden for launching them—even, in some cases, while shuddering at the thought of living in a world governed by his religious vision. But these supporters of terror, though prominently featured on television, do not represent the Muslim majority. Indeed, a good number of the Muslim world's apologists for terror are not themselves religious people.

In any event, opposition to US policies is hardly restricted to the Islamic world. No one should mistake political views for religious ones—millions of non-Muslims (including some Americans) voice similar criticisms of the United States. For Americans to want Muslims to repudiate terrorism and disown its authors is reasonable. To want them to agree wholeheartedly with everything America does in the world is unrealistic.

What Muslims lack in this moment of crisis is a clear, decisive, and unequivocal religious authority able to declare that the killing of innocents by terrorist attacks is contrary to Islam and to explain how Muslims can stand firmly against terrorism without seeming to embrace the United States and its policies. When authority itself is in question, the middle gives way.

History suggests that Islam will overcome its current crisis of authority, just as it has overcome a number of other crises in its past. The first of these arose soon after the prophet Muhammad's death in A.D. 632. Later in the 7th century, as the generation that had personally known Muhammad died off, the Muslim community split over several issues, particularly the proper line of succession to the caliphate that had been established after Muhammad's death. (It was from this crisis that the Sunni-Shiite split grew.) Civil wars erupted. The crisis of authority was temporarily resolved by the consolidation of a military state, the Umayyad Caliphate, and the suppression of dissent. The caliphate shifted the seat of power from Medina, in Arabia, to

**What Muslims  
lack in this  
moment of crisis  
is a clear, decisive,  
and unequivocal  
religious authority.**

Damascus, and quickly extended its rule over a vast empire that stretched from Spain in the west to what is now Pakistan in the east.

In the middle of the 9th century, as the conversion of non-Arab peoples brought into Islam people bearing the traditions of Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Greek philosophy, Islam again entered a period of uncertainty. The caliphate had passed into the hands of the Abbasids, so named because they claimed descent from the Prophet's uncle Abbas. The caliphate, its seat now in Baghdad, flourished—this period was in many ways the apex of Arab civilisation. But when a new religious challenge arose, the caliph's resort to force failed. Against him was arrayed a new class of religious scholars who maintained that Muslims should follow the tradition of the prophet Muhammad, as preserved in a multitude of sayings and anecdotes, rather than the dictates of a caliph in Baghdad. Today's declining Islamic authorities date the beginnings of their power to this confrontation. Under the leadership of the scholar Ahmad ibn Hanbal and others who followed him, it was eventually agreed that Muslims would look to a consensus of scholars—in theory, throughout the Muslim lands, but in practice within each locality—for guidance on how to live moral lives. (Ahmad ibn Hanbal himself was founder of one of the four main schools of Islamic law within the Sunni tradition.)

A fresh crisis of authority arose, however, as it became evident that the sayings of the Prophet were too numerous and internally contradictory for all of them to be true. A new group of scholars set out to establish rules for determining which sayings were most likely to be true, and they gradually collected the most reliable of them into books. Nevertheless, several centuries elapsed before these books of 'sound' traditions won recognition as the sole authoritative guides to Muslim behaviour.

The key to this recognition was the spread during the 12th and 13th centuries of madrasas, Islamic seminaries that had first appeared in Iran in the 10th century. Institutions such as al-Azhar in Cairo, the Zaituna Mosque in Tunis, the Qarawiyyin Madrasa in Fez, and clusters of seminaries in Mecca and in Ottoman Istanbul and Bursa gained particular eminence. The madrasas adopted the authoritative compilations of

prophetic traditions as a fundamental part of their curricula, along with instruction in the Koran and the Arabic language. Other collections were gradually forgotten. The Muslim religious schools of today, whether grand edifices like al-Azhar and the Shiite seminaries at Qum in Iran, or the myriad humble madrasas of Pakistan and pesantrens of Indonesia, have roots in the resolution of this crisis of authority that arose more than 800 years ago.

Even as the madrasas were being established, a new upheaval was beginning. It grew out of the feeling of many common people—including those in late-converting rural areas of the Middle East and more recently Islamised lands in West Africa, the Balkans, and Central, South, and Southeast Asia—that Islam had become too legalistic and impersonal under the guidance of the scholars and madrasas. Religious practice, these Muslims felt, had become a matter of obeying sharia law and little else. The rise of Sufi brotherhoods beginning in the 13th century was a response to this popular demand for a more intense spiritual and communal life. Born in the Middle East, Sufism spread quickly throughout the Muslim world. The Sufis made room for music, dancing, chanting, and other manifestations of devotion that were not permitted in the mosque. But Sufi

practices did not supersede conventional worship; the sheiks who led the Sufi brotherhoods provided religious guidance that paralleled rather than opposed the authority exercised by the established scholars and seminaries.

#### **Possibilities for change**

One can see in this capsule history of Islamic religious development a demonstration of the fact that a faith with no central institution for determining what is good or bad practice is bound to experience periodic crises of authority. But this history also demonstrates that the Muslim religious community has overcome every crisis it has confronted.

How will it overcome this one? There is no way to rebuild religious authority on the old foundations. The modern state, the modern media, and the modern citizen must be part of any solution. Islam's history suggests that any new institutions that grow out of the current crisis will not supplant those already in place.

**History  
demonstrates  
that the Muslim  
religious community  
has overcome every  
crisis it has  
confronted.**

Seminaries will continue to impart to their students a mastery of fundamental legal and interpretive texts, and their graduates will continue to issue weighty legal opinions. Because Muslims retain a historical memory of being unified under a caliphate—a powerful state predicated on Islamic teachings—the dream of Islamic political unity will not disappear.

Any response to the current crisis must appeal to the many Muslims whose spiritual, moral, and intellectual needs have not been met by the faith's traditional institutions. Fortunately, the violent, totalitarian philosophy of bin Laden and his allies represents only one of the possible responses. Others are more promising.

Throughout the Muslim world organisations modelled (consciously or unconsciously) on the ancient Sufi brotherhoods but expounding this-worldly interpretations of Islam have been able to attract thousands of members. (A revival of Sufism itself seems to be underway in Iran, Central Asia, and other areas.) In some ways resembling political parties, but dedicated as well to the pursuit of social welfare programmes, these fraternal organisations often present themselves as prototypes of a modern, non-clerical form of Islamic government. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, and the Hezbollah (Party of God) in Lebanon differ widely in their interpretations of Islam, but they share a willingness to exist in a modern political world of participatory institutions. The Islamic Salvation Front actually triumphed in the first round of Algeria's 1991 parliamentary elections and failed to take power only because the Algerian military stepped in. The country has been convulsed by violence ever since.

No one can safely predict whether the participation of such groups in an electoral system would further the spread of democracy or simply give them a platform for preaching noxious doctrines. Hezbollah leader Sheik Muhammad Fadlallah, for example, has embraced the concept of a secular, multiparty political system in Lebanon, even at the cost of alienating some of the support within Iran for his Shi'ite group. But Hezbollah originally rose to prominence in Lebanon through violence during the country's years of civil war (and it has continued its campaign against Israel). Still, the

fact that such groups formally advocate participatory governing institutions—and that the Islamic Republic of Iran has developed such institutions—does give reason for hope.

Another set of possibilities for change within Islam is provided by educational and research institutions that exist independently of both traditional seminaries and formal government educational systems. These institutions provide venues for modern Muslim intellectuals to develop new ideas about contemporary issues. They are as likely to be found in London, Paris, and Washington as in Cairo and Istanbul—London's Institute of Islamic Political Thought and the Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences in America, outside Washington, D.C., are leading examples—and the thinkers they host often provide valuable guidance for the growing population of Muslims living outside the Muslim world.

In some Muslim countries, governments now sponsor educational institutions devoted to teaching about Islam from the perspective of the contemporary world. The Institutes of Higher Islamic Studies in Indonesia are a notable example. Some of these institutes may soon become fully-fledged universities offering both religious and secular courses.

Iran may seem an unlikely quarter in which to look for encouragement, but it too may provide some clues to the future direction of Islam. There,

an avowedly Islamic state is pursuing a unique experiment integrating elections and other modern political elements into an Islamic framework of government. Though Iran may prove to be the first and only enduring Islamic republic, the intellectual trends that have developed there, sometimes to the dismay of conservative religious leaders with seminary backgrounds, encourage Muslims to think that a lively intellectual life and engagement with worldwide currents of thought can survive and flourish in a religious environment. Iran remains far from a model republic, but the trajectory that has taken it from being a country bent on the export of revolution to one with a sizable electoral majority favouring liberalisation is encouraging.

Finally, another source of innovation may be the substantial numbers of secular Muslims who—contrary to the Western stereotype—live not only outside the traditional boundaries of the Islamic world but within

**Because Muslims retain an historical memory of being unified under a caliphate, the dream of Islamic political unity will not disappear.**

them. Secular Muslim thinkers have been elaborating the idea of turath (heritage) as a point of intersection between the past and a present in which the particulars of religious law and practice seem irrelevant. In engaging the 'modern' Muslim intellectuals, these secularists are striving to create legitimacy for non-observant forms of Islam.

Although these modernisers within contemporary Islam seem to work at cross purposes as much as they work in concert, some sort of fusion among them seems the most likely route to resolving today's crisis of authority. There is little possibility that non-observant Muslim intellectuals, ideologues of Islamic political parties, thinkers attached to centres and institutes, and teachers in government-sponsored religious schools will ever see eye to eye on everything. But in the past, discord within Islam was often resolved when Muslim leaders agreed to respect divergent views while recognising a common interest in the welfare of the global Muslim community. Muhammad himself declared, in one of his most often-cited sayings, 'The difference of opinion in my community is a divine mercy'.

But more immediate action is needed than the development of long-term concord within Islam. The ugly alternative is a 'clash of civilisations' like the one

envisioned by Harvard University political scientist Samuel Huntington and echoed in the propaganda of bin Laden and other extremists. Polarising the world between Islam and the West would serve the interest of the people who fly airliners into skyscrapers; it would spell tragedy for everybody else. Even if Islam's uncertain authorities, new and old, cannot agree on issues that might imply support for American foreign policy, they should be able to recognise an oncoming catastrophe and take measures to avoid it.

**Secularists are striving to create legitimacy for non-observant forms of Islam.**

**Conclusion**

Islam's leaders must act. The heads of Islamic centres and institutes around the world, along with leading Muslim intellectuals of every persuasion, must clarify the meaning of their faith. Non-Muslims in the United States and other countries are eager for signs of leadership in the Muslim world. They await an affirmation that the vision of a peaceful, fraternal world embodied in Islam's past and in the hearts of most ordinary Muslims still guides the people who claim to speak in Islam's name. The crisis of September 11 can be the crucible in which the tools for resolving Islam's own crisis of authority are forged. The lessons of the past encourage hope that Islam will find a path out of its confusion of voices.

**A RECIPE FOR FAILURE**

'Islamism' is being pumped like a volatile gas into the building of Islam, now both from the top, and the bottom. Through the spread of so-called 'moderate' Islamism, it fills the void left by socialism at the top. And from the bottom, through the gradual permeation of the new Wahabi madrasas, and through the pipes of the new pan-Islamic media, it arrives like fashion. It is conveyed in the cult status of characters like Osama bin Laden, who is presented as a Che Guevera; by the Friday preaching from the pulpits in Saudi-financed mosques; through the misappropriation of 'zakat' or alms; by many other devilishly clever devices that help to inflame the dry tinder of great masses of people living under the thumb; whose squalor and poverty have been made the more unbearable by explosive population growth, and failed experiments in socialism.

In such an environment, things can only get progressively worse. For the rantings of mad mullahs are never going to feed anybody, or instill the entrepreneurial spirit that will help them raise themselves up. All it can do is to inculcate anger, and turn that anger against the rich, unsuffering West.

I have been giving you an account of Islamism, as I think it operates; the niche into which it enters, and how it extends from that niche. Nazism attacked Weimar German society in a similar way, the Bolsheviks attacked the Mensheviks, Mussolini and Tojo prevailed in Italy and Japan, Pol Pot in Cambodia, Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe—starting from the rot at the top, and working their way down through the central nervous system of a disoriented political culture.

David Warren, 'Wrestling with Islam', Public Lecture (3 December 2002). For the full transcript of this lecture, go to <http://www.davidwarrenonline.com/Miscell/index02.shtml>