

### **Chapter 3**

#### **The Persistence of Orientalist Myths**

At a campaign stop during his run for the presidency in 2008, Republican candidate John McCain was confronted by an elderly white woman who said that she did not trust Barack Obama. McCain nodded in agreement until she added that Obama was an Arab. He disagreed with her and said that Obama was not an Arab, rather he was a “decent family man” and a “citizen”<sup>1</sup>. Underlying this exchange was a whole host of assumptions: that Arabs are bad, cannot be trusted, are not American (Arab Americans don’t count), are not decent people, and don’t value family. Despite the seeming disagreement, both McCain and his supporter shared an implicit view of Arabs as foreign terrorists.

What’s worse, Obama—the “liberal” candidate—responded to charges that he was a Muslim and a terrorist by insisting that he was a Christian. On the campaign trail, he asserted that he has attended the same Christian church for two decades, that he was sworn into office using his family Bible, and that he constantly pledges his allegiance to the flag in the Senate.<sup>2</sup> In short, he did nothing to challenge the association of Muslims and Arabs with terrorism, tacitly accepting the anti-Muslim logic that passes for conventional wisdom in mainstream US politics.

Since the events of 9/11, politicians and the media have not just promoted Islamophobia—they’ve turned the dial up to 11. This rhetoric was not invented after September 2001; it has a long history, as we saw in the previous two chapters. In this chapter we’ll examine some images of Muslims that have persisted to the point of becoming “common sense”—ideas which are believed to be true and so obvious that they need no verification. In particular, we will look at five myths about Islam and Muslims. I use the term “myth” for both its meanings—as a traditional story of supposedly historic events that shed light on the worldview of a people, and as a false and questionable story. Myths about Islam in the twenty-first century are indeed historical, but they are based on a distorted version of the historic encounter between the Christian West and the Muslim East. The goal of this chapter is to outline how these Orientalist and Islamophobic myths evolved out of Orientalist thought and earlier traditions, and then debunk them.

#### **Myth One: Islam is a monolithic religion**

In the eleventh century, when the image of the Muslim enemy was beginning to crystallize, religious scholars commissioned by the European elite made few attempts to understand the various branches of Islam and their actual practice by Muslims around the world. Instead, they wanted to expose Muhammad as an imposter and Islam as a false religion. Not much time was invested in learning how Islam had incorporated the cultural practices of the empires and peoples it conquered or how it was transformed by different cultures, taking various forms in various regions.

While today only those on the far right would claim that Islam is a false religion, it is often taken for granted that Islam is homogenous. This is in large part because Orientalists, like their medieval counterparts, propagated the myth that Islam is a monolith that can be fully understood through its classical texts. Only working from such

an assumption can anyone make claims about a static entity called “Muslim civilization” with a core set of unchanging values, or about the “Muslim mind” (viewed, of course, in the singular, as though all Muslims share a hive mind). For it is only by denying the diversity of Islamic history and practices that one can then argue that Islam has certain inherent, unchanging characteristics that render it anti-democratic, violent, sexist, and so on. In short, the myths that will be discussed in this chapter emerge from this core assumption that Islam is a monolith.

Even a cursory look at the practice of Islam around the world shows this myth to be patently false. One and a half billion people around the world are Muslims—85 percent are Sunni and 15 percent are Shi’a.<sup>3</sup> Within these two main denominations, there are many more branches. Muslim-majority countries and regions span the globe, from Indonesia to Bangladesh to several central Asian countries, the Middle East, and North Africa. In most of these countries Islam is the dominant religion, hence the term “Muslim-majority countries.” Yet, these countries are also home to Christians, Jews, and people of other faiths, as well as atheists. Additionally, India, a predominantly Hindu country, is home to over a hundred million Muslims.

Islam looks different in each of these regions and countries, largely because as it spread, people imbued it with their own local customs and traditions. The Sufi Islam practiced in Northern India is quite different from the Shi’a Islam practiced in Lebanon, which is in turn different from the Sunni Islam practiced in Pakistan. Even within a single branch of Islam there are customs and practices that vary by region.

Much of the current Islamophobic rhetoric seeks to demonize Arabs in particular. As we saw in the example at the start of this chapter, Obama was “accused” of being an Arab, which is shorthand for “Muslim” in some quarters. Let us note, therefore, a simple point: all Muslims are not Arabs, and all Arabs are not Muslims. Arabs are people who speak Arabic, share certain common cultural traditions, and claim a common Arab ethnic identity.<sup>4</sup> Geographically, the Arab world has traditionally been divided into two parts: the *Maghreb* or the West, which includes Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, and other countries west of the Nile, and the *Mashreq* or the East, which includes Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and all the countries to the east of the Nile up to, but not including, Iran. Because of linguistic and cultural differences, Iranians and Turks are not considered Arabs.

Thus, if we actually look, even briefly as we have above, at the diversity of people who follow Islam, we find not only that there is no biological or ethnic basis for *homo islamicus* but that the notion of a monolithic Islam immediately falls on its face. So too does the Orientalist claim that there is a transhistoric “Islamic civilization” which is based on a core set of values and from which one can explain a host of contemporary phenomena. Yet this is precisely the logic we will find at work in the following myths, which assert that Islam is inherently sexist, irrational, violent, and undemocratic. The homogenization of Islam and of Muslims is so taken for granted that it functions as the basis of all of the other myths. Said noted that the influential Orientalist Grunbaum “produced a solid *oeuvre* that concentrated on Islam as a holistic culture about which, from beginning to end of his career, he continued to make the same set of essentially reductive, negative generalizations.”<sup>5</sup> This pattern can be found not only in scholarship but in popular culture as well.<sup>6</sup>

## **Myth Two: Islam is a uniquely sexist religion**

While sexually repressed Europe was fascinated and titillated by Muslim marriage customs even during medieval times, there was no systematic discussion of women and Islam until the nineteenth century. Commenting about Europe's nineteenth-century obsession with Muslim women, one scholar stated that there "is no subject connected with Islam which Europeans have thought more important than the condition of Muslim women."<sup>7</sup> The dominant narrative that emerged was one that presented Muslim women as severely subjugated, oppressed, and little more than slaves. Just as the Muslim despots tyrannized their subjects, it was argued, they also tyrannized their wives and daughters. As various scholars have shown, in reality the European men who wrote about the plight of Muslim women had little access to these women to verify their assumptions. Coterminal accounts by Western women of the Muslim women they encountered reveal a more complex reality.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, this narrative of the oppressed brown woman serviced the colonial enterprise. Western men were now to ride off in their jodhpurs and pith helmets to rescue them.

One pith-helmeted English gentleman who rose to the occasion was Evelyn Baring, first Earl of Cromer, more famously known as Lord Cromer. When Britain invaded and occupied Egypt in 1882, Cromer was entrusted to oversee the occupation. He viewed Egyptian society and Islam as follows "Islam as a social system has been a complete failure. . . . The degradation of women in the East is a canker that begins its destructive work early in childhood, and has eaten into the whole system of Islam." The solution was that Muslims "be persuaded or forced into imbibing the true spirit of western civilization."<sup>9</sup> At home, this champion of Egyptian women's rights worked feverishly to deny British women the right to vote, as a founding member and president of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage. This was not a contradiction for Cromer, who was a social conservative at home but an enlightened colonizer abroad. As a colonial overlord, he was not putting forward a statement of principle but rather simply deploying arguments useful to the colonial mission.

More than a century later, it should come as no surprise that George W. Bush, whose policy record was firmly anti-woman, should masquerade as the rescuer of Afghan women. One of Bush's first acts after coming to power was to cut funding to international groups that provide abortion services to women, yet he billed the war on Afghanistan as necessary to rescue Afghan women: "We have obviously serious problems with the Taliban government. They're an incredibly repressive government, a government that has a value system that's hard for many in America . . . to relate to. Incredibly repressive toward women."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it was the "incredible" part that impressed Dubya, for his own life is one seeped in sexist assumptions and practices. At any rate, a whole slew of female politicians, and even feminist organizations such as Feminist Majority, came out in support of the war. In reality, conditions for women in Afghanistan, particularly in rural areas, deteriorated after the US invasion. This point was made quite strongly by women's rights advocate Malalai Joya, the youngest woman ever elected to the Afghan parliament; the United States responded by barring her entrance into the country for a speaking tour until public protest erupted.<sup>11</sup>

Despite this reality, the logic that Muslim women are oppressed and therefore need to be rescued by the West continues to hold ground. The Islamic veil has been the

subject of much controversy. Seen ubiquitously as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression, the veil has been banned, scorned, or otherwise used to advance the aforementioned colonial argument. In April 2011, the French government recycled this argument when it banned women from wearing the veil in public. Absent from this discourse are the voices of Muslim women themselves, who could construct an alternative narrative—one which speaks to a self-conscious choice made by autonomous individuals. As I have argued elsewhere, such a move would entail a shift in the terms of discussion: instead of being portrayed as voiceless victims, Muslim women—who have after all been at the forefront of the “Arab Spring” that emerged in 2011—would become actors capable of changing their own circumstances.<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, this will not do—at least not for imperial nations that are hell bent on rescuing Muslim women, even when they refuse such help.

However, once we have dispensed with imperial chicanery, the next logical question is whether Islam is uniquely sexist. To advance this argument one may point to the fact that women's rights have been severely curtailed by right-wing Islamist regimes such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Islamists in Iran. My response to this point is twofold. First, the parties of political Islam do not represent the religion; rather, they distort Islam to serve political goals. Second, *all* of the world's major religions are to a greater or lesser extent sexist. Singling out Islam for its sexist practices in the mainstream media and public discourse is not a historical oversight but a systematic attempt to construct “our” values and religion as being enlightened in contrast with “theirs.”

One could, for instance, point to sexism in the history of Christianity and in Christian majority societies quite easily. The Christian creation myth tells us that Eve was created out of Adam's rib, and that women's pain in childbirth is a punishment for Eve's disobedience to God. Women who were thought to be witches were burned at the stake not only in Europe but in colonial America, barely three centuries ago. Nicaragua, a predominantly Catholic country, passed a ban on abortion making no exception even if the woman's life is in danger.<sup>13</sup> The United States has yet to elect a female head of state, while predominantly Muslim countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia have already done so. What is worse is that the “enlightened” United States continues to curtail women's rights. Only thirteen percent of US counties offer abortion services. Several states have passed laws that allow pharmacists to refuse to fill birth control prescriptions, including the “morning after” pill. And at the same time as women's rights to control their bodies have been restricted, attention on the fetus has increased. These restrictions on women's rights are due in no small part to the influence of the Christian Right on US politics. This is similar to the dynamic in many Muslim-majority countries, where the emergence of Islamist groups has led to a decline in women's status.

Even if we examine Islam on its own terms, there is much debate about the role of women. The Qur'an, like any religious text, lends itself to multiple interpretations. There are passages in the Qur'an that grant women the same rights as men to divorce and that permit them to own and inherit property, marking a step forward for women in Arab society at the time.<sup>14</sup> There are, however, also passages that condone polygamy and that restrict women's inheritance rights to only half of what men receive.<sup>15</sup>

Scholars like Leila Ahmed and Asma Barlas have argued that Islam is not inherently misogynistic. They point to the egalitarian passages in the Qur'an that suggest equality between men and women. Barlas argues that sexist interpretations of the Qur'an

are a product of particular societies that needed religious authority to justify sexual inequality.<sup>16</sup> Ahmed states that prior to the institutionalization of Islam, women in Arab society participated in warfare and religion and had sexual autonomy. Montgomery Watt even goes so far as to argue that Arab society at the time was predominantly matrilineal.<sup>17</sup> However, Maxime Rodinson rejects this analysis, stating instead that Arabia in this period is more appropriately described as a patrilineal society where polyandrous practices, combined with substantial social roles for women, prevailed in certain regions.<sup>18</sup> Prophet Muhammad's first wife Khadija was a wealthy woman who was forty when she proposed to the twenty-five-year-old Muhammad. Khadija had been married twice before and was widowed; it was Muhammad's first marriage.

As Islam spread, it adopted the cultural practices of various empires, including those of the neighboring Persian and Byzantine empires. The Christians who populated the Middle East and the Mediterranean had more rigid customs associated with women. In the Christian Byzantine Empire, the sexes were segregated. Women were not to be seen in public, were veiled, and were given only rudimentary education. As the expanding Islamic empire incorporated these regions, it also assimilated these cultural and social practices.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the particular misogynistic practices that Islam came to adopt were largely inherited from the Christian and Jewish religious customs of the neighboring societies Muslims conquered. The significant point here is that sexist attitudes towards women, far from being unique to Islam, were prevalent among Christians and Jews as well.

The women of this region had seen their rights curtailed under Western influence before. Ahmed shows that a similar fate befell Egyptian women when the Greeks conquered Egypt in 333 BCE.<sup>20</sup> In Greek society, women led segregated lives, cared for the young, and were “veritable children” under the law. The Greek philosopher Aristotle believed that the male “is by nature superior, and the female inferior, and the one rules and the other is ruled.”<sup>21</sup> By contrast, in Egyptian society, women had a high status, especially upper-class women. In the New Kingdom (1570–950 BCE), Egyptian women and men were considered equals under the law. Women had the right to inherit, own, and manage property, marriage laws were egalitarian, and women could move freely and without seclusion. That doesn't mean it was not a male-dominated society—but the *systematic* oppression of women of the kind found in Greek society didn't exist until the Greek conquest of Egypt.

So much for the Orientalist myth of liberty and women's rights as an enduring “core value” of the West from ancient Greece to the present. In reality the great “liberal” Western tradition is not only mired in sexism, but—as the case of Egypt shows—has even played a part in curtailing women's rights in the East. Moreover, it is crucial to remember that the rights that women *do* enjoy anywhere in the world today are the result of struggles waged by women (and men) for those rights. It took no less than a hundred years of bitter struggles for women to win the right to vote in the United States.

### **Myth Three: The “Muslim mind” is incapable of reason and rationality**

In a 2006 speech on “Faith, Reason, and the University,” Pope Benedict XVI equated Catholicism with reason and Islam with violence and a lack of reason. Paraphrasing a fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor, he stated that when a religion (like

Islam) is spread through violence it goes against reason and also against nature, for “not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature.”<sup>22</sup> In making this argument, the Pope joined a long line of Orientalists who have argued that reason, rationality, and science are alien to the world of Islam.

The French Orientalist Ernest Renan, who championed science and reason, stated in his 1883 essay “Islam and Science” that “early Islam and the Arabs who professed it were hostile to scientific and philosophic spirit.”<sup>23</sup> In a lecture at the Sorbonne, he said:

Anyone with any knowledge of current affairs can see quite clearly the actual inferiority of the Muslim countries, the decadence of the states governed by Islam, the intellectual barrenness of the races that derive their culture and education from that religion alone. All those who have traveled to the East or to Africa have been struck by the totally narrow mind of the true believer, the kind of iron band around his head that closes him off completely from science and makes him quite incapable of learning anything or opening his mind to any new ideas.<sup>24</sup>

Renan made sweeping generalizations about the “narrow minds” of people who live in the East and in Africa, who because of their adherence to Islam are an intellectually barren race. What we see here are not only racist assertions about Muslims but also the idea that Islam has stunted scientific growth. When challenged to explain the flourishing of science in Islamic empires in the Middle Ages, Renan replied that the Arabs, like other “Semites,” were incapable of science. The Abbasid caliphate, he added, was essentially Greek and Persian, even if it used Arabic. Thus, it was the “Aryans” who were responsible for this flowering of science.<sup>25</sup>

Cromer, whom we encountered in his pith helmet earlier in Egypt, had this to say in his two-volume book *Modern Egypt*:

The European is a close reasoner; his statements of fact are devoid of ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may not have studied logic; he is by nature skeptical and requires proof before he can accept the truth of any proposition; his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism. The mind of the Oriental, on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description. Although the ancient Arabs acquired in a somewhat higher degree the science of dialectics, their descendants are singularly deficient in the logical faculty. They are often incapable of drawing the most obvious conclusions from any simple premises of which they may admit the truth.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike Renan, Cromer is kind enough to admit that Arabs and Muslims once grasped the “science of dialectics”—but today, he claims, they are completely deficient in logic and reasoning. While this caricature persists even in the early twenty-first century, as the Pope’s statement made clear, biological racism of the kind seen above has more or less been replaced by cultural racism, which will be discussed in later chapters.

While today such blatantly racist arguments as Cromer’s are advanced only by those on the far right, it isn’t hard to see how the overall logic of irrationality pervades many discussions. Often, those who are seen as “terrorists” are presented as crazed, irrational, and fanatical: as individuals who commit untold horrors with no clear reason or motivation.<sup>27</sup> Palestinian suicide bombers, for instance, are presented as rabid lunatics rather than as people driven to extreme measures under conditions of occupation.<sup>28</sup>

Terrorists are never human beings who can be reasoned with; rather, we are told, they are driven by irrational motivations.

The debate on whether Iran should be allowed to have nuclear weapons draws from these arguments. Republican candidate and former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani argued that “the reality is the use of military force against Iran would be very dangerous. . . . It would be very provocative. The only thing worse would be Iran being a nuclear power. It's the worst nightmare of the Cold War, isn't it? The nuclear weapons in the hands of an irrational person, an irrational force [sic]. Ahmadinejad is clearly irrational.”<sup>29</sup> These lines of demarcation are familiar: “irrational” Iran and the “rational” West. Little discussion is devoted to why Iran, as a rational political actor, might want to acquire nuclear weapons; it is, after all, surrounded by nuclear powers such as India, Pakistan, China, Russia, and Israel, and by US bases in Qatar, Iraq, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan, any of which might harbor nuclear weapons.

There are many ways to debunk this myth about Islam, science, and rationality, and many excellent books and articles that tear to shreds the very concepts of biologically defined races and the spurious connection between biology and intellectual capacity. (See, for instance, the various excellent critiques of the book *The Bell Curve*.) Here, however, I will expand in more detail the point raised in chapter 1—that the West would not have gone through the Renaissance had it not been for the scientific contributions made by the Abbasids and the kingdoms of al-Andalus.

During the seventh century, while Europe was mired in the “Dark Ages,” Islam came onto the scene and the Muslim armies established a vast empire that stretched from Central Asia, through parts of Europe, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. The Muslim rulers of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties (661–1258 CE) recognized the advanced development of the kingdoms and cultures they had conquered and took it upon themselves to assimilate and adopt these cultures. They established libraries and translation centers where the great works of science, medicine, and philosophy, both Eastern and Western, were collected and translated. This age of translation was followed by a period of great creativity when a new generation of Muslim thinkers and scientists built upon this knowledge and made their own contributions.

The Persian scholar Ibn Sina—known in Western histories as Avicenna—laid the basis for the study of logic, science, philosophy, politics, and medicine. Ibn Rushd systematized Aristotle's thought so as to introduce rationalism and anti-mysticism to a new audience; he also went beyond Aristotle to promote rational thought as a virtue in itself. Ibn Rawandi wrote several books questioning the basic principles not only of Christianity and Judaism but of Islam as well. Ibn Rawandi belonged to the Mu'tazilite sect, which went so far as to question whether the Qur'an was really a collection of the revelations that Muhammad received from God. They used rationalist thinking, fragments of Greek philosophy, and their own observations to develop theories to explain the physical world.<sup>30</sup> In short, science thrived in the world of the Islamic empires.

When Europe emerged from its period of stagnation, its Renaissance in art, culture, and the sciences drew on this enduring legacy, as European thinkers flocked to the great Muslim libraries not only to re-learn their own history and tradition but also to absorb the further development of this tradition by Muslim thinkers.<sup>31</sup> This history is either ignored or revised by past and present-day Orientalists, who present the “West” as a mythical entity that apparently developed in isolation from the rest of the world.

It is also significant that the Pope, in denouncing Islam for lacking reason, failed to bring up the Catholic Church's hostile opposition to the scientific revolution and to the birth of non-religious and rational ways of understanding the world. The scientific revolution, and more broadly, the Enlightenment, stood in opposition to Christian dogma and was viewed as a threat by the Church. Scientists who employed reason and rationality to explain the physical world were severely punished. Giordano Bruno, who championed the Copernican system of astronomy, was imprisoned for eight years by the Roman and Venetian Inquisitions for refusing to recant his beliefs. He was later burned at the stake. Galileo was similarly brought before the Inquisition and placed under house arrest for the rest of his life.

The Pope's speech is deeply rooted in Orientalist myths; it presents a particular vision of a rational and enlightened "West" while obscuring Christianity's own history of violence. He thus quoted the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus, who said, "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."<sup>32</sup> It is ironic that Joseph Ratzinger—who was elected Pope Benedict XVI after serving as head of the Vatican office of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly known as the Inquisition)—could denounce the spreading of religion through violence and face little or no criticism. This is in no small part due to another deeply entrenched myth that Islam is at its core a violent religion.

#### **Myth Four: Islam is an inherently violent religion**

Barely moments after the twin towers came crashing down, US politicians and pundits began to associate that act of violence with Islam in ways not dissimilar to earlier Orientalist constructions. From the public speeches of George W. Bush and the rants of rightwingers such as Ann Coulter to the proclamations of the Pope and others, a slew of comments too numerous to list here connected the actions of a handful of extremists to the religion of Islam.

This myth has a long history. As we saw in chapter 1, its origins go back to the eleventh century and the start of the Crusades. Its clearest contemporary echo can be found in a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammad published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005. This cartoon featured the Prophet with a bomb on his turban, implying that Islam came into being with violence at its core. Muslims around the world protested angrily, but thanks to the actions of a small number of political Islamists, the protests were interpreted in the West not as legitimate offense against an ancient slur, but as a dogmatic response to the publishing of an image of the Prophet. Liberal columnists endorsed this position, defending the cartoonists on the grounds of free speech, and many US newspapers carried the cartoon on the same grounds, without recognizing or acknowledging that the cartoon itself endorsed the myth of an inherently violent Islam. In another instance, *U.S. News and World Report* featured a historical overview of Islam titled "Spreading the Faith: A Chronology," which internalized this logic. The chronology began with the birth of Muhammad in 570 and ended with the events of 9/11, as if to say that there is an unbroken line of continuity between the two events.<sup>33</sup>

The association of Islam with violence has only continued under the Obama administration. After Major Nidal Hassan turned a gun against his comrades and killed

thirteen of them at Fort Hood in November 2009, the dominant explanation in the media linked Islam to violence.<sup>34</sup> One article in *Forbes* magazine even went so far as to suggest that Hassan's actions could be better understood through the phrase "going Muslim," which describes a process whereby a Muslim "discards his apparent integration into American society and elects to *vindicate his religion* in an act of messianic violence against his fellow Americans" (my italics).<sup>35</sup> The essence of the argument is that Muslims are like ticking time bombs programmed by their religion to inevitably turn to violence. The "Ground Zero mosque" controversy in 2010 extended this association. Those opposed to the construction of an Islamic community center in downtown Manhattan argued that any symbol of Islam was offensive to the victims' families. This argument is premised on the notion that Islam itself was to blame for the events of 9/11, rather than fundamentalist interpretations of the religion.

I will address this myth in two parts. In this chapter, I will discuss Christianity's history of violence if for no other reason than to question why it is so often sidelined, particularly in contrast to Islam's history of violence which is ubiquitous. In chapter 5, I will explain why today's Islamist movements are not the direct descendants of seventh-century Islam, but are instead the product of contemporary historical conditions.

The claim that Islam was spread through war is indeed accurate. In the two decades after the Prophet's death in 632 CE, Muslim armies defeated the two great neighboring empires, the Byzantine and Persian (Sassanid) empires, conquered large segments of their land, and set up an Islamic Empire. The Muslim armies were able to defeat these two powerful empires because constant warfare between the Byzantines and the Persians over the previous century had left the people war-weary. In fact, some villages welcomed the Muslim armies. Once in power (and unlike their orthodox Christian counterparts, who persecuted heretics and ruled through fear, intimidation, and terror), the Muslim invaders gave their subjects the choice of either converting to Islam or paying a tax.

Christianity too rose to dominance through conquest and conversion, first in the Roman world and then in the neighboring areas of Europe, Armenia, Arabia, eastern Africa, and central Asia.<sup>36</sup> As previously noted, the Crusades, waged by European Christians from the eleventh to the thirteenth century, were another violent chapter in Christianity's history.

During the First Crusade, in 1099, the crusaders launched a killing spree after taking control of Jerusalem, murdering almost the entire population of Muslim men, women, and children. The Jews, who fought side by side with the Muslims to defend the city, were not spared either. The crusaders set fire to a synagogue in which Jews had taken refuge, and made sure that every one of them burned to death.<sup>37</sup> The same levels of brutality were seen during the Third Crusade, when King Richard of England (Richard the Lionheart) beheaded thousands of men in cold blood in full view of their armies after a battle. In contrast, after Saladin, the Sultan of Egypt, successfully retook Jerusalem from the crusaders, he forbade acts of vengeance and violence against the crusaders, gave Jews state money to rebuild synagogues, and left churches untouched.<sup>38</sup> This is consistent with the manner in which the Muslim empires treated Christians and Jews. During five hundred years of Muslim reign in Jerusalem, from the seventh century to the eleventh, Christian churches were left alone and Jews were permitted to return and resettle in the area. This harmony was violently interrupted by the Crusades, when Christian armies

wreaked havoc in the region, destroying synagogues and mosques and killing Jews and Muslims.

Christian empires were no less brutal towards their own populations. This ranged from the persecution faced by non-Orthodox Christians in the Byzantine Empire to the Vatican's intolerance toward non-Catholic Christians and Jews. Still to come was the Inquisition, a series of movements orchestrated by the Catholic Church and Christian orthodoxy to reassert the Church's economic control over Europe. The Spanish Inquisition, for instance, is remembered for its utter brutality, mass torture, and the burning of men and women at the stake. Many Jews and Christians fled Europe to escape the Inquisition and sought a new home under the Muslim Ottoman Empire (1299–1922). Ottoman society was far more tolerant; Jews and Christians lived peacefully there, and some attained high positions in the bureaucracy (sometimes even without converting to Islam).

Looking at Christianity's brutal history today, one might well advance an argument that all Catholics are bloodthirsty fanatics. Indeed, this logic would be analogous to the argument that Islam is inherently violent and that Muslims have a "predisposition" towards violence. Yet such a generalization is unthinkable. To my knowledge, no mainstream newspaper or magazine has drawn a straight line between the Crusades and the Nazi Holocaust of Jews, let alone between the birth of Christ and various acts of terrorism committed by Christian fundamentalists. Furthermore, as Talal Asad argues, the same people who call the actions of suicide bombers unjustified legitimize the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which have caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands. In short, only the violence of certain groups is highlighted and coded as a product of those groups' religious affinity.

### **Myth Five: Muslims are incapable of democracy and self-rule**

As we have seen, the notion of "Oriental despotism" was developed in the eighteenth century by writers like Montesquieu, who argued that the hot climate of the East made Orientals supine and submissive and thus unable to resist tyranny. The Orientalists put this theory on a more sound academic footing by stating that despotism was one of the core values of "Islamic civilization." And modernization theory would make it even more scientific by suggesting that "traditional" societies were characterized by hierarchical systems of power. Since, these theorists argued, change would never come from within, it was the burden of the West to civilize, modernize, and democratize the East. This "White Man's Burden" argument has been used, in different forms and guises, by every imperial power since.

Arthur James Balfour, who famously penned the Balfour declaration recognizing Zionists' claim for a state in Palestine, put it this way in 1910:

First of all, look at the facts of the case. Western nations as soon as they emerge into history show the beginnings of those capacities for self-government . . . having merits of their own. . . . You may look through the whole history of the Orientals in what is called, broadly speaking, the East, and you never find traces of self-government. All their great centuries—and they have been very great—have been passed under despotisms, under absolute governments. All their great contributions to civilization—and they have been great—have been made under

that form of government. Conqueror has succeeded conqueror; one domination has followed another; but never in all the revolutions of fate and fortune have you seen one of those nations of its own motivation establish what we, from a Western point of view, call self-government.<sup>39</sup>

Balfour went on to add that Britain was in Egypt therefore not only for the sake of the Egyptians but “for the sake of Europe at large.” This was the burden of the great British Empire, he concluded, and they must bear it with grace and dignity.

What then if the ungrateful native should choose self-rule over the enlightened colonial overlord? What was Balfour’s Britain to make of the movements for national liberation then starting to emerge in Egypt, India, and other colonized nations? Such struggles for self-determination had to be explained away. One way this was done was to assert that the leaders of these movements were misguided agitators who could not understand what was in their own best interests. As Cromer argued, “the real future of Egypt . . . lies not in the direction of a narrow nationalism, which will only embrace native Egyptians . . . but rather in that of an enlarged cosmopolitanism.” In other words, the subject people should shut up and realize that they are better off as members of the global British Empire.

Echoes of such attitudes were to be found in the United States as well. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt, who shared Balfour’s and Cromer’s views of Egyptians, stated that they were “a people of Moslem fellahin who have never in all time exercised any self-government whatever.” A firm believer in race hierarchies and the “White Man’s Burden,” he asserted that Muslims were an inferior people: “It is impossible to expect moral, intellectual and material well-being where Mohammedism is supreme.”<sup>40</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that almost a century later, the Bush administration would use this myth to argue that the United States was bringing democracy to Iraq—a proposition that was supported widely. I was part of an anti-war coalition that opposed the upcoming war on Iraq until the United States invaded; once Bush declared that the United States would stay to rebuild the country and establish democracy, though, I found almost unanimous agreement in the coalition that this was indeed the right thing to do. The United States has similarly stated at various points that one of its goals in Afghanistan is “nation-building”—and liberals as well as anti-war feminists accepted this logic.<sup>41</sup> In reality, the United States has never had an interest in “bringing democracy” to the people of the Middle East, or to any other people for that matter. If anything, it has a long and sordid record of wrecking democratic movements and replacing them with dictatorships.<sup>42</sup>

This trend can be observed in the Middle East in the postwar period. After World War II, the Middle East and North Africa were rocked by national liberation struggles. Between 1932 and 1962, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria all succeeded in shaking the hold of their colonial masters. In the wake of these struggles there was a widespread desire for reform and change in the region, and new political and social forces emerged. Secular Arab nationalism gained a stronghold, but socialist and communist parties also vied for political influence. The United States publicly supported national liberation struggles, but in reality intervened when it saw an opportunity to weaken the hold of Britain and France; its interests did not (and do not) lie in supporting democratic movements on their own terms. In fact, secular nationalists who failed to comply with American interests were reviled. John Foster Dulles, as

Eisenhower's secretary of state, called Nasser and other Arab nationalists like him "pathological" for their suspicion of the West, and referred to the secular nationalist Iranian leader Mohammed Mossadegh as "a wily Oriental."<sup>43</sup> Eisenhower himself believed that secular nationalists were little more than Oriental despots. He said: "If you go and live with these Arabs, you will find that they simply cannot understand our ideas of freedom and dignity. . . . They have lived so long under dictatorships of one form or another, how can we expect them to run successfully a free government?"<sup>44</sup>

In truth, the United States had little interest in "bringing democracy" to the region. Its activity in the Middle East is motivated by one chief objective: namely, to control the oil wealth of that region, at any cost. Consequently, its foreign policy has been directed toward preventing the emergence of any government or movement that might threaten its dominance in the region. In order to achieve this aim it has consistently supported dictators and repressive regimes (such as the Saudi monarchy and others in the Gulf) that can be relied upon to act in the interests of the West. It has further funded, trained, and armed the military and security forces of its dictatorial allies so as to prevent domestic challenges to their rule. This strategy has largely been successful; over the years, various movements for progressive change have been squashed by US-backed dictators. In case that should fail, the United States maintained powerful naval forces and military bases in the region.

When necessary, and where possible, the United States has intervened militarily, such as in 1958 when US Marines briefly entered Lebanon to block an attempt by Arab nationalist forces to topple the pro-Western government in power. It also supported Islamist groups that opposed secular nationalists and communists in various countries, as we will see in the next chapter. Covert CIA operations have served as another handy tool, using assassination attempts, coups, and other such means to dispose of unfriendly governments and political organizations. In 1953, the CIA toppled the secular nationalist Mohammad Mossadegh, who was democratically elected to power in Iran in 1951. Mossadegh's crime was nationalizing the oil industry. He was then replaced by Reza Pahlavi, the Shah, who ruled with an iron fist, murdered and tortured tens of thousands of political dissenters, and abolished all political parties but his own.<sup>45</sup> In this, the United States was simply taking a page from Britain, which similarly militated against constitutional and democratic movements in Persia (and Egypt) at the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>46</sup>

Apparently despite the hot weather, people in the Middle East and North Africa have fought for self-rule and progressive reforms. Yet, when they have done so, instead of receiving American support, they have seen their democratic aspirations squashed. This is, however, an ongoing struggle. In 2011, another wave of mass struggle burst onto the historic stage in the Middle East and North Africa. In a matter of weeks, grassroots movements in Tunisia and Egypt swept from power two pro-Western dictators who had ruled with an iron fist for decades. Democracy and political freedom were key demands in the Arab Spring of 2011.

Not everyone was inspired by this new wave of struggle for political freedom. Democracy will not work, argued the doddering old Orientalist Bernard Lewis; a consultative system that comes out of traditional Islamic culture would be better. As he put it, "This idea that a general election, Western-style, is a solution to all these problems, seems to me a dangerous fallacy which can only lead to disaster. I think we should let

them do it their way by consultative groups.” Lewis was speaking here to Western leaders; he seemed to be advising them that the “problem” of the various peoples’ movements cannot be solved through Western-style elections because the “language of Western democracy is for the most part newly translated and not intelligible to the great masses.” Even in the twenty-first century, the natives, the unwashed masses, still don’t know better. Their systematic organizing and Twitter-based publicity for free elections, more political parties, and greater political freedom are best ignored; instead the West, which still knows best, should guide them to accept Islamic forms of governance for which they are better suited. Old habits die hard.

These five myths have dominated the national political conversation ever since the events of 9/11. Both liberals and conservatives accepted the logic of these myths and propagated them in the years after 2001. To be fair, not all liberals or left-wingers support Islamophobia; some have indeed written and spoken out against anti-Muslim racism. However, these forces are a tiny minority in the United States. Particularly with the rise of the Obama administration, mainstream liberalism wholeheartedly adopted the notion that the United States can indeed act as a force of humanitarianism around the world, and has given its consent to the “war on terror.”

Sasha Abramsky, in a cover article for *The Progressive*, argued that al-Qaeda, a “classically imperialist” force, must be vanquished by the West, if for no other reason than because it hates the West’s best points and wants to undo them, in particular “the pluralism, the rationalism, individual liberty, the emancipation of women, the openness and social dynamism that represent the strongest legacy of the Enlightenment.”<sup>47</sup> If it wasn’t appalling enough that *The Progressive* ran this article, to make matters worse, it did so with a cover page that featured a racist caricature of a large Muslim man (identified by his beard, turban, and menacing scimitar) pitted against a puny white figure fighting what appears to be an uneven battle in the “clash of civilizations.”

From their support for the Afghan war to their acceptance of the notion that the United States would bring democracy to Iraq, liberal imperialists have endorsed and participated in propagating the myths outlined in this chapter. Still, there are differences between liberal and conservative imperialists. For instance, conservative imperialists argue that Islamist organizations around the world are united in a conspiracy to overthrow the West and establish a caliphate from North Africa to Southeast Asia. Liberal imperialists do not see such a pan-Islamic threat, and are willing to work with moderate Islamists. In the following chapters we will flesh out and differentiate the forms of Islamophobia that emerge from conservative and liberal corners.

First, though, we will turn our attention to the new Muslim enemy—the “Islamic terrorist.” It is important to start by noting that Islamist groups were not always seen by the US government as enemies. As we will see in the following chapter, during the Cold War the United States supported the parties of political Islam against secular nationalist and leftist parties it believed to be in the pocket of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the Iranian revolution of 1979, which deposed the US-backed Shah and brought a Shi’a Islamist government to power, meant that the United States had Islamist enemies at the same time as it did allies. In a nutshell, the foreign policy establishment’s view of political Islam has been neither uniform nor consistent. It is to this history that we turn next.

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- <sup>1</sup> John McCain, town hall meeting, Lakehall, MN, October 10, 2008. Footage from Associated Press available from Youtube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmRU3ocIH4>. Accessed August 24, 2011.
- <sup>2</sup> Associated Press, "Obama Says He's Christian, Not Muslim," *The Boston Channel*, October 2008. Available at <http://www.thebostonchannel.com/r/15101761/detail.html>, accessed September 9, 2011.
- <sup>3</sup> *Wikipedia*, s.v. "List of Countries by Muslim Population," last modified September 9, 2011, accessed September 9, 2011.
- <sup>4</sup> Maxime Rodinson, *The Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
- <sup>5</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 296.
- <sup>6</sup> Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Stephen Sheehi, *Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign against Muslims* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2011); Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2009).
- <sup>7</sup> Quoted in Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, 69.
- <sup>8</sup> See for instance Barbara Hodgson, *Dreaming of East: Western women and the exotic allure of the orient* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2005); Reina Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, travel, and the Ottoman harem* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Reina Lewis and Nancy Micklewright, eds., *Gender, Modernity and Liberty: Middle Eastern and Western Women's Writings: A Critical Sourcebook* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1991), all of which have analyzed European women's contributions to discourse on the "East" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What these authors show is that while some of the dominant myths about Muslim women are echoed here, there are also other accounts that contest the notion of Muslim women as horribly oppressed.
- <sup>9</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 152–153.
- <sup>10</sup> Bill Sammon, "Bush Urges Afghans to Help Oust Taliban," *Washington Times*, September 26, 2001, accessed October 26, 2009.
- <sup>11</sup> Malalai Joya, *A Woman Among Warlords* (New York: Scribner, 2009). [PAGE?—Also, Word wants to skip a footnote number here and I can't figure out why.] (I don't have a specific page here—DAO—help!)
- <sup>12</sup> Deepa Kumar, "Heroes, Victims, and Veils: Women's Liberation and the Rhetoric of Empire Post-9/11," *Forum on Public Policy* 4:2 (2008), 23–32.
- <sup>13</sup> N. C. Aizenman, "Nicaragua's Total Ban on Abortion Spurs Critics," *Washington Post*, November 28, 2006, accessed October 28, 2009.
- <sup>14</sup> Dilip Hiro, *Holy Wars: The Rise of Islamic Fundamentalism* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
- <sup>15</sup> Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad* (New York: New Press, 2002).
- <sup>16</sup> Barlas, A. (2002) "Believing women" in *Islam: Unreading patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- <sup>17</sup> See Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), cited in Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 43.
- <sup>18</sup> Rodinson, *Muhammad*, 230.
- <sup>19</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 62.
- <sup>20</sup> The Egyptian civilization (3100–333 BCE) ended with the Greek conquest of Egypt.
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted in Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 29. [Skipping a footnote number here too. It might be good to include her citation of Aristotle.]
- <sup>22</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Lecture of the Holy Father," delivered September 12, 2006 in Regensburg, Germany, transcript available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/15\\_09\\_06\\_pope.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/15_09_06_pope.pdf), 2.
- <sup>23</sup> Quoted in Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 45.
- <sup>24</sup> Quoted in Maxime Rodinson, *Marxism and the Muslim World* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981), 50.
- <sup>25</sup> Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, 79–80.
- <sup>26</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 38.
- <sup>27</sup> Karim H. Karim, *Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Black Rose Books, 2003).
- <sup>28</sup> Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

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- <sup>29</sup> Rudolph Giuliani, remarks delivered at Republican presidential debate, May 3, 2007, in Simi Valley, CA, transcript available at <http://2008election.procon.org/pdf/Rep20070503.pdf>, accessed September 9, 2011.
- <sup>30</sup> Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihad, and Modernity* (New York: Verso, 2002), 54.
- <sup>31</sup> George Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).
- <sup>32</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Lecture of the Holy Father," available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/15\\_09\\_06\\_pope.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/15_09_06_pope.pdf)
- <sup>33</sup> U.S. News and World Report. *Secrets of Islam* (Washington, DC: U.S. News and World Report, 2005).
- <sup>34</sup> Anthony DiMaggio, "Fort Hood Fallout: Cultural Racism and Deteriorating Public Discourse on Islam," *Znet*, December 3, 2009, accessed January 18, 2010.
- <sup>35</sup> Tunku Varadarajan, "Going Muslim," *Forbes*, November 9, 2009, accessed January 18, 2010.
- <sup>36</sup> Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, 19
- <sup>37</sup> Ali, *Clash of Fundamentalisms*, 40.
- <sup>38</sup> Andrew Curry, "The First Holy War," *U.S. News and World Report*, August 23, 2005.
- <sup>39</sup> Quoted in Said, *Orientalism*, 32–33.
- <sup>40</sup> Quoted in Little, *American Orientalism*, 15.
- <sup>41</sup> After a week in Afghanistan, Medea Benjamin of Code pink took an about turn in its antiwar position. See Aunohita Mojumdar, "Code Pink rethinks its call for Afghanistan pull out," *Christian Science Monitor*, Oct 6, 2009, [www.csmonitor.com](http://www.csmonitor.com).
- <sup>42</sup> Lens, *Forging of the American Empire*; William Blum, *Rogue State* (Maine: Common Courage Press, 2000); Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2006).
- <sup>43</sup> Quoted in Little, *American Orientalism*, 28.
- <sup>44</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*, 27–28.
- <sup>45</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- <sup>46</sup> Goldschmidt and Davidson, *Concise History of the Middle East*, 190-93, and 198-201.
- <sup>47</sup> Sasha Abramsky, "Our Al Qaeda Problem," *The Progressive*, October 2005.