

Islam, its origins and impact on western thought

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I have spoken about Islamic/West relations to many groups since September 11. It is unfortunate that it takes an event such as September 11 to awaken people's interest and to alert them to the fact that there is a major player in the world today — Islam — about which most Western people know very little. If nothing else, September 11 brings home, as nothing else could, the fact that we cannot ignore Islam and the whole problem of its relation to the West. September 11 forced the issue. The issue had lurked as a sub-current throughout most of the twentieth century, obscured by the Cold War and the challenges of global Marxism. With the collapse of communism — and the success of the Iranian revolution not long before that — the historical conflict between capitalism and communism begins to appear more as an aberration that only briefly interrupted the much more long-term conflict between two opposing civilisations: Western — with its Christian background — and Islamic. This is indeed one of the most intractable conflicts in any history, and it remains ongoing, today threatening the very stability of the world in which we live and, if you listen to alarmist voices, threatening our very future survival.

This morning I want to share some of my reflections on this history of conflict and some thoughts on the nature of the conflict itself. This is not something we are encouraged to do. Our history, our culture, our education system, our media — where they have anything to say at all — proliferate definite views about Islam and the Islamic/West problem, but they do not encourage any penetrating and sympathetic enquiry. During the Cold War we were not encouraged to study Russian history so as to reach a deeper appreciation of the peculiar and tragic cir-

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cumstances of the Russian people — our enemy. In conflict situations, enemies are given simple tags, are stripped of the complexity inherent in human beings, and are treated as an unknowable, alien 'other'. It takes no insight to realise that, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, Islam has replaced communism as the perceived threat to our way of life; as 'the enemy'.

In the late nineteenth century there were Christian voices that confidently predicted the demise of Islam. At the turn of that century most of the Muslim world was

under colonial rule and the numbers of pilgrims both-ering to make the journey to Mecca every year numbered, they say, about 30,000 and declining. The resurgence of Islam is one of the great movements of the twentieth century and in the long run is probably of greater significance than the rise and fall of communism. It is also, of course — unlike communism — just another turn of events in an already long and complex history; just another episode in the ever-changing fortunes of the protagonists in this protracted dispute.

Islam did not wither away in the twentieth century. Colonial domination of the Muslim world did not end the matter. The resurgence of Islam has ensured that there is at least one more round — probably many more — to go. I have been thinking around this problem, thinking long and hard about Islam, for over ten years. I have concluded that, while it is easy enough to get a sound understanding of the principles and practices of Islam, and easy enough to track the history of Islamic civilisation's conflict with the West, with Europe and Europeans, deep reflection on these issues takes us into forbidden or at least dangerous intellectual territory and raises some profoundly unsettling questions about self-identity. It's strange

to relate that my extended studies of Islam have told me much more about the West — about the occidental tradition, my own tradition — than about Islam itself. I will explain.

I think it is fundamentally wrong to consider Islam as the 'other', as an alien civilisation that is quite different to and distinct from our own, the West. (Conversely, it is also quite wrong for Muslims to think of the West as an antithetical civilisation, too.) The most fundamental move in anti-Islamic propaganda is to characterise it as something different from and unrelated to our own tradition. When I speak to community groups about Islam, this is the wall of resistance that I encounter first and foremost. And the biggest impression I make is when I relate the countless ways in which Islam is directly and intimately connected with Christianity and Judaism, and hence with the whole Judeo-Christian order that, for better or worse, is at the heart of Western civilisation.

People expect the Islamic tradition to be as different from the Western tradition as is, say, the Chinese tradition, or the Hindu. There are no doubt connections between the Chinese, Hindu and other traditions and the West — no civilisation exists in isolation — but these civilisations are not directly and intimately linked to the West in the way that Islam is. People are surprised to find this. People are surprised to find characters from the Bible in the Koran. People are surprised to find that Muslims not only know of Jesus but count him as one of their own, and admit the Virgin birth — the prophet Isa, son of Mary, but who was his father? People are surprised to find that Arab-speaking Christians refer to God as 'Allah'; they imagine that Allah is an exotic God, as different from the Judeo-Christian deity as say Shiva or some other deity from the Hindu pantheon. Very commonly people tell me that they thought Islam was a type of paganism and are surprised by the claim that it is Abrahamic, the primordial religion of Abraham. People are surprised to discover that, in fact, Islam comes from the same universe of ideas as Judaism and Christianity — it is, in fact, nothing more than a third point of view of the same material. We commonly speak of the Judeo-Christian tradition — I just did. This designation excludes Islam. To be more accurate we should speak of the Judeo-Christeo-Islamic tradition, characterised, as it is, by monotheism, a common prophetic heritage, and such features as

revealed Books — scripture — People of the Book, as the Koran says. Yet our whole cultural heritage works to either actively exclude or systematically ignore the place of Islam within this broad religious tradition such that people — ordinary people, educated people — are genuinely surprised to find that Islam shares a common heritage with Christianity and Judaism.

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The mutual misunderstandings between Islam and the West typically begin with one side casting the other side as exotic, strange, alien, foreign. Your Muslim fundamentalist will tell you that the modern West is a godless monster against which the divine mandate of Islam must struggle to the death. Fanatics, fundamentalists, propagandists, will always emphasise the differences. I want to emphasise the similarities. Since September 11, I have spent a lot of time explaining to people that there is

a lot more Christianity and Judaism in Islam than they imagine. But I would also like to add that there is a lot more Islam in the West than we imagine, too. Islam not only has common sources with the western tradition — or the Judeo-Christian edifice that has been the core of that tradition; it has a common history, too. You can read a hundred history books and not realise this. There are books on European history. There are books on Islamic history. Too little attention is given to their shared history.

To talk about origins for a moment, the pivotal event in this story — indeed it might almost seem like the pivotal event in world history at the moment — was the clash between the Roman Empire and the Jewish State in the ancient world, and specifically the Jewish War, when the Romans dismantled that state, razed the Temple, occupied Jerusalem, and ended the Jewish priesthood. This was the culmination of a bitter clash between the Near Eastern Levantine world and the expanding, ambitious Romans (and before them the Greeks). Two religions were born from this terrible clash. The Romans savagely repressed the Jewish zealots, as we know from the famous episode at Masada, and they sponsored instead accommodationists, the Rabbis, who offered the Romans a relatively benign, inward-looking Judaism with no political ambitions and no organised priesthood. Thus was born Judaism as we have known it, as distinct from ancient or Second Temple Judaism, which was — as the Dead Sea Scrolls have shown us in a spectacular fashion — very different

from the Judaism post-Temple. The Romans, of course, would have preferred that Judaism, like other ethnic ideologies, just disappeared in the great Roman melting pot. In this period Jews constituted some ten per cent of the population of the Empire. The challenge was to integrate this minority or, as the Rabbis proposed, to separate and isolate them as distinct and well-behaved enclaves.

This is the context in which the second religion, Christianity, was born. It presents itself as a continuation of Judaism, or rather the whole theme of its literature is supersession: it supersedes, or purports to supersede, Judaism! I find its literature — from the Gospel of Matthew on — profoundly anti-Semitic, which is odd because it is supposed to have been written by Jews. More likely, it seems to me, it is another Roman-sponsored religious movement, if not a Roman invention, serving much the same purpose as the first — namely, to diffuse the Roman's volatile Jewish problem. St Paul gives away the main agenda: Christ frees us from the Jewish Law, he says, so now we're free to obey the Roman law. 'Render under Caesar what is Caesar's,' says Jesus, the peaceful Jew, the very opposite of the hotheads and fanatics who fought and lost the Jewish War. (Throughout the Gospels, you'll note, Jesus restrains his hotheaded followers. 'Put down thy sword, Peter!' The Gospels can be read as pro-Roman, counter-revolutionary literature. Pilate didn't want to crucify Christ just as, in Roman propaganda, Titus and Vespasian didn't really want to destroy the Temple...)

But all of this was very, very messy. There was no clean settlement. I tend to see contemporary events very much in the light of those terrible ancient events, events which still haunt us. When ex-General Ariel Sharon went within the ancient Temple precinct — where the Holy of Holies is supposed to have been — with his bodyguards, and provoked the current Palestinian uprising, he was calling on the ghosts of the Jewish War: he appealed to hatreds that extend back that far. There was no Islam then, of course, but something of the Islamic point of view, and the spirit or ethos of Islam was certainly active and abroad.

A number of scholars have observed how ideas, motifs, themes, even words from the Dead Sea Scrolls make a surprising reappearance in Islam (in Shi'ite Islam especially, as it happens). I correspond with a woman from central Saudi Arabia. Her study is the passage of religious vocabulary from the Aramaic of the Scrolls into the Arabic of the Koran. She finds real continuity. Her surmise is that Jews — not the Rabbinic Jews, but the nationalists, the zealots, those who

lost, and did not write the histories — escaped the destruction of the Jewish War by fleeing into the deserts of Arabia. The Bedouin come in to her *Wadi*, she tells me, in the dry season. They have very rich and ancient oral traditions that are certainly pre-Islamic, if not older. In their poetry, she says, they sing of the fallen city and its temple — sure references all the way back to the Jewish War. The locals joke that these Bedouin are 'more Jewish than Jews' and were the 'original Jews', she says. (This is just outside of Riyadh.)

In any case, the passage of ideas from early Christian times to the time of Muhammad and the rise of Islam is clear and demonstrable. In the Acts of the Apostles, the early church tackles the problem of which laws converts to Christianity must obey. Do male converts need to be circumcised, for instance? This was a volatile issue in the early church, according to the docu-

ments of the New Testament. In the Acts of the Apostles the problem is taken to James, called the brother of Jesus, apparently the head of the Jerusalem church (or some such office). He gives Paul a letter to take to the Gentiles that says that, in short, some Jewish laws — such as the prohibition of drinking blood — prevail, while others don't apply. But from his Epistles it seems Paul never delivered this message to the Gentiles. Instead, he claimed an apostleship of his own and developed his own radical doctrine which amounted, as I say, to dispensing with Jewish law altogether and replacing it with civil law. Remarkably, though, centuries later, exactly these Jamesean legal rulings, as recorded in the Acts and as ignored in Paul's letters, reappear in Islam, in Islam's food regulations and general approach to law.

Islam gives expression to an unfulfilled potential within early Christianity. Many groups, and points

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of view that became known as heresies as orthodoxy crystallised, retreated to the fringes of the Roman Empire. The destruction of the Temple and the end of Second Temple Judaism left religious chaos that lasted for centuries. Out of it came Rabbinic Judaism, as I have said, and orthodox Christianity — a very Gentile, pro-Roman affair that claims to supersede Judaism. But another, unsatisfied point of view gathered along the outskirts of the Empire in such places as central Arabia. This was a Jewish-Christian or Ebionite point of view. The early Christian heretics, called the Ebionites (the Poor Ones) and also the Nestorians, Monophysites and others, bear resemblance to what became Islam. Islam, in a very real sense, was the gathering together of forces left unsatisfied by the Roman attempt to settle the religious chaos left in the vacuum of the aftermath of the Jewish War and the destruction of the ancient Jewish state. The Dead Sea Scrolls are potent evidence that there were points of view abroad in late Second Temple Judaism that did not survive, or were not supposed to survive, the Roman settlement. Just as the Scrolls, no doubt, were not supposed to survive, Islam was not supposed to happen. Islam is a point of view that was supposed to have been extinguished, negated by Rabbinic Judaism and Gentile Christianity.

In contrast to the 'otherness' that is imposed upon Islam — as I mentioned earlier — Christianity has actually had a hard time coming to terms with Islam's distinctness. The first responses to Islam by Christians were to regard it as a Christian heresy. In fact, it was recognisable as such because it gave a home to so many ideas from the Ebionites and other early Christians who lost out in the solidification of orthodox Christian doctrine — trinitarianism especially. For much of history Christianity has understood Islam as a heresy, an errant species of Christianity itself, not as a distinct and different religion. Indeed, mustering hatreds that go back to the ancient schisms, Christianity has portrayed Islam as the heresy of heresies, an umbrella for every known type of heresy plus a few new ones. It has understood the success and rapid

spread of Islam as a type of hybrid vigour — according to the heresiologists, when you cross heresies you get new and more vigorous ones. And Islam is the prime instance of this!

Here I want to underline the ambivalence in the Western approach to Islam. On the one hand there is the refusal to accept that it is part of the same broad tradition. On the other hand there is the refusal to admit that it is a distinct and different thing, a

legitimate religion in its own right. You get this revealing ambivalence — it is often misunderstood as confusion — in medieval texts especially. Islam is seen as a Christian heresy in the same breath it is condemned as a vile paganism, exotic and alien. This has been an important pattern in Western thinking and it persists as an undercurrent, at least, to this day. The heart of the problem is that Islam is both 'same' and 'other'. It is familiar, yet strange. At different times Western res-

ponses to Islam will emphasise one or the other, but the problem or tension of 'sameness' and 'otherness' is always there. I think it is an ever-present dynamic.

It manifests in different ways. Many things can be understood, constructively understood, in these terms. For instance, there was a time when Islamic civilisation had developed a fantastic intellectual order based upon their selection of the classical Greek and Latin corpus, and when the West (then Christendom), in the inferior position, wanted to acquire that knowledge. This was, for a Christian world, an intellectually perilous undertaking because it meant entering into sympathy — a requisite degree of sympathy — with the infidels — at least so as to learn Arabic, study their texts and make off with the booty of science and philosophy. The problem was how to divorce the classical core from the Islamic — and heretical — vehicle through which it came back into Europe. This is a 'sameness' and 'otherness' problem. Europeans had to acquire Muslim learning, admitting a common intellectual life and a similar heritage, while maintaining the aura of the Muslims' 'otherness'. The task was to learn what the Muslims had



learned without actually learning anything about them.

There are a series of letters from the so-called Father of the Renaissance, Petrarch. Petrarch is an old man in these letters and sick and in need of medicine, but he refuses the superior medicines of the Arabs, turns away Arab doctors and rails, with incredible vehemence, against all things Arabic. More importantly, though, it is in these letters that he reveals a key feature of his own pioneering work, namely that it was this hatred of all things Arabic that spurred him to rediscover the Greek and Roman classics. 'Why should Europeans get their medical knowledge from the Arabs?' he asks. 'They got it from the Greeks and Romans, and we *are* the Greeks and Romans! We don't need to study the Arabs. All we need to do is rediscover their sources!' I want to argue that this was close to the heart of Petrarch's motivations and one of the things that led him to tour Europe hunting through old libraries for classical works to bring back into circulation. I want to argue that Petrarch's Renaissance project — the rediscovery of the classics — was designed to circumvent Islamic learning just as, in an analogous way, Christopher Columbus's journey west was designed to circumvent the Islamic-dominated passages to the East. The genius of Petrarch is that he sidestepped the Muslims. He went around them. He rendered them irrelevant. He helped Europeans free themselves from a position of intellectual dependence upon Muslim learning.

Petrarch's specific grievance, other than a general hatred of the Muslims (which was not unusual in itself), was against the Averoeists, the European followers of the Muslim philosopher Averoes, or Ibn Rushd (to give him his Arabic name). Petrarch saves his sharpest barbs and nastiest insults for that class of medieval intellectuals who *admired* all things Arabic and Islamic and carried the banner of Averoesism amid controversy in the University of Paris, the Medical University in Padua, and other centres of learning. Strangely, though, this Averoesism wasn't really a true image of Arabic philosophy, and in fact it wasn't even the philosophy of Ibn Rushd who, no doubt, would have been amazed by the philosophies ascribed to him in Europe. The fact is that the Europeans didn't know very much about Ibn Rushd at all, but what they lacked in facts they made up for in fiction and imagination. Ibn Rushd was not even a hugely influential philosopher in the Muslim world, but his name caught the imaginations of medieval Europe's intellectual malcontents, who attributed to him their own assortment of radical theories.

Chief among these was the so-called 'double truth' position, which maintains that scripture and reason yield not the same truth but two different types of

truth. The truth of scripture, that is, is not necessarily compatible with the truths that human beings can fathom with their own reasoning faculties. This idea was dynamite in the Christian Middle Ages and it was attributed — wrongly — to Ibn Rushd, who was supposed — wrongly — to be the greatest of the Muslim doctors because — wrongly again — he was the supposed Great Commentator on Aristotle. The great encyclopedic work of medieval Aristotelean Christian thought, the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas, was written for no other purpose than to demonstrate, contra Averoes, that the Christian faith is perfectly lucid, reasonable and rational and at one with the truths that the minds of men can nut out without divine assistance. Averoesism — a philosophy spuriously ascribed to the Muslims — would have rendered Christianity a mystery religion. The fight against Averoesism — in which Petrarch's was the winning move — forced Europeans into a long meditation upon the nature of reason, as opposed to revelation.

It is often said that the West, compared to other civilisations and intellectual orders, places a remarkable emphasis on reason and the processes of the rational mind — some say at the expense of other faculties. This comes, no doubt, from the Graeco-Roman and Socratic heritage, but the provocation of Averoesism — the War on Averoesism, it would be called today — was a crucial, overlooked factor in this. At a later date the Philosophies of the Enlightenment — Voltaire and co — often took a sympathetic view of Islam and saw it as the nearest thing to a rational religion. Its simple creed and stark monotheism had produced a religion that had embraced the sciences as none other. In contrast, Christianity, with its Trinity and its miracles and its history of burning scientists, is inherently irrational and cannot be reconciled with reason, they argued. In some ways the Enlightenment took this long meditation on the nature of reason and, as Christendom gave way to Europe, sundered it from its Christian context.

The curious and telling thing is that many things that are benign in the Muslim world, like the works of Ibn Rushd, create upheaval and revolution when they move into Europe. There is a story by Rudyard Kipling in which a certain monk, a Brother Roger, arrives at a remote northern-Spanish monastery and enquires about the strange misshapen creatures depicted in the illuminated manuscripts prepared by the monks there. At length the abbot of the monastery shows him their secret, a strange glassware device stolen from the infidels which, when you put a drop of water under it, reveals miraculously strange wriggling creatures never seen before. The scientific-minded Brother Roger is fascinated by this tale, but

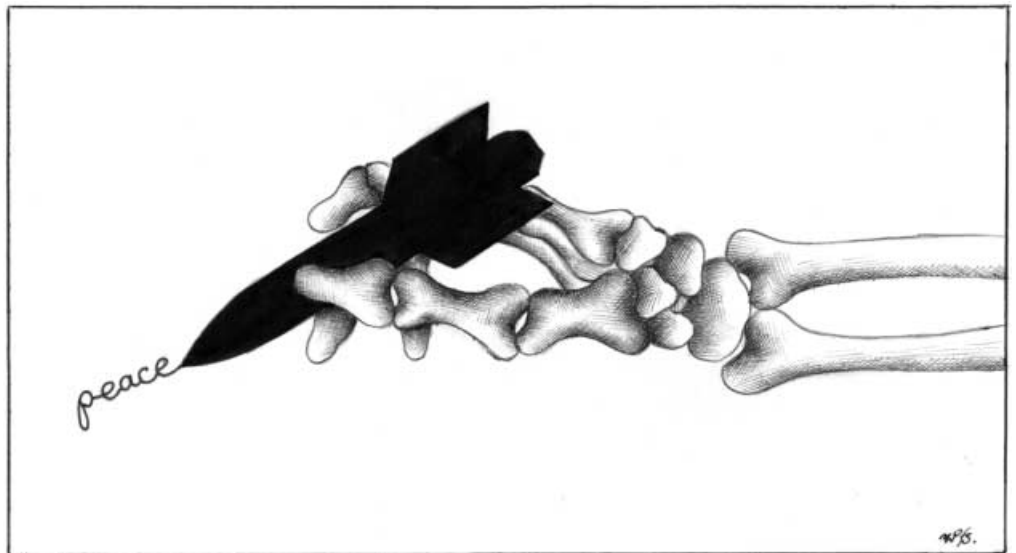
his curiosity is dashed when another monk, alarmed by the glassware device and its powers, grabs it and smashes it, crying that the evil magic of the infidels will be the death of us all. Ideas — such as scientific ideas — that were benign in the Muslim world created upheaval when they moved into Europe. And yet Europeans, Christians, despite this sort of horror at all things that come from the Muslims — lest they be tainted with heresy — greedily acquired Muslim know-how.

Encounters with the Muslim order stimulated the secular world, too. While the church remained fixed in its ancient patterns of hostility and anathema towards the Saracens — arch-heretics — the courts of Europe, less interested in theological purity than ecclesiastics, embraced such Islamic imports as cloth, silk, spices, stories, games, amusements, music; the paraphernalia of civilisations. It was over relationships to the Islamic

world — and its wealth of new things, new ideas, new tastes — that church and lay societies grew increasingly estranged in the aftermath of the Crusades. The Crusades, it's strange to relate, were a series of military misadventures, and yet, having lost every battle, Europe won the war. At the beginning of the Crusades, Europe was a miserable flea-ridden backwater. At the end of the Crusades, Europe was a thriving sophisticated civilisation that overtook Islamic civilisation, which began its long, slow period of decline, a period of decline that continued through to the twentieth century interrupted only by the arrival of the Turks on the scene and, as it were, a second wind for Islam.

This is the context for what I see as one of the most important, most complex, but least appreciated points of contact between Islamic and western civilisations: the Protestant Reformation. I feel that if this point of contact were better appreciated then we would have a clearer picture of some of the forces that have shaped and are shaping today's world. To speak of shared history, and shared ideas, we could talk about any number of points of contact such as, for instance, the 800 years that Muslims were in Spain and produced there one of the most brilliant and fertile societies where, moreover, Muslims, Christians and Jews lived in relative harmony for an extended length of time.

But I want to conclude by looking at a different and neglected point of contact, which is Protestantism and, in particular, Calvinist Protestantism — because in terms of religious typology, Islam and certain forms of Calvinist Protestantism are remarkably similar. The parallels should be too obvious to mention, but in ten years of reading around these themes I have only seen them hinted at by scholars once or twice. Islam has no priesthood. Calvinism has no priesthood. Islam has no institution of celibacy or monasticism. The



Protestants have no institution of celibacy or monasticism. Islam is rigorously anionic or iconoclastic in its religious art. So too were the Protestants. Islam forbids alcohol, so too Calvinist Christianity, the Gospel miracle of turning water into wine notwithstanding. Strict Islam takes a dim view of music and dance and vain pastimes; so too Calvinism. Sociologically, Islam is a religion of bourgeois traders. So too the Calvinists. More importantly, we have the emphasis on the Book. The Protestants treat the Bible as the Muslims treat the Koran, as the actual Logos, the Divine Word made manifest, whereas in Catholic and orthodox Christianity Christ himself is the Logos, not the text. There is also a strong Unitarian theme in Protestantism, a rejection of the Trinity.

Luther's writings on Islam are fascinating. He is often openly sympathetic and praises the Turks for their discipline, their fervour, their faith and so on, which, he says, put Christians to shame. You can read dozens of history books on the Reformation and not realise that the whole context of the Protestant revolt was the threat of Turkish incursions into central Europe. The Pope called for a crusade, the age-old pattern of Christian response. The genius of Luther was in breaking out of that pattern, the Crusade, as a means of dealing with the Muslim challenge. Against the Pope's call for a crusade against the Turks,

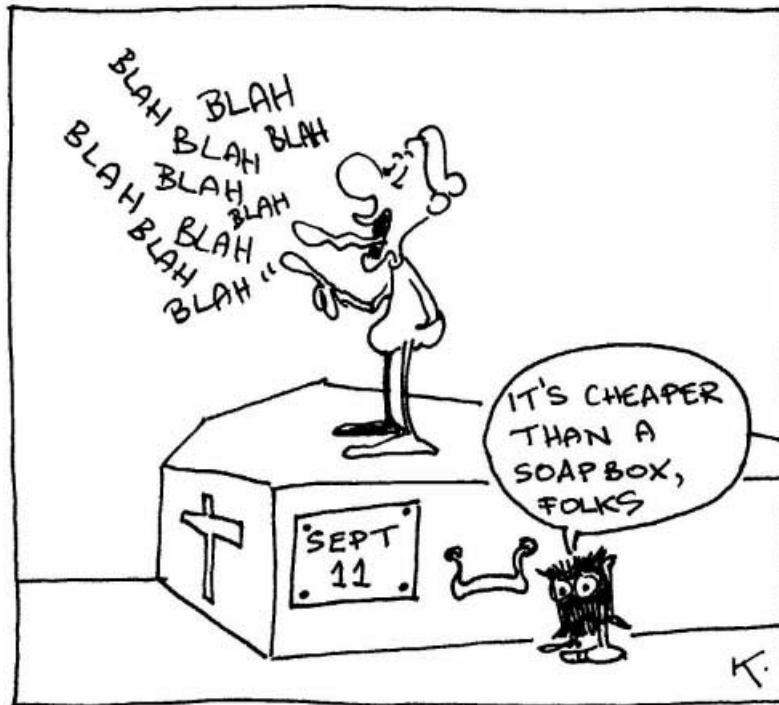
Luther argued that the best way to deal with them was for Christians to reform themselves. It was the Muslim threat that made this such an urgent task and which gave impetus to the Reformers. In order to compete, the Christians needed a new, sleek, streamlined Christianity, unencumbered by extraneous ritualism, an obsolete agricultural calendar and all the pious overgrowth of the Middle Ages.

The Reformers turned again to the early phases of Christianity and refreshed those points of view that had been pushed aside by the formation of orthodoxy and the monolithic church. The Reformers revived the diversity of the early church. Whether by design or by accident, many Protestant groups came out looking suspiciously like an Islamified Christianity, even down to the black robes and wimples. Protestantism, I want to say, is a type of Islamified Christianity, or at least a Christianity modified so as to better compete with the Infidels. In the to'ing and fro'ing between the two orders, Islamic and Christian, the Protestant reformation snookered the Muslims, so to speak; removed their advantage. The typological parallels between Calvinism and Islam are, as I say, rather obvious once they are pointed out, and the Turks were pushing into Europe in exactly that period, yet definite historical connections between the Calvinists and the Muslims are difficult to establish. I have to consider the fascinating possibility that the connections between Calvinism and Islam are ahistorical, or that the historical connections have been culturally repressed; we just can't see them.

In any case, the undoubted similarities between

species of Protestantism and Islam cast, I think, a new light on America's relationship with Islam. America is the quintessential Protestant experiment. The Plymouth Brethren who founded America were perhaps among *the* most Islam-like of Calvinist groups. Remember always that by Islam-like I do not mean sympathetic; on the contrary, if such groups can be seen as a type of counter-Islam within Christianity

then they will be fundamentally, absolutely hostile to that which they shadow. We should not underestimate the influence and reach of such Calvinist Christianity in America today. When President Bush declared, in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 'Who is not for us is against us,' he was appealing to a key scripture in that American Bible-based tradition. He was pushing those Ply-



mouthern Brethren buttons.

The importance of these observations, I feel, is that they counter such arguments as one hears very often today to the effect that Islam and the West are irreconcilable opposites in collision. This is the now-common Clash of Civilisations thesis. My response to that thesis is to say that instead of thinking of Islam and the West as opposites in collision, it is better to think of them as contending similars. Once again it comes down to similarities and differences and which of them we choose to see. Instead of thinking of Islam and the West as civilisations clashing I advocate seeing it — as Hichim Jait, the Algerian scholar, said — as a battle raging in a single system. That is my main point this morning: the Islam-and-West problem is best seen as a battle raging within a single system.