

# The West's Urgent Need to Understand the True Nature of Islam

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The 12 June 2018 issue of Crisis Magazine published an article by William Kilpatrick entitled, “*The Burqa, the Baker, and the Bishops.*”<sup>i</sup> He explained that leaders of the Catholic Church, beginning with Pope Francis himself all the way down to his bishops in the West, regard Islam merely as a religious faith. Yet the history of the last fourteen centuries proves that Islam is an amalgam of religion and state in one indivisible entity.

In our study of various cultures, we tend to see them through the prism of our own worldview. The proper way, however, is to look at them from within their own worldviews. In his Introduction to *The Arabs in History* the late Bernard Lewis (31 May 1916 – 19 May 2018,) cautioned against using Western categories of thought, when studying the history of the Arabs and of Islam.

“The European writer on Islamic history labours under a special disability. Writing in a Western language, he necessarily uses Western terms. But these terms are based on Western categories of thought and analysis, themselves deriving in the main from Western history. Their application to the conditions of another society formed by different influences and living in different ways of life can at best be an analogy and may be dangerously misleading. To take an example: such pairs of words as Church and State, spiritual and temporal, ecclesiastical and lay, had no real equivalents in Arabic until modern times, when they were created to translate modern ideas; for the dichotomy which they express was unknown to mediaeval Muslim society and unarticulated in the mediaeval Muslim mind. The community of Islam was Church and State in one, with the two indistinguishably interwoven; its titular head, the Caliph, was at once a secular and religious chief. Such words as ‘religion,’ state, ‘sovereignty,’ democracy,’ mean very different things in Islamic context and indeed varying meanings from one part of Europe to another. The use of such words, however, is inevitable in writing in English and for that matter in writing in the modern languages of the Orient, influenced for close on a century by Western modes of thought and classification. In the following pages they are to be understood at all times in their Islamic context and should not be taken as implying any greater degree of resemblance to corresponding Western institutions than is specifically stated” (pp. 19, 20).

Kilpatrick referred to the Danish Government’s ban of the Islamic full-face veil in public, and asked, “what if a burqa ban was proposed in the U.S.? How would American Catholics respond? Answer: even if a bishop should have personal qualms about the burqa, he would still likely defend the right to wear it. That’s because the USCCB’s policy on religious liberty is more or less the same as Ben Franklin’s policy for resisting the British—namely, ‘If we don’t all hang together, we shall all hang separately.’” He then concluded, “Muslims have few of the rights enjoyed by citizens in the West. Moreover, many of the stipulations of sharia law are outright violations of the Bill of Rights.”

Even though some Western ideologues might accuse Professor Kilpatrick for spreading Islamophobia when he speaks like that, they would be off the mark. His evaluation of Islam is identical with what certain Arab-Muslim intellectuals are saying and they should not be overlooked. In fact, several Arabs are dismissing Islam altogether, regarding it as irrelevant for our time.

Lately, thanks to the Internet, I have been able to “attend” some public presentations in Egypt and in Tunisia, where men and women gather to listen to lecturers who boldly assert that Islam is outdated; and that such slogans as “*al-Islam saleh li culli zaman wa makan*” (Islam is valid for all time and in all places,) must be relegated to the dustbin of history. To illustrate my point, I cite the views of two Arab scholars, the Tunisian Youssef Seddik, and the Egyptian Sayyid Al-Qemany.

Dr. Youssef Seddik was born in Tozeur, Tunisia in 1943. He has several academic degrees and has lectured at prestigious French universities on modern Islamic philosophy. In 2004, he published “*Nous n'avons jamais lu le Coran,*” (*We have never read the Qur'an,*) in which he questioned the politics of Islam. He has appeared on the TV Channel *Al-Hurra*, where he advocated the theory that the printed copy of the Qur'an, known in Arabic as the “*Mus-haf*” was a human product, and must not be equated with the original manuscript of the Qur'an.<sup>ii</sup> Therefore, the printed text may be studied with the tools of modern scientific and philosophical principles.

Among other things, Dr. Seddik calls for the abolition of the prestigious one thousand-year old *Al-Azhar University Mosque* in Cairo, Egypt, and its equivalent Tunisian center, *Al-Zaytuna Mosque* in Tunis.

Speaking on *Al-Hurra* on 13 June 2018, Dr. Seddik claimed that “*from the death of the Prophet Muhammad and to this day, our history has been a pack of lies.*” He discussed the incompatibility of the Quran with modern man-made laws, which rendered the religious texts obsolete.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxIe9zoViDc>

In another interview, he said, “Every Muslim Believes the Entire Earth Must Become Muslim. But I Like the American Moderation and Coexistence - Something You Rarely Find in Non-Western Countries.”

<https://www.memri.org/tv/paris-based-tunisian-philosopher-youssef-seddik-our-history-pack-of-lies/transcript>

In Egypt Dr. Sayyid Al-Qemany has been campaigning for a radical reinterpretation of Islam. He heads a secular political party in Egypt and has clashed with the officials at *Al-Azhar*. As a result, they declared him as a *Kaffir* (Unbeliever.) He agrees with that designation, since he doesn't believe in the injunctions of the Sharia, nor in the mythological aspects of the Qur'an.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4c3vhggFOY>

Recently, at a meeting with his supporters he stated” “*We Have Tried Islamic Rule for 1,400 Years and It Has Failed.*”

<https://www.memri.org/tv/egyptian-author-sayyid-al-qimni-we-have-tried-islamic-rule-1400-years-and-it-has-failed/transcript>

In referring to the radical critique of Islam by these two prominent Arab scholars, I am not implying that their views have become generally acceptable among the overall Arab communities. I am simply drawing attention to these movements, to highlight that change has become an important feature of Arab societies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; even though it has impacted mainly the young educated classes.

At the same time, to keep our understanding of contemporaneous Islam balanced, it is necessary to consider the impact of some retrograde movements occurring in two Muslim-majority lands: Turkey and Indonesia.

On Sunday, the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2018, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's victory in Turkey's presidential and parliamentary elections became clear. The process of the re-Islamization of the Turkish Republic will gather momentum. Gradually, Erdoğan will attempt to dismantle the secular edifice that was built by Atatürk, which functioned well for decades, thanks to the Officer Corps and the independent Judiciary.

Two weeks later, The Wall Street Journal reported that "Turkish authorities dismissed more than 18,000 state employees for alleged ties to terror groups Sunday, a dramatic extension of mass purges launched after the 2016 failed military coup as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is about begin a new term with vastly expanded executive powers."

The changes that have been happening in Indonesia must also be noted. It has the largest Muslim population of any country and has had a tumultuous history since its independence from Dutch colonial rule in the aftermath of WWII. Its first leader, Sukarno was a secular activist and a major leader in the Non-Aligned Movement.<sup>iii</sup>

In October of 1965, a coup attempt resulted in General Suharto assuming absolute powers in the country. It was followed by a well-organized plan to purge the country of the Communist threat. A month after taking power the military began slaughtering communists and alleged communists in Java and in Bali. Some claim that as many as one million people were killed. It was a veritable blood bath. For several years after the purge of communists, the persecution of alleged communists went on.

With the destruction of the secularist system initiated by Sukarno, Indonesia has experienced a revival of a rigid and fundamentalist Islam. On 9 May 2017, an Indonesian court found the Christian governor of the country's capital, Jakarta, guilty of blasphemy against Islam, sentencing him to two years in prison. The case is widely seen as a test of religious tolerance and free speech.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/09/world/asia/indonesia-governor-ahok-basuki-tjahaja-purnama-blasphemy-islam.html>

These major events have not seemed to dent the West's prevailing idea that Islam is purely a religious faith. On the other hand, it should be obvious that for the last 1400 years, the *Futuh* (Arabic term for the Islamic conquests that began in 632 A.D.) have proved that Islam is much more than a religion. It did not persuade adherents by the strength of its teachings alone but conquered by the sword not the word. The historical amnesia that afflicts so many Western

leaders about the true nature of Islam is reflected in the policies their governments have adopted. Muslim communities are shown deference when governments allow them to practice their beliefs and traditions even when they conflict with Western law. As a British blogger recently put it,

“The steady influx of Islamic people is beginning to have a deleterious effect on British society, in some areas more than others, but a ‘foothold’ has been gained by Islam in the UK. A great many people in the UK are deeply concerned about the effect Islamic people are having on their homeland.”

<https://www.quora.com/Are-the-people-of-UK-concerned-about-the-rise-in-Muslim-population>

Lately, however, there have been signs of change on the continent. Germany's new interior minister, Horst Seehofer, in his first interview since being sworn in on 14 March 2018, has said that "Islam does not belong to Germany."

In a March 16 [interview](#) with *Bild*, Germany's largest daily newspaper, Seehofer was asked if Islam belongs to Germany. He responded: "No. Islam does not belong to Germany. Germany is shaped by Christianity. This tradition includes work-free Sundays and church holidays and rituals such as Easter, Pentecost and Christmas."

Seehofer added that Muslims living in Germany are "of course" part of Germany. But that does not mean, he said, "that we therefore, out of false deference, give up our country's traditions and customs." He added: "My message is that Muslims have to live with us, not next to or against us. To achieve that, we need mutual understanding and consideration, which is only achieved by talking to one another."

<https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/12040/german-interior-minister-islam-does-not-belong-to>

As some Western government officials are beginning to recognize the true nature of Islam, and deal with it realistically, we may expect an improvement in this area of International relations. Similarly, as more Western people become acquainted with the thoughts of Arab-Muslim intellectuals who have analyzed the complex problems of their societies, and offered bold solutions, there is room for guarded optimism. The West would benefit greatly from their insights and proposals, and rescue its leaders and opinion makers, from their Utopian fantasies about the true nature of Islam

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2018/burqa-baker-bishops>

<sup>ii</sup> Professor Youssef Seddik was referring to the decision of the Third Caliph, Uthman (644 – 656) who gathered several Qur’anic manuscripts that were circulating at the time, kept one version, and burned the rest. His “textus receptus,” known as the “*Uthman Qur’an*,” is the one used throughout the Muslim world. It must be added that other manuscripts, or fragments of the Qur’an, have been discovered, such as the Sanaa, Yemen, manuscript, whose contents differ somewhat from the Uthman version.

<sup>iii</sup>The chief architects of the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) were Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru of India; Ahmed Sukarno, the President of Indonesia; Gamal Abdel Nasser, the President of Egypt; Marshall Tito, the President of Yugoslavia; and Kwame Nkrumah, the President of Ghana.