

The Gift of the West

by Thomas Mates

With the Cold War over, the historic conflict between Islam and the West has retaken center stage, and we are again embroiled in a clash of civilizations. Old fights about hallowed ground have become new fights about what's under that ground, wrapped in a larger crusade for regional stability. But in the case of Iraq, the United States' muscular foreign policy is, at least rhetorically, aimed at something higher: something beyond weapons searches, the construction of military bases, and the securing of an important commodity. It is the final assault upon a formerly amiable dictatorship in an attempt to press it and its neighboring Muslim societies to become more Western. Americans are devoting many lives and enormous amounts of money to this enterprise because many of them and their leaders believe the Western way of life is not only a fitting model but one that is to a certain degree transferable: the West has a gift to give.

My view of the West's gift is different. I think of it not as a political or economic gift that we have to *give* but rather as a spiritual gift that we *received* from the literal, physical west itself, by virtue of Europe's perch on the unexplored Atlantic and the sheer scale and plenty of the new hemisphere colonized by a self-selecting, "America-loving" (to use Emerson's phrase) fragment of European society.

It is also a gift we received from Constantine, who Christianized Europe, thereby bestowing upon its citizens a canon of scripture so confusing and impractical that it was rejected of necessity once the laity began, twelve centuries later, to print and read vernacular translations. Following this crucial but now misunderstood sixteenth- to eighteenth-century revolution, the West's churchgoers unwittingly adopted oral religions that were, and remain, far more Judeo-Muslim in outline than scripturally Christian. Western "Christians" thus became Judeo-Muslims—but Judeo-Muslims without a Quran or Talmud, without a *sharia* or *halach*; Judeo-Muslims free to play fast and loose with God's archaic, sometimes moral, sometimes immoral laws. People who were free to modernize.

Having modernized and muscularized, many Westerners believe we've constructed a way of life that serves as a fitting model for other societies and one that is transferable. But how appropriate is this assessment? Considering first the question of its transferability, we must understand that what we are really asking is whether the United States can forcibly modernize Arab and central Asian societies held back by accidents of geography and scripture. And to answer that question we might begin by considering a conflict that arose within the United States itself—one that merely involved one of these two accidents: the accident of geography.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the majority of colonial Americans embraced slavery in both the North and the South. But slavery became more pronounced in the South because the soils, the lay of the land, and the climate there made toil more uncomfortable and slave labor more economically viable than in the North. For these simple reasons the nineteenth century opened with the South resting on a traditionalist, aristocratic system with cotton as its king and rapidly falling behind the North both educationally and technologically. The country became a house divided, both naturally and, for a time, politically. War ensued, followed by an occupation for which the occupiers soon lost their appetite. Following the collapse of Reconstruction, the South was “redeemed—was returned to a state of slavery in all but name—and was kept that way through terrorism. Prominent among the terrorists, driven by fear and bitterness to a distorted interpretation of their religion, were the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, who terrorized not only blacks but Jews and Catholics as well. Through violence and intimidation, these terrorists and their sympathizers in government were able to sustain a primitive system of apartheid right up until my childhood, about a mere forty years ago.

In other words, transferring culture across a geographical boundary can be a difficult process, one that may lead, even in the so-called promised land of the United States, to the creation of “evil.” And between the United States and the Arab Muslim world there stands not only a geographical but a geological boundary: the boundary of oil and the retarding effect that a resource-export economy can have on a region’s educational and political development. But if we add to this geographical/geological boundary the second accident currently dividing Westerners from Arab Muslims—namely, the accident of scripture—we must anticipate even greater difficulties.

Since the attacks of 9/11 many in the West have expressed hope for an Islamic reformation, but they aren’t

taking into account the historical importance of scripture. Because of this they are failing to understand why the Protestant Reformation had the liberating effect it had in the West and why a similar phenomenon can’t occur with Islam. They are also ignoring the fact that the more militant strains of American fundamentalism and millennialism—the least exemplary of American religions—are Protestant. These denominations, in other words, are already reformed; but like Wahabbism (the type of Islam practiced by Osama bin Laden and the Taliban), they are reactionary and are marching backward instead of forward.

The Reformation wasn’t a movement started by freedom fighters, small *d* democrats, or small *r* republicans. It was a repudiation of the Roman Catholic Church by clerics who wanted to end its corruption and princes who wished to challenge what had become a bloated rival aristocracy. The reformers themselves weren’t trying to invent moder-

nity; they were merely trying to replace corrupt authority with the authority of the written Bible, creating societies in which the temporal laws would be in accordance with the laws of God. Substitute the word *Quran* in that last sentence for the word *Bible* and you have precisely the traditional Muslim position.

The key difference between Arab Muslim nations and Western nations, however, is that for Arab Muslims the traditional position remains the modern position. In fact, the Islam of some fundamentalists today is stricter and more severe than that traditionally practiced, and, more to the point, these fundamentalists have been far more effective at achieving temporal authority than have their Western, Christian counterparts. Why is this? To a significant extent it is because the Quran—despite

its archaic views on banking and relationships between the sexes—is a practical, legalistic text upon which a functioning society can be based. The same can’t remotely be said of the New Testament, and it was the resulting Christian *rejection* of the literal written word of the New Testament (in

Transferring culture across a geographical boundary can be a difficult process, one that may lead, even in the so-called promised land of the United States, to the creation of “evil.”

other words, the Reformation's failure) that ultimately turned the Reformation into the liberalizing "success" of popular history.

The New Testament is a dissident manifesto written by oppressed people who had given up hopes for terrestrial self-determination. The Quran, in contrast, was written by a successful military and political leader, and the civic and legal philosophies of the two books couldn't differ more starkly. Suffering under Roman rule, the New Testament's authors placed as little faith in earthly authority as they did in earthly material goods. According to their view, temporal officials were to be obeyed but were also understood to be Romans: the first now who would later be last. God granted them temporal power not because they were good but because, like Pharaoh, they personified the evil against which His apocalyptic drama could play out (Romans 9). Living under such officials, believers were told not to expect or seek justice. Thus the New Testament tells us that there is no reason for believers to resist evildoers (Sermon on the Mount) and also tells us that, while it is virtuous to endure deserved punishments, it is even more virtuous to endure *undeserved* punishments (1 Peter 2). It leaves the reader not knowing whether Christians themselves are to enforce any laws at all. Christians have therefore euphemized or ignored these teachings, and Thomas Paine, in *The Age of Reason*, gave the obvious explanation: this sort of surrender to earthly injustice, he said, amounted to "sinking man into a spaniel."

The Quran, in contrast, enjoins believers to obey the laws themselves, to inflict earthly punishments on those who break the laws, and to defend their lands and their faith against invaders. This is what Muslims believe, and it is just as surely what Christians believe.

The practicality gap between the New Testament and the Quran goes a long way toward explaining the theocracy gap between Western and Arab Muslim societies. Muslim nations have gotten a bit stuck because they've been able to

rely on their book, while the impracticality of the Bible (including its radical anti-materialism) forced Christians to jettison it in favor of oral traditions. Christians have therefore been busy re-inventing Christianity to suit themselves for a long time, freely tossing out anachronisms about women, science, and governance along with verses extolling the virtues of poverty, subservience to one's oppressors, and the elimination of earthly penalties for evil.

Well, relatively freely. The truth is that a significant number of Americans have forever done their best to dig in their heels and create a theocracy. U.S. laws and public policy have always been partly based upon the majority's religious beliefs, even if the First Amendment has prohibited citizens from being explicit about it. It took Americans until the 1960s to fully retire Jesus' divorce laws (these being among the very few laws he actually enunciated). And archaic laws affecting women's rights, slavery, sodomy (only legalized in 2003), Sunday business closures, the teaching of evolution, and so on, came straight from the Bible, primarily the Old Testament.

Society has always had its theocrats, but the conflict between the Old and New Testaments has simply rendered the Bible too "dim and doubtful" (as James Madison described it in the *Federalist* #37) to allow them to gain as much traction as their Muslim counterparts have been able to derive from the Quran. American Christians, in other words, are a lot like Arab Muslims, save for the accident of scripture. And until they take the ramifications of that accident fully into account, U.S. foreign policy will remain unrealistic.

Bernard Lewis (in *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, Oxford University, 2002), along with countless other commentators, has acknowledged scripture's contribution to the cultural divide but has done so incorrectly, saying that the West's liberalizing tradition of separating church and state stemmed from Jesus' instruction to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's. Not so. Despite this verse, the Roman

The practicality gap between the New Testament and the Quran goes a long way toward explaining the theocracy gap between Western and Arab Muslim societies.

Catholic Church was traditionally tax-supported, as were early Protestant churches (they still are in England and Scandinavia), and the societies in which they flourished were markedly theocratic.

The Pilgrims brought the theocratic impulse with them to America and in Massachusetts Bay set up a society in which speech was anything but free and in which the General Court heard heresy cases. Gradually they backed away from the legal enforcement of religious beliefs and rules but not because Jesus called for the separation of church and state. They backed away because, as Bible printing and reading became more widespread, they learned that Jesus' approach to crime and punishment—including his rescinding of the writ of "an eye for an eye"—was impossible to understand. As Lisa Gordis has shown in *Opening Scripture: Bible Reading and Interpretive Authority in Puritan New England* (University of Chicago, 2003), the colonists of Massachusetts Bay wanted to build a society around the laws of the New Testament but ultimately had to acknowledge that it scarcely contains any laws and leaves the issue of the *enforcement* of the Old Testament's laws in utter confusion.

A century and a half later, Thomas Jefferson came to an analogous conclusion. He, like all of the United States' founders, believed in God—as today's Christian conservatives are wont to remind us—but he had trouble finding a comprehensible God in the Christian Bible. The Old Testament's morality he found "degrading and injurious." He held a more positive view of the New Testament, saying that the moral system of Jesus (whom Jefferson considered a mere mortal) was "sublime." But he also found it impractical and disagreed with Jesus' extreme anti-materialism and de-emphasis of good works, punishment, and restitution in favor of an emphasis on faith and forgiveness.

Jefferson was a Unitarian and a scriptural skeptic, and skepticism was widespread among the country's founders. Despite being God-fearing churchgoers, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and others, along with Jefferson, questioned the biblical depiction of God, and it is their skepticism that lies at the heart of the United States' heritage of religious liberty. The Constitution's framers

ultimately settled upon a godless constitution—and fought successfully for it against a public outcry—because they didn't want to live in a society in which ideologues could stir up Old World-style conflict by coercing professions of faith in a legally and economically unworkable religion, the most basic elements of which (the trinity, the forgiveness of one person's sins for another's suffering) are beyond comprehension.

After a while, the inscrutability of the Christian Bible caused skepticism to filter down to the masses as well. Americans wanted to be believers but they also wanted to prosper materially, punish evildoers, and, if possible, escape the horrifying doctrine of predestination (represented in Romans 9). They accomplished the trick by latching onto the teachings of John Wesley, who rejected predestination, founded Methodism, and ushered in the modern era of American Christianity, which saw the number of churches and church mem-

berships skyrocket during the nineteenth century. Several "reawakenings" later, Americans find themselves with a smorgasbord of Christianities in which the free market, rather than the New Testament, determines the messages being preached. In essence then, the Reformation in the long run brought Christianity back to a quasi-pre-Reformation condition in which the clergy make up the doctrine as they go along. Before the Reformation, before Gutenberg, they could get away with it because the laity didn't know what the Bible said. After Gutenberg, the

Before the Reformation, before Gutenberg, they could get away with it because the laity didn't know what the Bible said. After Gutenberg, the laity took a look and decided at length they didn't want to know.

laity took a look and decided at length they didn't *want* to know.

The Quran's relative practicality—particularly in regard to self-defense and the punishment of evil—as well as its vital place at the center of Arabs' language and literature, mean that Islam won't evolve along a similar path. The written word of scripture has remained and will remain closer to the heart of the temporal law in the Middle East than it has in the West (as, for example, in Iraq's new constitution), and this, again, throws into question the transferability of Western culture. But behind the issue of transferability lies the even more fundamental question of whether Western society provides a fitting model for transfer in the first place. Claiming that it does implies a belief that we have found suitable guiding lights to replace the traditionalism and scripture that we abandoned in order to modernize. But have we?

Westerners have veered toward democracy and rationalism, but these aren't so much guiding lights as they are methods for following guidance once it has been received. As for the guidance itself, we are receiving it principally from two sources these days, neither one of them exemplary. The first source is the Christian oral tradition, a particular version of which has crystallized into canon law in the eyes of cultural conservatives. The second source is an economic model mandating eternal per-capita growth.

The oral "law" stresses absolutism regarding subjects that are irrelevant to the everyday functioning of our society (for example, evolution and homosexuality) and an absolutist ideology about the ensoulment of fetuses at conception that is neither traditional nor biblical. It also stresses military and economic invincibility (whereas Jesus stressed meekness) and absolutism (where Jesus gave us relativism) regarding the punishment of evil by believers.

Most troublingly it includes the belief—shared by current House Majority Leader Tom Delay (Republican, Texas)—that human activity can influence the timing and outcome of the apocalypse: a notion that intersects menacingly with the beliefs of ultra-orthodox Jewish elements (Gush Emunim, the Haredim, and the National Religious Party) in Israel. Though these extremists constitute minorities in their respective countries, they form vital swing blocs and possess far more political influence than they deserve. By clinging to fundamentalism and attempting to fulfill their own prophecies, they are destabilizing a region that we are ostensibly trying, at a frightful cost both in lives and dollars, to stabilize and *secularize*.

And then there is the growth imperative. While modernizing, Americans leapt off the rock called traditionalism, grabbed the rocket called innovation, and now we can't let go. We aren't free to simplify our lives or even to work fewer

hours in response to our ever-increasing efficiency. We are shackled to the mortal sins of gluttony and military-industrial complexity and locked in a system that demands the abrogation of the fourth and tenth biblical commandments, which proscribe covetousness and a 24/7 economy. The Federal Reserve Board, the U.S. president, and the advertising industry wield the carrots and sticks that keep us in line. This is a way of life that seems both environmentally and spiritually (not to mention militarily and even fiscally) unsustainable, particularly when we consider its looming adoption by the rest of the world's six billion inhabitants, led by China and India. It might in a sense have been inevitable that an immigrant people—coaxed by a New World that seemed as inexhaustible as their own aspirations—would adopt such an approach. But that doesn't mean that its adoption is inevitable for other countries—or rational for any country.

In the Soviet Union it was the state that refused to wither away, in Islam it is the Quran, and in the United States it is the oral law and the growth imperative both accepted as articles of faith. The free, secular way of life that we advertise on the Arab street is, in other words, neither free nor secular, and we aren't making ourselves safer in the long run by hewing to this unsustainable approach that we have stumbled into in our adolescence. Youths live recklessly because they imagine themselves immortal, and it is within this daydream that the middle-American mind still resides.

The far right and far left have already awakened and are forecasting doom. On the left are the radical environmentalists, driven to terroristic fundamentalism by the weapon of mass extinction that is modern commercial development. The right, meanwhile, is split between the millennialists and a new generation of "emigrants" who have abandoned the larger American society (and, to the best of their ability, their tax obligations thereto) and fled to gated communities. They have entered the end times, and if Americans ever manage to transfer their culture, their revelations should do brisk business in the bookstalls of Baghdad. ☪

Thomas Mates is a staff research chemist at the University of California, and a freelance writer on political, social, and religious issues. His work has appeared previously in the Ithaca (NY) *Book Review* and the Santa Barbara *Independent*.

Support *Humanism* >>> Donate Online

<http://www.americanhumanist.org/secure/join.html>