



THE TWO FACES
OF ISLAM

THE HOUSE OF SA'UD FROM
TRADITION TO TERROR

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Preface

IN THE AFTERMATH of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, people of goodwill on both sides of the divide between the Judeo-Christian and Muslim worlds were filled with deep anxieties. For Westerners, it seemed that a dreadful clash of civilizations had become imminent and unavoidable. For Muslims, it was clear that serious injury had been done to the most powerful nation on earth—a wound that could only call forth a terrible retaliation. Many Jews and Christians seized on the belief that something feral and evil in the faith of Muhammad had made September 11 inevitable. Many Muslims feared that a new “crusade” against Islam would ensue, expressing deeply ingrained impulses in the West.

After almost one and a half millennia of Islamic civilization, the Judeo-Christian West remains extraordinarily confused and ignorant about this major development in the history of monotheistic religion. It seems absurd to realize that after 14 centuries of contact between the two, mutual comprehension was deferred until a hideous terrorist crime killed thousands in the world’s greatest city. Islam is viewed by most people in the West as a monolith, even though a single opinion may no more be ascribed to its adherents than to those of Judaism or Christianity. But in the wake of September 11, Islam has been identified more than ever, in the Western mind, with violence, intolerance, and fanaticism. To many Americans, the face of Islam is seen in Arab celebrations of the twin tower massacres, the malevolent smirk of Osama bin Laden, the images of the 19 hijackers, and suicide bombings in Israel. That face is identified, above all, with maniacal hatred of the United States.

And while the face of Islam appeared, after the attacks on America, to be uniformly menacing, a Babel of ignorant non- and anti-Muslim voices assailed frightened Westerners. Competing explanations for “Muslim hatred” emerged rapidly and on all sides. Some commentators bemoaned the abuses of Western imperialism; others pointed to the problem of Israel. Self-styled experts claimed to have found the proof of deep flaws in Islam itself, in the text of *Qur’an* and the long history of Christendom and Muslim civilization in military conflict. These essayists and columnists sketched the image of an Islam that is intrinsically aggressive, contemptuous of modernity and the West, fearful of women, and hateful of reason and individuality. Conservative ideologues attempted to rouse American opinion by reviving the archaic vocabulary of Christian civilization under attack. Paul Johnson, in a widely read essay, rejected the idea that Islam is “a religion of ‘peace.’” This is untrue, he wrote: “Islam means ‘submission,’ a very different matter, and one of the functions of Islam, in its more militant aspect, is to obtain that submission from all, if necessary by force. Islam is an imperialist religion.”

Islamophobic writers proliferated like mushrooms in the Western media, reciting clichés about the alleged forcible conversion of Jewish and Christian populations, a supposed ban on Christian churches in all Islamic societies, and the ostensible prevalence of customs like female genital mutilation in Muslim lands. In Europe, extremist politicians like Jean-Marie Le Pen accumulated votes by manipulating the specter of Muslim immigrants, like marauding pirates with knives between their teeth. Before his assassination the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn called, in so many words, for his fellow-citizens to vote for or against Islam.

Nobody in Western Europe would have dreamed of suggesting a political referendum on Judaism; but Islam was now viewed as the fearsome and implacable Other. It was as if the lessons of the Holocaust, in which Europe had allowed the wholesale massacre of a non-Christian people that had lived for centuries on its territory, strictly because of their faith, had been completely forgotten. Other smears involved charges of wholesale cultural destruction, of the type advanced by V. S. Naipaul, who claimed that India had only become impoverished because of Muslim power. Among the Christian Slavs and their apologists, there had long been talk of a Muslim demographic threat to Europe.

President George W. Bush at first seemed to echo this rhetoric when he clumsily designated the war on the Osama bin Laden/Taliban terror alliance a “crusade,” perhaps the worst word that may be used in such a context. Such terminology was a gift to bin Laden; the Western war to liberate the Muslims of Afghanistan might better have been called an authentic and righteous *jihad*.

But none of these views of Islam represented an accurate accounting of its essence. A journey to the authentic heart of Islam sets one at odds with a great deal of erroneous common wisdom in the West—a situation Islamic extremists have exploited to advance their own agenda. The lack of a central religious authority in Islam contributes to the problem; for outsiders it is difficult to distinguish between the margins and the mainstream.

Westerners until now have known almost nothing about the deep conflict that presently rages over the soul of Islam, a struggle to determine its future which is, at the same time, a controversy over its past. Knowledge of this split, and the nature of its protagonists, constitutes a “secret history” comparable to the hidden archival record of Soviet Communism. But it is a confrontation we cannot ignore and from which we cannot stand aloof.

When President Bush and other Western leaders assured their publics that terrorism is at odds with true Islam, and were echoed by the Islamic establishments in many Muslim and non-Muslim countries, they were both right and wrong. The strain of Islam that encouraged bin Laden and his followers represents neither a majority of Muslims nor traditional Islamic values. But nor is it a matter of a simple hijacking of the faith. The extremist face of Islam, which justifies violence and stirs hatred, reflects rich and powerful interests. That face is possessed by the ideology known as Wahhabism, a “death cult” that is the official religious dispensation of the Saudi kingdom and which the Saudis, utilizing the financial power they have derived from their vast oil revenues, have spent decades—and billions of dollars—exporting to the rest of the world, from Pakistan and India to the Balkans, the Philippines, Western Europe, and America itself. Despite the proliferation of terrorist groups with diverse-sounding names and backers, the real source of our problem is the perversion of Islamic teachings by the fascistic Wahhabi cult that resides at the heart of the Saudi establishment, our putative friends in the region. As is well known to the rest of the world’s one billion Muslims,

most of whom are not Wahhabi, and who resist its imposition on their societies, this cult has flourished for decades, ironically enough under Western protection. We have nurtured this serpent in our very bosom. Yet no history of the Wahhabi cult has been written for a general audience; it is high time to correct this omission.

Until September 11, we typically saw and heard only two kinds of Muslims in our media: rich oil princes and unemployed ranters in the streets of Arab cities. Even after the atrocities in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, old habits persist. The common wisdom is that we must listen to the Arab street, because, we are told, its voice shapes political consciousness in those societies. Nothing could be further from the truth: In the highly stratified Arab and Muslim nations, the street counts for nothing, which is the main reason people often crowd it yelling hateful slogans. The time has come to look beyond the Arab street to the antifundamentalist, anti-Wahhabi traditions in Islam.

The petroleum princes and the shouting street are the two extremes in an environment that is a great deal more educated and diverse than we have led ourselves to believe. America has a lot to learn about Islam. Journalists, academics, and diplomats urgently need to find out whom to listen to, if we are to improve our relations with the Muslim world and prevent the worsening of the so-called clash of civilizations.

With this book I have tried to present a fresh view of Islam, challenging the hegemony of Saudi-backed extremism in the Muslim world but equally rejecting the simplistic, "crusader" polemics widely seen in Western intellectual life today. Mainstream Islam restored to its past power, traditional and pluralistic, will generate new, fruitful contributions to humanity. It will draw on the hidden history the West should have learned long ago, but to which it has been blinded by prejudice, myth, and fear. The war against the terror axis may last a decade, or many decades. It may continue as long as the Cold War did, or longer. It is imperative that we find reliable Muslim allies in this war; that we learn their languages, and understand their cultural differences as well as their similarities.

I do not believe anything in Islam led intrinsically or inevitably to September 11. If Islam had been an unrelievedly violent and aggressive religion, it would have disappeared long ago, like numerous pagan cults. I base this view on my own experience as a journalist and writer on the Balkan wars of

the 1990s, during which I encountered the other face of Islam—pluralist, spiritual, and committed to coexistence with the earlier Abrahamic revelations, Judaism and Christianity.

Westerners, terrified of the prospect of an Islamicized West, seem unable to recall that there was once a viable option for a Europeanized Islam. Obsessed with a narrative centered on conflicts, invasions, misunderstandings, and competitions for domination, we have forgotten that there were also long periods of commercial and cultural interchange, in Spain and elsewhere in the Mediterranean, above all in the Ottoman Balkans, whose society was uniquely European *and* Islamic. My review of this history offers an alternative to the concept of an inevitable clash of civilizations.

Many readers may find this assertion counterintuitive, because the Balkan nightmare of the 1990s revived the image of that region as a cauldron of interreligious hatred and savagery, which many presume was derived from a past of Turkish oppression, and where controls on deep-rooted violence disappeared with the end of Communism. Of course, it is inarguable that in the late 18th and 19th centuries, as partially described in this book, the Muslim Balkans fell into decline, their economy far surpassed in development by Western Europe, and inevitably into ethnic and political wars. Nevertheless, during their period of highest prosperity and stability, from the middle of the 15th to the middle of the 18th centuries, the Ottoman Balkans were by far the most forward-looking region in the Islamic world, thanks to their inextricable involvement with the rest of Europe. The West has much to learn from the long Balkan experience of multi-faith cooperation and civility: It embodies the other face of Islam, the one we must cultivate and support if we are to help the Muslim world conquer its own destructive demons—its version of fascist and Communist totalitarianism—and thereby help ourselves.

I was first drawn to the Balkans—Albania, the former Yugoslavia, and Romania, in particular—by a linguistic and literary interest in the culture of the Sephardic Jews who once numbered in the hundreds of thousands in the region. These Jews descended from those expelled by the Christian monarchs of Spain and Portugal at the end of the 15th century. Welcomed to the Ottoman domains, they settled as far north as the banks of the Danube, in virtually every city in the Balkans and Turkey: Dubrovnik, Split, Sarajevo, Belgrade, Bucharest, Shkodra, Skopje, Sofia, Vlora, Adrianople, Constantinople,

Smyrna. Their “capital” was Salonika in Greek Macedonia, an Ottoman city-state of 100,000, a “Hebraic republic” of which as many as 80 percent were Jewish. There they maintained their own language, which became known as Judeo-Spanish and Ladino. They trained rabbis, wrote commentaries on the *Torah*, taught the mystical secrets of the *Kabbalah*, disputed for leadership of world Jewry, and printed thousands of copies of religious and secular books in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Judeo-Spanish, supplemented, later, by newspapers and magazines. They married, fostered families, wrote poetry and balladry, traded and traveled, and recited the prayers and observed the festivals of their faith in their numerous synagogues. They constituted a whole Jewish civilization.

The Balkan Sephardim struck deep roots in the lands between the Adriatic and the Black seas. They included one of the great pioneers of Zionism, Yehudah Alkalay (1798–1878), who was born in Sarajevo and served as a rabbi in Zemun, across the Sava River from Belgrade. The Sephardim who supported Zionism saw it less as a solution to the problem of anti-Jewish prejudice than as a mystical fulfilment of the messianic Covenant, and those among them who went to the Holy Land typically did so more for spiritual than ideological or political reasons. Many were also drawn into the socialist and other revolutionary movements. But except for those who resided in Turkey and Bulgaria, and small remnants elsewhere in the Balkans, they were wiped out in the Holocaust. Their literary and religious traditions were almost entirely destroyed with them. Sephardic girls facing death in the Nazi concentration camps of Poland comforted each other by singing the Spanish love lyrics with which they had grown up.

I am a child of California, bilingual in English and Spanish; I had worked in Latin America and Spain, and had published volumes on the history of Hispanic culture and the Spanish civil war. I was deeply attracted by the idea that some part of this Judeo-Spanish world might have survived in Bosnia-Herzegovina, its furthest northern extension. As a staff writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and a correspondent for the *Jewish Forward*, I first went to the region in 1990, as Yugoslavia was collapsing. I attended Jewish services, photographed synagogues and graveyards, and listened, for the first time, to Sephardic melodies sung by the surviving speakers of the Judeo-Spanish idiom. I was deeply moved, on my first visit to Sarajevo, to find a monument to local volunteers who died while serving in the Spanish Republican

Army—all of whom bore Sephardic, i.e., Spanish names. Iberia's long lost Hebrew children had returned to its soil to sacrifice their lives in the cause of its freedom.

I formed strong friendships in the Jewish communities of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. But I also encountered there the native European Islam of the Balkans, and the fascinating traditions of the Albanians. And soon I observed the emergence of a new, valiant, desperate, and cruel struggle for liberty, as the Bosnian Muslims, and then the Albanians, came under brutal attack.

From 1991 to 1995, I was active in the work of the Daniel Dajani, S.J., Albanian Catholic Institute, a unique forum for the study of European Islam and its relations with Christians and Jews, located in San Francisco. The Institute was mainly involved in the reconstruction of Catholic life in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia, after the long martyrdom imposed by Communism. Thanks to my work there, I gained a detailed knowledge of Albanian linguistics, literature, history, and religion. My literary interest in the Balkans had become historical, then turned in a spiritual direction. In the Jewish realm, I assembled a large personal library, including such Balkan Sephardic classics as the famous *MeAm Lo'ez* (In Foreign Tongues), a *Torah* encyclopedia published in Judeo-Spanish, beginning in the 18th century, in Constantinople and Salonika. But at the same time I read the works of the Albanian and Bosnian Franciscans and Muslims, and encountered the strong local traditions of the Sufi orders. Much of what I found reproduced ideas and concepts I had discovered long before, in the 1960s, as a typical San Francisco student of mysticism, and reaffirmed lessons I had learned in the streets of Narbonne in Provence, Barcelona, and Palma de Mallorca, from the history of Islamic Spain and its relations with Jewish and Christian culture.

I also took up a matter that has become extremely controversial in recent times: the *dhimma*, or contract governing the relations of Muslim rulers with People of the Book, i.e., Christians and Jews. Researching community and ecclesiastical histories, I examined the reality of the Ottoman *dhimma* as it applied to the Balkan Sephardim, and the Bosnian and Albanian Catholics. Unfortunately, the Islamic *dhimma* has lately become a pretext for a prejudicial attitude among some Jews, one that apes the "crusader" mentality by which Islamophobia is justified as a defense of the Christian West. Basing themselves on pseudoscholarship, even respectable authors like the Israeli

historian Benny Morris, known for his sympathetic account of the expulsion of Palestinians in 1948, have put forward the claim that Jewish life under Islamic rule was universally and unrelievedly oppressive.

Such claims about the *dhimma*, and an allegedly permanent and unavoidable Jewish-Muslim conflict, may only be sustained by writing the Sephardim in Turkey and the Balkans completely out of Jewish chronicles. It is charged that the Jews were “second-class citizens” under Ottoman rule; but the very concept of citizenship existed nowhere in the world before the late 18th century, and the status of the Jews under the Turkish sultans was unquestionably superior to that in the Christian domains, where Jews were subject to wholesale violence.

Around 1454, Rabbi Isaac Sarfatti of Adrianople gives substance to this view of Jewish life under Muslim rule in a letter to the German Jews, in which he declared,

I have heard of the afflictions, more bitter than death, that have befallen our brethren in Germany; of the tyrannical laws, the compulsory baptisms and the banishments, which are of daily occurrence. I am told that when they flee from one place a yet harder fate befalls them in another . . . On all sides I learn of anguish of soul and torment of body; of daily exactions levied by merciless oppressors. The clergy and the monks, false priests that they are, rise up against the unhappy people of God . . . for this reason they have made a law that every Jew found upon a Christian ship bound for the East shall be flung into the sea. Alas! How evilly are the people of God in Germany treated; how sadly is their strength departed! They are driven hither and thither, and they are pursued even unto death . . . Brothers and teachers, friends and acquaintances! I, Isaac Sarfatti, though I spring from a French stock, yet I was born in Germany, and sat there at the feet of my esteemed teachers. I proclaim to you that Turkey is a land wherein nothing is lacking, and where, if you will, all shall yet be well with you. The way to the Holy Land lies open to you through Turkey. Is it not better for you to live under Muslims than under Christians? Here every man may dwell at peace under his own vine and fig tree. Here you are allowed to wear the most precious garments. In Christendom, on the contrary, you dare not even venture to clothe your children in red or in blue, according to our taste, without exposing them to the insult of being beaten black and blue, or kicked green

and red, and therefore are ye condemned to go about meanly clad in sad-colored raiment . . . And now, seeing all these things, O Israel, wherefore sleepest thou? Arise! And leave this accursed land forever!

To uphold the image of Muslims as implacable enemies of the Jews over whom they ruled one must further purge from history the “revolution” in Jewish life caused by the 17th-century Cossack massacres in the Ukraine, during which hundreds of thousands of innocents were killed, and when refugees from Eastern Europe looked to the Turkish Sultan to protect and even avenge them.

A valuable truth about the *dhimma* and its consequences emerges from a topic seldom discussed in this context: Jewish printing. The first book printed by Western technique in Asia was a Jewish legal code, the *Arba Turim* or *Four Rows*, authored by Rabbi Yakov Ben Asher of Toledo (c. 1270–c. 1343). This exquisitely designed typographical gem was issued in Constantinople in 1493. (Turkish-language printing did not come into existence for another century, which is no reflection on the Muslims; they had a much larger “guild” of scribes and calligraphers, who long kept the production of manuscript texts as an individual craft.) The first book printed in the continent of Africa was an edition of *Abudarham*, a collection of laws and commentaries on prayer, written in 1340 by Rabbi David Ben Yosef of Sevilla. This volume was produced in the Moroccan city of Fez in 1516. Both of these books, and hundreds more after them, were produced under Muslim rulers.

Although the first printed Hebrew book (Rashi’s *Torah* commentary) appeared in Rome in 1470, and Jewish printing proliferated in Italy, then elsewhere in Christendom, issuance of Jewish books was closely monitored, and at times seriously repressed. And while Jewish books were burned in Italy, Jews, Jewish converts to Christianity, and their descendants were burned alive in Spain and elsewhere in Christian Europe. No such immolation ever seems to have occurred in the Ottoman domains. The Turkish Sultans simply did not worry about the books printed by their Jewish subjects. Nor did they subject these men and women to persecution, much less death, for their loyalty to the Covenant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There is no history of physical attacks on Jews by Muslims in Turkey or the Balkans, notwithstanding the “blood libels” hurled at them, at the instance of local Christians, during the 18th and 19th centuries. These historical facts do not exonerate the

Arabs and Persians from brutalities against Jews; but Turkey, as the greatest Islamic power in history, should have pride of place as an example.

George Orwell did not learn about the nature of Stalinism by going to Moscow; rather, he went to Barcelona, where he witnessed the Communist secret police at work undermining the Spanish left. Similarly, I did not need to go to Riyadh to understand the malign activities of the Wahhabis, because I learned about them in Sarajevo, where Saudi-backed extremists actively sought to subvert the legitimate cause of the Bosnian Muslims. I first heard the term "Wahhabi" in a Balkan context at the beginning of the 1990s; and I personally witnessed the struggle between local Muslims and Wahhabis again, in Kosovo, at the end of the century.

My understanding of this phenomenon equipped me to better comprehend both the attacks of September 11 and the perplexing behavior of the Saudi regime in their aftermath. The Saudi attitude remains profoundly puzzling to most Americans; they have assured us none of the cooperation we expect from a major ally in the war against terrorism, and the established Western view of the Saudi kingdom as a moderate force in the Arab and Muslim world has been called into question—rightly so, as it turns out, and in a manner that is long overdue.

In 1999, I retired from the *San Francisco Chronicle* and went to live and work in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. There I was honored by the opportunity to collaborate with Jews, Franciscans, scholars and Sufis of Sunni and Shi'a inspiration, and Serbian Orthodox religious leaders in efforts for interfaith cooperation—the most rewarding experiences of my entire life. From Balkan believers and mystics, I have learned much—about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—but above all, about Islamic spirituality. In Sarajevo, known as the "little Jerusalem of the Balkans," a city which has seen great evil, a solution to the "clash of civilizations" is to be found. A great tearing of the human fabric occurred in the former Yugoslavia, and it could be that an equally great healing could begin there as well. Religion can unite and heal as well as divide. There may be, then, only one solution to the present global crisis—a religious one, based on Abrahamic solidarity.

In the Ashkenazi synagogue of Sarajevo, built exactly a century ago, a bare *minyán*, or quorum of 10 confirmed male Jews, meets to hear the cantor or *chazzan* David Kamhi lead the Sabbath service in the style of the synagogues of Istanbul. He sings the famous kabbalistic Sabbath anthem, *Leha*

dodi or "Come my friend," written in Ottoman Palestine half a millennium ago. It includes the lines *Itoreri itoreri, ki va oreh kumi ori*—"Arise, arise, for light has come . . ." In the synagogue, the bells of the Christian churches are heard . . . and the Muslim call to prayer or *adhan*, the evening call known as *aksham*, is heard, and heard again, and again, from the many mosques of Sarajevo. God is great! God is great! The words of the *aksham*, marking the end of the day for Muslim, Christian, Jew, and atheist alike in Sarajevo, filter through the minds of the pious Bosnian Jews. And then the Jews of Sarajevo, the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, file out of their synagogue, to the streets of their city, a city no less theirs than the Muslims', where the divine law of the sons of Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac is tested.

"Arise, arise, for light has come . . ." At the end of the night of hatred, war, and oppression, dawn must appear. Imagine *this* dawn: In a mountainous country, where you have spent the night as a guest in a tiny stone house, you are awakened by the floating, gently piercing predawn call to Muslim prayer, from the minaret of a nearby mosque. You walk to a narrow window and view all of God's creation at its most beautiful: in the black velvet of night, under the brightest stars and a brilliant moon. The predawn call to prayer includes an extra line: "Prayer is better than sleep." And when you stand at the window in the mountains and watch and listen alone you understand those words. You breathe to yourself the blessed and omnipotent words: love, unity, God. And after you have prayed, and serenity has descended upon you, come thin strands of light, then the slow lifting of the veil of darkness: dawn.

This is how their acolytes view the wisdom of the Sufis, and especially the greatest poet among them: Ibn Arabi, *Shaykh ul-Akbar*. Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani of the Naqshbandi Sufi order has called on President George W. Bush to support a global summit of traditional Muslim leaders, which would consult with Western intellectual and political figures in the beginning of a new Abrahamic dialogue. A "conversation of civilizations," rather than the much-heralded clash between them, could also contribute to a resolution of the Israeli-Arab conflict. But it cannot be posed as a political or diplomatic project. It must rather encompass a mission of Abrahamic reconciliation, emphasizing the common legacy of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and a common responsibility for the future of humanity.

The United States must take an historic initiative to welcome traditional,

pluralist, mainstream Islam into the common spiritual and intellectual discourse throughout the world. This cannot be done merely by embracing Muslims as another flavor in the multicultural buffet. A meaningful effort to counterpose traditional Islam to Wahhabi extremism must also be supported by the West, including measures to induce the Saudis to cease funding its global expansion. The Saudis' apparent desire for a more significant involvement in resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict cannot be viewed with confidence so long as Saudi activities supporting theological extremism and terrorism go unchallenged.

A shift in Islam away from the Wahhabi-Saudi promotion of terror to the mainstream Muslim commitment to mercy and compassion would not only ease tensions between the Western and Islamic worlds but could also make a "believers' peace" possible in Israel. This means taking the Middle East conundrum out of the hands of the politicians on both sides who have a vested interest in the conflict—equally symbolized by Yasir Arafat and Ariel Sharon—and abandoning a peace process based on delusions. Instead, it means encouraging rabbis, *imams*, Christian clerics, Sufi shaykhs, and *ayatollahs* to enter upon a regional and global "faith-based initiative" for peace.

A yawning abyss between the West and Islam is not the only probable future for the world. Even after September 11, Americans, and our allies, which already include many Muslims, are determined and hopeful of victory. In beating the Islamofascism of the Wahhabis, the West can rally traditional Muslims in a way that contributes to a new pluralism and stability in the Islamic global community. Islam may thus fulfill its destiny as a positive force for all humanity—in the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful.

Sarajevo–Washington

2001–2002