Culture Talk: Six Debates That Shape the Discourse on “Good” Muslims

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In his book *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, [c1952]), Leo Strauss, the University of Chicago political philosopher, analyzed the technique of writing under repression. He discussed medieval philosophers who had written under repression – al-Farabi, Maimonides, and Spinoza – but this was not an esoteric exercise. The cold war had begun only three years before, and American officialdom tended to see a communist behind every book. “In a considerable number of countries which, for about a hundred years, have enjoyed a practically complete freedom of discussion,” wrote Strauss, “that freedom is now suppressed and replaced by a compulsion to coordinate speech with such views as the government believes to be expedient, or holds in all seriousness.”

Persecution, Strauss noted, “gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing,” one “in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines.” But what if only some are conscious of the growing repression and thus write between the lines, while most have so internalized the repression as common sense that they translate it into a narrow agenda? Surely, in such a case the most appropriate response is to broaden the parameters of the discussion in order to not just read between the lines, but also beyond the margins. In what follows, I will try to do so by identifying and commenting on the issues driving the debate between participants.

**Debate One: Culture and Politics**

One of the most amazing news items I read in the weeks following 9/11 was in *The New York Times*: Sales of the Qur’an had soared in the United States as more and more Americans sought to read it for clues as to what had motivated the hijackers. In the months and years that followed, I wondered if the

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people of Afghanistan or Iraq, even Fallujah, were reading the Bible for an explanation for the bombs raining upon them from on high. I doubt that any of them really did. I wondered what explained this difference.

I am convinced that the difference lies in how the public debate on 9/11 has been framed by public intellectuals in the United States. Most public intellectuals, especially the quasi-official ones, share assumptions that I call culture talk. The core assumption is that you can read some people’s politics – the politics of those who are not “modern” – from their culture, for culture is not something that they make; rather, it is their culture that makes them. Even those who accept that all cultures are historical assume that cultures grow in separate containers called “civilizations” that talk and exchange, but only do so at the margins. Since they all develop along the same lines, you can tell who is more and who is less developed. In addition, it is characteristic of the less developed that they require an external impulse to get out of a vicious circle. The historical responsibility of the more advanced culture, then, is either philanthropic – to bring “development” or “democracy” to those less fortunate – or that of policing the world by imposing a quarantine on those likely to act out of resentment or anger.

Culture talk has a history. It is about taking the moral high ground and is as old as colonialism. Democracies have always had to justify colonialism to their populations as a selfless and philanthropic endeavor. Not surprisingly, the justificatory literature on colonialism typically identifies vulnerable groups in the target countries – those who need to be saved – and turns them into so many proxies. This is how one needs to understand the nineteenth-century British preoccupation with the talk of saving Indian women (by ending practices like sati, polygamy, and the ban against widow marriage) and children (child marriage), or entire populations in Africa from possible enslavement, as well as the contemporary American preoccupation with female genital mutilation. It used to be called “the White Man’s Burden”; now it is called “humanitarian intervention.”

This is also how one needs to understand the blatant double standards practiced by official America today: permissive toward its allies and clients, while calling for adversaries to be held accountable. As a result, death in Darfur is termed genocide and calls for a global response, whereas the killing of many more (upwards of 3 million by the most conservative count) in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a regional tragedy somehow unworthy a wider concern, and the arraignment of over a million citizens in northern Uganda is an internal problem.
Most culture warriors have a romantic view of homeland cultures. Those Americans who are preoccupied with the urgent need to reform other societies are often blissfully silent about the sea-change in American politics and society over the past few decades. With religious study circles spreading in official Washington circles, chances are that most political extremists with a religious orientation – whether jihadi or not – would find the United States’ governing institutions very congenial places in which to formulate policies to remake the world.

Culture talk is self-serving in yet another way. If someone slaps me and I explain it as an expression of “their” culture, it removes me from the picture. To explain a development like 9/11, one needs to focus on relationships between those central to the event. And, that means shifting the focus from culture to politics.

Debate Two: The Internal vs. the External

All cultures are historical. But even if understood as historical, is culture a wholly internal category? What is the relationship between the “internal” and the “external” in the politicization of cultural and religious identity? Modernity tends to politicize culture. Take the example of that very modern empire, the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman millet system created a form of “indirect” rule that went far beyond the tendency of earlier empires to simply impose fiscal and military demands through unequal relations with the conquered territories. In also recognizing the religious community as a political entity, the Ottomans recognized religious authority as political and sanctioned new powers (e.g., of taxation and adjudication) to that authority. Instead of a form of overrule that did not disturb internal relations, Ottoman authority politicized and transformed internal relations. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Dutch and the British would arrive at a similar form of rule. However, they politicized different types of cultural communities: religion here, and ethnicity and caste there.

For Europeans, the politicization of culture began right at home as nation-states replaced multinational empires. In the new modern European empires, the politicization of culture became a more efficient technology of rule, a way to divide and rule whole peoples instead of just elites. Faced with a resistance they were unable to put down for over two decades in Aceh, the Dutch finally decided to create another form of authority parallel to the ulama – that of chiefs – and sanction the latter as “traditional.” The result was two parallel authorities with two different (and possibly con-
flicting) sources of legitimation: one anchored in custom (adat) and the other in religion (the Shari‘ah).

The British also set aside their ambitions to “civilize” natives by bringing them under the rule of (English) law. Faced with resistance at two ends of the empire, in the West Indies and India in the mid-nineteenth century, they looked for “traditional” allies. Queen Victoria’s declaration in 1858, after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, that the Crown will not interfere in “religion” gave it the power to determine and to police the boundaries and the authorities of “religion.” Anyone who wants to understand the Shari‘ah and the debates around it in pre-partition India would do well to historicize their understanding of Anglo-Muhammadan law. The same can be said of implementing (ethnic) “customary” law and authority in Africa.

Empires, whether local or colonial, had little appetite for a type of law that would recognize different interests in the form of divergent interpretations. Whether the law was “customary” or “religious,” they looked for a single infallible source of interpretation. And if it did not exist, they created it. So, both the British and the Dutch claimed that any change in “tradition” or “custom” was prima facie evidence of its corruption. One needs to keep in mind that such a claim would never be made about “tradition” at home. In the colonies, however, “genuine” tradition was said to have two characteristics: one, it must not change; and two, it must be enforced through law.

I have gone through this long diversion on modern empires and colonialism to make one point: We need to understand both the politicization of culture (and religion) and the hardening of internal relations in the historical context of an encounter between western power and non-western societies. The polemic between what is external and what is internal is not particularly useful, nor is the notion of all cultures developing through containers called “civilizations,” each of which are external to the other. It is not just that the lines between civilizations are porous and have become blurred; rather, what was an external imposition at the start of a historical period came to be internalized through it.

Debate Three: The Question of Secularism

The parameters of the present debate on Islam and secularism were set by Princeton Orientalist Bernard Lewis, first in his 1990 Atlantic Monthly article on “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” and then in his book What Went
Wrong (Perennial: 2003), in which he rehashed these same ideas. Lewis claimed that the problem with Islam was that it never successfully transitioned from theocracy to secularism, as the West did—why, he said, Muslim fundamentalists are at war with secularism and modernity. Even more revealing of his political agenda was his claim that the Islamic critique of the West was similar to fascism, communism, and “third worldism.”

Lewis’ ideas have generated two kinds of responses. The first has internalized the key assumption of his argument: There is indeed a single western experience (with no significant internal variations) and that it represents the norm (the universal) that all others must duplicate or turn into so many abnormalities. This response goes on to claim that Islam is just as secular and modern as the West. In contrast, the second view questions Lewis’ assumption and points out the need to understand that human development is diverse and that this diversity is the outcome of multiple paths of historical development. Thus, there is a need to understand the specificity of historical development in Islamic societies, particularly how the boundary between religion and the state has developed and functions.

I find the second kind of response far more productive and illuminating. The key contribution comes from Reinard Schulze, who points out the need to grasp the historical fact that in Islam, there is no “religious power that had to be separated from worldly power.” Whereas historical Catholicism developed as the prototype of the empire-state, and historical Protestant denominations as the prototype of the nation-state, there was no institutionalized religious power in Islam. Thus, one question that is central to secularism, namely, delineating the boundary between religious and secular power, has been a non-question in historical Islam.

The significance of this can be seen in the development of state power in Islamic societies. Whereas both political power and social practices in Islamic societies have been particularly wanting in tolerating “internal” differences (e.g., as relating to rights of women, non-believers, and divergent sects), their historic strength has been in the tolerance of “external” diversities because they did not automatically see these as political threats. This particular historical line of development also explains why it has been so easy for secular thinkers to cross the boundary into the religious domain in Islamic societies, and why key theoreticians of radical political Islam have tended to come from the secular sphere. It also makes sense of Richard Bulliet’s observation in The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization (Columbia University Press: 2004) that religious scholars in Islam have traditionally played the role of checking the ruler’s absolute power in the name
of justice (rather than liberty). Indeed, as Bulliet points out, the most tolerant expressions of Islamic faith today come from those trained in traditional religious schools, not from those with training in secular subjects.

This perspective also makes sense of the one major (and recent) exception to this trend – Ayatollah Khomeini’s construction of clerical power as *vilayat-i faqih* – as a preemptive move in the face of challenge from secular thinkers like Ali Shariati. For those tempted to see Khomeini’s innovation as a Shi’ah norm, one only needs to point out that it is currently under great stress not only from the democratic movement in Iran, but also from rival theological interpretations, as signified by the alternate conception associated with Ayatollah Sistani, that the clergy must be a moral/political force outside the state rather than a force within the state.

**Debate Four: The Roots of Jihadi Islam**

Jihadi Islam identifies Islam with a single pillar, jihad, and then proceeds to offer a re-interpretation of it. Key to this debate is jihadi Islam’s embrace of violence as central to political and social change. How is one to understand the development of jihadi Islam as a theoretical (or theological) tendency? Can its particular understanding of the Qur’anic text be illuminated by the historical context of its development? In answering “yes” to this question, I found it most useful to trace this development as the history of an idea, most recently through two important post-Second World War theorists of political Islam: Abu Ala al-Mawdudi and Sayyed Qutb.

Crossing the boundary from post-partition India to Pakistan, al-Mawdudi was aghast at how banal he found the Muslims of Pakistan; nothing but rituals seemed to distinguish them from the Hindu population of India. His loss of confidence in everyday Muslims went alongside his formulation of Islam as a state project: They would have to be made into Muslims. Islam is not a mere religion, it would have to be a *din* (like communism, he says at one point), meaning a state ideology. Al-Mawdudi represents the point of a radical shift in political Islam, from a society-centered (with a focus on the ummah) to a state-centered ideology.

Is it simply incidental that the shift in the case of political Islam occurs alongside a similar shift in other forms of nationalist thought in the post-colonial period, from a society-centered to a state-centered perspective? Sayyed Qutb is notable, from this point of view, in that he introduces the distinction between “friend” and “enemy” (see his *Signposts*), that one must use reason with friends and force with enemies. This distinction resonates
with many other radical perspectives of the period, so to say, across the board. Are we to understand al-Mawdudi and Qutb as simply thinking inside a tradition, political Islam, or are we also to understand them as in conversation with other (and competing) forms of contemporary ideologies of national liberation, particularly secular nationalism and Marxism-Leninism, with whom they shared a number of characteristics, including a growing faith in political violence?

My point is that the contemporary jihadi Islamist embrace of political violence must be understood as a modernist project, not as a premodern leftover in modernity. Violence has been at the heart of political modernity: At least since the French Revolution (1789), modern people have thought of violence as central to progress. Marx’s dictum that revolution is the midwife of history is part of this modernist perspective. No other century was as preoccupied with progress as the twentieth, and none more violent. But we need to remember that those who lived during that century were likely to think of most violence – revolutions, world wars – as “good” and not “bad” violence.

This understanding can illuminate the history of the cold war for us. When George Kennan came to write an op ed in the New York Times toward the end of his life, he lamented that even though western powers had already achieved containment in the first few years of the cold war, they kept it going out of their determination to bring the Soviet Union to its knees no matter the cost. Reagan epitomized this point of view and rationalized it by politicizing a religious vocabulary. The Soviet Union, he said, was “an evil empire.” And there could be no co-existence with evil. Evil had to be destroyed; co-existence was simply a code name for capitulation.

Reagan came to power after the American defeat in Vietnam. A powerful anti-war movement at home opposed American overseas military intervention. Henry Kissinger’s attempt to substitute it by a proxy war in Angola had been an ignominious failure. But Reagan was determined to turn the alliance with apartheid South Africa into a strategic one: “constructive engagement.” He provided South Africa with a decade-long political umbrella to create from scratch Africa’s first genuine terrorist movement (Renamo in Mozambique), another one that vacillated between terror and political organization (UNITA in Angola), and then duplicated that project in Nicaragua (the Contras). The “great communicator” claimed that terror – specifically referring to that authored by UNITA in Angola, the Contras in Nicaragua, and the Mujahideen in Afghanistan – was the spread of the “democratic revolution” and went so far as to herald the leaders of the
Contras and the Mujahideen as the “moral equivalents of America’s Founding Fathers.”

The Afghan jihad was a hot house in which the protagonists driving the present war on terror – the neocons and the jihadis – matured ideologically and politically. In their reformulation of Islam as resting on one pillar – jihad – as mainly military, and of military jihad as no longer about a community’s self-defense but the righteous assertion of an individual, jihadi Islam must be understood as a form of born-again Islam, a worldly counterpart to contemporary born-again Christianity and born-again Judaism.

Debate Five: The Search for Moderate Muslims, or Defining Friend and Enemy in Contemporary America

I found the discussion on this question revealing, at times more as a source of information on the participants in the debate than on Muslims, whether moderate or not. Is the defining characteristic of a moderate Muslim non-violence, or is it an openness to the idea of evolutionary change? Should we think of “moderation” and “extremism” as representing virtue and vice or in context, indeed, as did Kennedy in his inaugural address? Is it true that extremists are best thought of as spoiled grown-up children who cry not because of a particular grievance but because they want attention? Or, is the search for moderates, as one participant jokes, simply a search for those who are “like us”? Or, as another claims, does it come from an interest born more of policing than of intellectual instincts?

I am reminded of a book by Harvard literary theorist Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (Oxford University Press: 1986). In a fascinating chapter on post-civil war America, Sollors discusses how American literature celebrated the “good” (read: moderate) Indian – young Indians who were willing to defy patriarchal authority of parents and chiefs in the name of romantic love, even willing to commit suicide – precisely when the American polity was getting ready to carry out a massive ethnic cleansing exercise: the Indian removals of the nineteenth century.

Whether it is the search for the “good Jew,” the “good black,” or the “good African” – or indeed “the noble savage” – history teaches us that any search that claims to divide a people between “good” and “bad,” “moderate” and “extremist,” must ring a warning bell.
Debate Six: The Preconditions of Reform

How are Muslim-majority societies to reform? Some worry about the absence of internal freedom and of Muslim intellectuals with the capacity for original thinking. Others worry about external pressures likely to generate a closed-door mentality: The Muslim world is under siege, and the war on terror demands nothing less than capitulation as the seal of recognition of a “good” or “moderate” Muslim. Under such circumstances, is it not likely that every self-respecting Muslim will be moved to fight under the banner of Islam, radical or not, if for no other reason than self-respect?

Muslims do not just live in Muslim-majority societies; more and more live in Muslim-minority societies. Both, however, are likely to reach similar conclusions from day-to-day political experiences. Like all minorities, Muslim minorities too will learn to distinguish between religious and political community, for without this distinction they will neither win the right of belief nor the rights of a citizen. The same lesson is also relevant for Muslim majorities. Half a century after the end of colonialism, many recognize that the politicization of the religious community will inflame every religious difference as political: not only between Sunni and Shi’i but also between sects (e.g., Ahmadiyya, Isma’ili, the Twelvers), not only between majority and minority but also inside the majority. With different schools of law inside Sunni Islam, whose interpretation of the Shari’ah is to be enforced with the power of the state (rather than observed voluntarily)?

Some argue that the real difference between those with a capacity to reform and those without is their attitude to *ijtihad* and jihad. One participant warns that *ijtihad* has been raised to a strategic slogan by official America and stands for a political agenda. Participants warn of two notions of *ijtihad* – one so narrow and technical as to leave it to experts and deprive it of any democratic content, and the other so loose as to be without any sense of limits and so lend itself to a project that aims to liquidate Islam in the name of Islam. A reflection on the discussion suggests the need to think of a third and middle possibility, one that recognizes the right of *ijtihad* as belonging to all but residing within limits framed by “fundamentals.”

But can we think of *ijtihad* as an antidote to jihad? The right to reform, in the final analysis, is a right that belongs to non-political organizations that can establish meaningful autonomy as well as to political communities that can defend sovereignty. The end of the cold war has shown that it is precisely those societies that Jeanne Kirkpatrick labeled as “totalitarian” (as opposed to “authoritarian”) and said could not reform from within, that
have managed to do so. China, Russia, and other parts of the former Soviet Union are spectacular examples of this ongoing process. In contrast, North Korea is being put under the gun and asked to reform, with little chance of doing so. Turkey won the right to reform; Algeria was denied it, as was Iraq, in both cases at great human cost. One hopes that the lesson has been learned and that others branded as part of that club – Iran and Syria – will be spared that terrible fate.

Conclusion
Half a century after Strauss and three years into the war on terror, a former student from the Straussian circle at the University of Chicago, Anne Norton, wrote a book called *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (Yale University Press: 2004), once again to raise the question of whether America is a truly liberal society. Her focus is placed on that group of people who claim to be the intellectual heirs of Strauss and are using their new-found political influence to frame a new enemy and champion the building of a new American empire:

> Once it was another set of Semites who could not be trusted, whose primary loyalties lay elsewhere, who needed to be given a clear message about what was expected of them. … Now it is the Muslims who are involved in shadowy global conspiracies, Muslims who have “fellow travelers.” The old language of anti-Semitism has found another target.

> In this context, the study of Muslims is bound to turn into a veritable industry, for modern empires are given to investing substantial resources to study the enemy. But unlike the former Soviet Union and contemporary China, both of which enjoyed meaningful sovereignty, the study of Islam and Muslim societies is likely to be on both sides of the border. Official America will fund Islam-watchers on this side of the border as well as professional “good” Muslim NGOs on the other side. Both are likely to grow in a mutually sustaining relationship. Unfortunately, neither is likely to be the source of independent and original thinking.