

Islam: Historical Reality vs. Western Self-Deception

BY MARTIN WITKERK

“Let’s be clear: Islam is not our adversary. Muslims are peaceful and tolerant people and have nothing whatsoever to do with terrorism.” Thus tweeted Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton on November 19, 2015. It was no isolated statement. During the 1990s, her husband had consistently favored Muslim factions over their rivals in the Balkans and Chechnya. The Republican administration of George W. Bush took a similarly positive view of Islam that remained unaffected even by the murderous attacks of 9/11. Just a few days following the carnage in New York and Washington, the president was intoning:

America counts millions of Muslims among our citizens, and Muslims make an incredibly valuable contribution to our country. Muslims are professionals, as well as moms and dads.... There are millions of good Americans who practice the Muslim faith who love their country as much as I love the country, who salute the flag as strongly as I salute the flag.

President Bush’s advisor on Islam was a man named David Forte, a Catholic conservative who subscribes to a theory of “ecumenical Jihad” according to which believers of all faiths, including Muslims, must unite in opposition to modern secularism. Of Islamic terrorism, he is fond of saying that “nothing this evil could be religious.” Perhaps this *a priori* assumption that religions must be “good” is a holdover from the days when conservatives defined themselves in terms of the struggle against “godless communism.” It is the same sort of thinking that prompted the CIA to support the *mujahideen* of Afghanistan, including Osama bin Laden, during the Soviet occupation.

The strength of Serge Trifkovic’s *The Sword of the Prophet* is its freedom from all such preconceptions; its

rigorously empirical approach to Islam provides readers with the necessary basis for an informed opinion of the kind our masters in Washington so conspicuously lack. Mr. Trifkovic is a naturalized American from Serbia. He holds a Ph.D. in modern history from the University of Southampton (1990) and is the Foreign Affairs editor of *Chronicles* magazine. Four years after publishing the book here under review, he published the more practically oriented study *Defeating Jihad: How the War on Terror May Yet Be Won, in Spite of Ourselves*.

THE SWORD OF THE PROPHET

Serge Trifkovic

Boston: Regina Orthodox Press, 2002

312 pages



The story of Islam as he tells it begins long before the birth of Muhammad, in the very geography of Arabia and the character of its people. The cradle of Islam was a harsh land protected from conquest by its lack of anything that might attract the covetousness of outsiders. Most inhabitants were nomads, a way of life

dictated by nature: a flock will soon consume all the scant grazing in an area, whereupon the owners had to move camp to another area. Settled communities were limited to springs or wells, and their denizens lived either by growing date palms or acting as middlemen, trading in frankincense, buying camels, sheep, wool, or animal oil from the tribes, and exporting them to neighboring lands. [Life] could barely be sustained outside the supportive context of an extended family that was the basis of social organization. “Love your tribe,” an Arab poet says, “for you are bound to it by ties stronger than any between husband and wife.”

Martin Witkerk writes from the mid-Atlantic region and has a Ph.D. in philosophy from Tulane University.

Faithfulness to the pledged word, honesty, and the rest of the ethical code operated only within the context of such a tribe. Between tribes, lack of central authority bred a Hobbesian mindset. The possession of arms and scant regard for human life (especially if it infringed on one's honor or claim to pastures, camels, or women) was the mark of manhood. Robbery and murder outside the protective confines of one's clan were not considered bad *per se*, but judged by their results. Respect for one's neighbor was strictly contingent on his power and means.

Contrary to what the advocates of "ecumenical jihad" might expect, this primitive society was nevertheless strongly religious:

From the remotest times Mecca had been a place of pagan pilgrimage. Arabs came to bow down in the temple of the *Kaaba* ("cube") before a certain black stone, probably a meteorite. As part of pagan ritual, they were required to run around it seven times and to kiss it before running a mile to the nearby dry well of Wadi Mina "to throw stones at the devil." The temple also eventually housed hundreds of idols that were revered by different Arabian tribes. When away from Mecca, they turned in its direction in prayer.

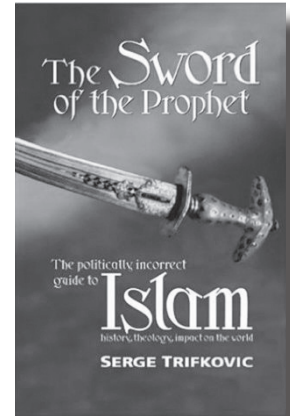
The dominant deity was the moon god [known as] *al-ilah*, shortened by frequency of usage to *Allah*. The frequency with which the crescent moon appears in pre-Islamic archeological artifacts throughout Arabia attests to its special status. The moon god, and his spouse, the sun goddess, produced three deities known as the Daughters of Allah, who enjoyed particular favor with the Meccans.

Mecca was controlled by the powerful Quraysh clan. Muhammad was born into one of the poorer and less influential branches of this clan about 570 AD. By his early teens, he was working for his uncle as a camel driver, traveling as far as Syria, and probably acquiring some knowledge of Jewish and Christian monotheism. Trifkovic states that "from the inaccurate and sometimes greatly distorted accounts of the Christian faith that Muhammad provides in the Kuran, it appears likely that he received the outline of the Christian teaching by the adherents of various heterodox Christian sects in Arabia itself.

In AD 595, when Muhammad was twenty-five years old, the Ethiopians threatened Mecca, but were repelled by a coalition assembled by his uncle. It appears that Muhammad could not bear the sight of the battlefield and ran away, exposing himself to contempt and ostracism. To make ends meet, he became a shepherd—the lowliest position in that culture. Trifkovic comments:

The boy grew up on the social margins of a society in which power and money were the defining currency of one's standing. Muhammad's later bitterness towards the establishment of his native city and its social and spiritual structure reflected the sense of powerlessness felt by a resentful young man.

Muhammad soon accepted the offer to become an assistant to a traveling cloth merchant. His new work took him to Hayacha, a merchant town south of Mecca. There he met the wealthy widow, Khadija, and entered her service. Beginning as a camel driver, he rose to become a supervisor and business partner. Although she was fifteen years older than Muhammad, they eventually married. "For a decade, Muhammad focused his hitherto unrevealed talents and energy to the development of Khadija's business interests." It made him an affluent man.



At the age of forty, Muhammad had an uncanny experience in a dream: a "majestic being," whom he later identified with the angel Gabriel, told him "You are the Messenger of God."

At first Muhammad appears to have been reluctant to accept the apparition's claims at face value and feared demonic possession, but his wife Khadija told him that a virtuous man such as he could not be a victim of demonic delusions but should accept the call with humility.

For three years, no more visions followed, but then they began occurring with increasing frequency, and Muhammad gradually began preaching to friends and family.

About AD 613, he decided to go public with his revelations. His teaching was simple, focused on submission to one transcendent Allah; on the end of the world and the Day of Judgment, when all will be brought to life; on the subsequent delights of paradise for the virtuous and torments of hell for the sinners; and on the practice of charity.

Before his move to Medina, Muhammad was unable to enforce any rules, and so he did not try to impose on his converts any new code of behavior. His demands were purely spiritual: understanding and public acceptance that there was no god but Allah, and that he, Muhammad, was his messenger. Otherwise the old

customs and traditions were followed, including the drinking of wine and certain forms of lending at interest. His revelations at this time include positive statements about Christians and Jews, even allowing for the possibility that they could attain salvation. In part, this may be because he still hoped to be recognized as a prophet by these groups.

By AD 615, Muhammad had gained about seventy followers, mainly from among the more marginal elements of Meccan society. They spent their days worshipping in the house of a young man named al-Arqam, prostrating themselves until they touched the ground with their foreheads in acknowledgement of God's majesty. The new religion was not popular with the rulers of Mecca, however. Muhammad's attack on the divinity of idols endangered the Quraysh tribe's profits deriving from guardianship of the Kaaba and its idols.

Hoping for an impressive gesture that would finally sway his fellow citizens, Muhammad presented the key tenets of his teaching to a gathering of the most prominent members of his tribe. Attempting to sway the doubters by theological compromise, Muhammad went so far as to allow for the possibility that three particularly well-like Meccan deities—the

moon god's daughters—were divine beings, capable of interceding with Allah on behalf of the faithful.

The move did not work. Subsequently returning to his original uncompromising monotheism, he declared that this particular revelation had been of "Satanic" inspiration. This little incident was the inspiration for Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*. Some modern Muslims refuse to accept that it really occurred, but as Trifkovic notes, "it is inconceivable that orthodox Muslim chroniclers would have invented this story."

The attitude of the Meccan authorities hardened; like Christ, Muhammad was to be a prophet without honor in his own country. Muhammad's followers became subject to a certain amount of harassment, although no one was killed. The prophet's influential uncle tried to convince his fellow citizens that his nephew was a harmless madman deserving of pity.

In AD 621, Muhammad gained the trust of twelve visitors from the oasis of Yathrib (now Medina) two hundred miles to the north. They promised to spread his teachings, and the following year seventy-five believers in the new religion visited Muhammad in Mecca. Meanwhile, the Meccan authorities were planning to put Muhammad on trial for his life. He commanded his



Serge Trifkovic, author of *Sword of the Prophet* and *Defeating Jihad: How the War on Terror May Yet Be Won, in Spite of Ourselves*

followers to begin migrating to Yathrib in small groups. Shortly before leaving himself, in September 632, he conveniently received his first revelation allowing him to make war on the people of Mecca. Such a thing required divine sanction, since tribal bonds were the most sacred known to the Arab society of the time.

Yathrib soon became known as *Medinnet el Nebi*, the city of the prophet, or “Medina” for short. The city enjoyed a more favorable climate than Mecca and was home to a settled farming population that included eight Arab clans, as well as Christian and Jewish communities. These groups did not get along well, and many in the city hoped that an impartial outsider such as Muhammad could help keep the peace by arbitrating disputes. A house was built for him, but he and his followers remained short of money. Many were eager for revenge against the Meccans. Claiming divine authorization, Muhammad led expeditions against passing Meccan caravans. His first three attempts were unsuccessful, possibly because his plans were leaked to the Meccans in advance.

In early 624, he led his first successful raid, ambushing a caravan from Yemen, killing one man, taking two prisoners for ransom and carrying home a great deal of loot.

The success of the raiders was partly due to surprise: the attack took place in the holy month of Ramadan, the time of the truce generally respected even by the most pugnacious of brigands until that time. This did not present a problem to Muhammad, however, who had just received a revelation allowing warfare even during Ramadan. From that point, revelations suitable to the needs of the moment, helping Muhammad augment his political and legal authority (or even helping him keep his quarrelsome wives in check), [became] frequent and surprisingly specific in the way Allah obliged in addressing the daily needs of his prophet.

Two months later, Muhammad led three hundred men against a Meccan caravan. The Meccans, however, learned of his intentions in advance and sent a force of six to eight hundred men to meet him. The encounter, which occurred at Badr on March 15, 624, turned into an unexpected victory for Muhammad, whose followers interpreted this as a divine miracle. Over forty of the Meccans were killed and sixty taken prisoner; just fourteen of Muhammad’s followers were killed. The prophet’s power and prestige soared.

The Battle of Badr was a turning point in Muhammad’s career, following which “the simple preacher of Mecca turned into a vengeful warlord.” The prisoners were beheaded rather than ransomed; an accompa-

nying revelation declared “it is not for any prophet to have captives until he hath made slaughter in the land.” When the severed heads of his enemies were presented to him, he declared that the sight pleased him better than “the choicest camel in Arabia.” When one man asked who would take care of his little girl after he was killed, Muhammad replied: “hellfire”; as the man was beheaded, he exclaimed: “I give thanks unto the Lord that hath slain thee and comforted mine eyes thereby!”

Muhammad returned to Medina in triumph and proceeded to settle scores with his detractors there. An atmosphere of fear descended on the city; informers passed all disrespectful or merely careless remarks to the prophet, who followed them up with “proceedings that were sometimes both cruel and unscrupulous.”

At least twenty-seven people were murdered on Muhammad’s orders. He also expelled two Jewish tribes from Medina; their considerable belongings and land were divided among Muhammad’s followers.

Many raids and battles followed, eventually totaling 82 over the prophet’s entire career. Muhammad’s revelations explicitly permitted the rape of even married women captured in battle; such permission is authoritative for Muslim jihadists to the present day.

Early in 627 AD, Mecca gathered an army of 10,000 men—huge by the standards of the day—to besiege Medina in an attempt to put an end to the new religion once and for all. As Trifkovic recounts, “after a siege of only two weeks, during which Muhammad undermined the attackers’ unity by sending envoys to different tribes comprising the Meccan coalition, they gave up and withdrew.”

Immediately following this victory, Muhammad accused the last remaining Jewish tribe in Medina of complicity with the enemy.

This time, mere expulsion and robbery would no longer do. Muhammad offered the men conversion to Islam as an alternative to death; upon their refusal, up to 900 were decapitated in front of their women and children. Torches were lit so the slaughter could be accomplished in one day. The women were subsequently raped; Muhammad chose as his concubine one Raihana bint Amr, whose father and husband had been slaughtered before her eyes only hours earlier.

Addressing the general matter of Muhammad’s endorsement of violence, Trifkovic comments:

Muhammad’s practice and constant encouragement of bloodshed are unique in the history of religions. Murder, pillage, rape, and

more murder are in the Kuran and in the Traditions seem to have impressed his followers with a profound belief in the value of bloodshed as opening the gates of paradise and prompted countless Muslim governors, caliphs, and viziers to refer to Muhammad's example to justify their mass killings, looting, and destruction. "Kill, kill the unbelievers wherever you find them" is an injunction both unambiguous and powerful.

By the summer of 627, Muhammad's authority was unassailable, and he began using it to serve his own desires. In earlier days, back in Mecca, he had warned his followers that "the passion for women" was a temptation that could enslave men. Now his revelations exempted him from the limit of four wives he had laid upon his followers. The story of the fifty-two year old Muhammad's betrothal to six or seven year old Aisha, and of the marriage's consummation three years later, is also widely known.

When Muhammad began spending much of his time with a Christian slave woman, his wives protested. A new divine revelation told him not to restrain himself from "that which Allah has made lawful to you," merely for the sake of pleasing his wives. There was no winning with God's prophet. Muhammad himself was a jealous husband, however, and a further revelation specifically prohibited his wives from remarrying after his death.

Muhammad even took away the only wife of his adopted son Zayd. One day, Muhammad went to visit Zayd. He was away, and the prophet was received by his wife Zeinab. Muhammad exclaimed "praised be Allah, who changes men's hearts!" Zeinab recounted the incident to Zayd who, bowing to the inevitable, divorced her in order to clear the way for her marriage to Muhammad. A revelation quickly followed to bless the arrangement.

Trifkovic comments:

There are contemporary Western authors who argue that we must not extend the judgmental yardstick of our own culture to the members of other cultures who lived in other eras. In response, it should be pointed out that even in the context of seventh century Arabia, Muhammad had to resort to divine revelations as a means of suppressing the prevalent moral code of his own milieu. Attacking caravans in the month of Ramadan, taking up arms against his own kinsmen, murdering people without provocation, and indulging with considerable abandon one's sensual passions was so fundamentally at odds with the moral standards of his own Arab contemporaries that only the ultimate authority could, and did, sanction it.

This has bequeathed to Islam what Trifkovic calls a "nominalistic system of ethics:"

Nothing we do, say or think is good or bad as such in Islam, nothing is right or wrong without specific reference to the revealed will of God or the traditions of his prophet. The definition of what is just depends solely on Allah's will, to which none of the usual moral criteria found among humans is applicable. "Just" and "unjust" are not regarded in Islam as intrinsic characteristics of human actions; they are entirely changeable by divine decree.

Following a skirmish between some Meccans and Muhammad's followers in November, 629, Muhammad began assembling an army of 10,000 men for a campaign against Mecca. So terrified were the Meccans this time that a delegation of leading citizens approached him on the road and voluntarily submitted to his authority. In return, Muhammad forbade his followers all score-settling against the Meccans. In January, 630, Muhammad rode triumphantly into his native city. The Kaaba was rid of idols, but was to remain the "temple of Allah." As Trifkovic notes, "by providing for considerable continuity between old beliefs and new religion, he facilitated the conversion of the remaining skeptics within, and pagan tribes without.

Muhammad was perfectly aware that not all who chose submission (Islam) over death were sincere converts:

As it happens, Muhammad's pragmatism in demanding only verbal submission to start with was a very useful device in spreading Islam throughout the conquered lands, from Bosnia to India. St. Paul's "let each be fully convinced in his own mind" could not apply to a conquering faith that depended on the power of the sword. In the longer term, as it turned out, the formal submission of the first generation of converts inevitably led to the irreversible change of identity and belief system of those that followed.

In the Spring of 632, Muhammad performed a solemn pilgrimage to Mecca, accompanied by over 40,000 believers. It was the original *Hajj*, copied by his followers to this day. He retained much of the old pagan ritual, including kissing the black stone of the Kaaba and walking about it seven times. This compromise with paganism scandalized some of the faithful; it is recorded that when the second Caliph, or successor, to Muhammad went on the *Hajj*, he paused to address an explanation of his behavior to the Kaaba stone: "I know that you are a stone that does not hurt or benefit. If I had not seen the prophet kiss you, I would not have kissed you."

In June, 632, a few weeks after completing his pilgrimage, Muhammad died in Medina.

Muhammad's prophecies had been memorized or written down haphazardly during his lifetime, and collecting all of them accurately proved an impossible task:

In the tradition we frequently encounter reference to the verse of the stoning that was lost because no two witnesses could be found who had memorized it identically. The second Caliph, Umar, stated: "Let no one of you say that he has acquired the entire Kuran, for how does he know it is all? Much of the Koran has been lost." Aisha complained that one Sura was reduced from two hundred verses to only seventy-three in Uthman's version. She also stated that some verses were lost when a domestic animal got into the house during preparations for Muhammad's funeral and ate them.

A further embarrassing fact about the Kuran as we have it is the two dozen or so grammatical errors it contains, including a few wrong cases. Muslims consider even these authoritative; where God departs from normal Arabic usage, it must be normal usage that is mistaken.

The Kuran, or "recitation," is not considered by Muslims to be a revelation of Allah, who remains essentially unknowable, but only of his commandments. It is to be recited, as its name states, and not subjected to analytical study by a reasoning mind. Muhammad is reported to have said: "Dispute about the Quran is infidelity. Whosoever interprets [it] according to his opinion, let him seek his abode in the fire."

Because of its "nominalistic system of ethics," Islam stands in need of a *de facto* criterion for distinguishing between good and evil, and the Kuran is insufficient for this, "provid[ing] but scant instruction regarding important daily aspects of faith and life." The solution was found in the direct imitation of god's prophet. Muhammad is said to have encouraged this: "Allah sent me to complete the excellent virtues and to perfect all good actions." Stories of his acts and words provide believers "the eternal model of behavior for every little detail of everyday life: when to blow the nose, how to wear shoes, how to urinate, and how to conduct sexual union in marriage"—even whether one's hair is to be cut from left to right or vice-versa.

These stories of Muhammad's words and deeds are known as the *hadith*. There are six generally accepted collections of *hadith*, together filling many volumes. The oldest collection dates from AD 870, or 138 years after the prophet's death. There is every reason to suspect that these supposed acts and sayings, as Trifkovic puts it, "address the political, legal, and spiritual needs of later times and tell us more about the mindset and

agenda of the Arab rulers of their neighbors' conquered lands many generations after Muhammad's death." Yet Western scholars, who have been rationalistically trying to reconstruct the "historical Christ" for the last three centuries, generally accept at face value the claims of Muslims that the surviving literature accurately conveys the story of Muhammad's life. They clearly understand whose religious sensibilities must be deferred to and whose can be safely ignored.

Muhammad died without clearly appointing any successor, and Shi'ites and Sunnis fight over the issue to this day. Most Muslims at the time accepted the authority of Muhammad's long-time companion Abu Bakr, whose brief caliphate was occupied with the "Wars of Apostasy," to bring back into line those who had taken advantage of the prophet's death to shake off the authority of the new religion.

War was a way of life for the Arab tribes, and once Muhammad united them under the banner of Islam, their energies turned outward. During the second caliphate of Umar (634-644) Islam was carried beyond the Arabian peninsula, quickly bringing it into contact with civilizations far more advanced than itself. Many of the achievements of Islam's so-called Golden Age between the eighth and thirteenth centuries owed more to the genius of the nations the Arabs overran, especially Persia, than to Islam itself.

In Trifkovic's view, these early conquests "did not have the purpose of spreading Islam as such, but rather the establishment of rule by Muslim Arabs in the conquered lands."

In the early decades of the conquest, Islam was still identified with Arab culture to such an extent that conversion also meant association with one of the Arab tribes as a client. The converts, then and in subsequent centuries, had not only lost their names for Arab ones, but also a sense of their own past and culture. Their pre-Islamic ancestors could no longer be respected. The vanquished were "culturally disemboweled," condemned to the enforced psychosis of renouncing their old and highly developed identities for a crude and violent desert blueprint that regulated the minutest details of their lives.

As author V. S. Naipaul has noted,

There has probably been no imperialism like that of Islam and the Arabs. Islam seeks as an article of faith to erase the past; the believers in the end honor Arabia alone; they have nothing to return to. Islam requires the convert to accept that his land is of no religious or historical importance; its relics were of no account; only the sands of Arabia are sacred.

European imperialism, by contrast, was sometimes accompanied by heroic efforts to learn the sacred languages and understand the cultures of the subject populations. Since the publication of Edward Said's book *Orientalism* in 1978, it has been fashionable to denigrate the achievements of these Western scholars. But, while their work may have involved biases of various sorts, it deserves to be stressed that Arab imperialism was accompanied by no such efforts at all.

The great classical civilization of India, for example, still studied by Indologists and Sanskrit scholars, was largely destroyed by Islamic conquest before the British ever set foot in the subcontinent.

Until that time India was one of the world's great civilizations. Tenth century Hindustan matched its contemporaries in the East and West in the realms of speculative philosophy, mathematics, and natural science. Medieval India, until the Islamic invasion, was a richly imaginative culture, one of the six or seven most advanced cultures of all times. Its sculptures were vigorous and sensual, its architecture ornate and spellbinding.

Beginning in 712, Muslim raiders under the command of one Muhammad Qasim, "demolished temples, shattered sculptures, plundered palaces, killed vast numbers of men—it took them three days to slaughter the inhabitants of the port city of Debal—and carried off their women and children to slavery."

After the initial wave of violence, however, Qasim tried to establish law and order in the newly conquered lands, and to that end he even allowed a degree of religious tolerance. Upon hearing of such practices, his superior, Hajjij, wrote back:

It appears from your letter that the way of granting pardon prescribed by the law is different from the one adopted by you, for you go on giving pardon to everybody, high or low, without any discretion between friend and foe. The great God says in the Kuran: "O True believers, when you encounter the unbelievers, strike off their heads." Henceforth, grant pardon to no one of the enemy and spare none of them, or else all will consider you a weak-minded man.

Hajjij directed that all able-bodied men were to be killed and that their underage sons and daughters were to be imprisoned and retained as hostages. Qasim obeyed.

From the Muslim point of view, Hajjij was entirely correct. Muslims are forbidden to refer the conquered to the law of their own faith; the Kuran says, "Pass your

judgment on them according to what God revealed to you."

Qasim's eighth century raids into Northwest India were only the prelude to the more violent career of early eleventh century Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, who "passed through India like a whirlwind, destroying, pillaging, and massacring." He made a vow to "chastise idolaters" every year of his life. In the course of seventeen invasions, according to the Persian historian Alberuni,

Mahmud utterly ruined the prosperity of the country and performed there wonderful exploits, by which the Hindus became like atoms of dust scattered in all directions. The Sultan gave orders that all the temples should be burnt with naphtha and fire, and leveled with the ground.

In his *The Story of Civilization*, Will Durant described these events as "probably the bloodiest story in history." Trifkovic mentions that the mountainous northwestern approaches to India are known to this day as the Hindu Kush, or "Slaughter of the Hindus," as a reminder of the days when slaves from the Indian subcontinent died in the harsh Afghan mountains while being transported to Muslim courts of Central Asia.



Will Durant, author of *The Story of Civilization*

The Muslim conquest of Christian lands in the West was not much less harsh. Everywhere they went, Muslims imposed the *jizya* on Christians, a special tax paid only by non-Muslims and used mainly to finance further jihad. In effect, Christians were "forced to bankroll the subjugation of their co-religionists who were still free."

But all this unpleasant history is forgotten by mainstream Western scholars, who prefer to focus on the Crusades:

The postmodern myth claims that peaceful Muslims native to the Holy Land, were forced to take up arms in defense against Christian aggression. This myth takes AD 1095 as its starting point, but it ignores the preceding centuries when Muslim armies swept through the Byzantine Empire, conquering about two-thirds of the Christian world of that time. Far from being wars of aggression, the Crusades were a belated military response of Christian Europe to over three centuries of Muslim aggression against Christian lands.

It is also frequently forgotten that Muslims ultimately won that war.

In 1258, Mongol warriors captured Baghdad, and the future of Islam appeared in doubt. The religion owes its continued survival to the appearance on the stage of world history of a new people: the Turks. Their first kingdom was established in Anatolia on the border of the Byzantine Empire by Osman I in 1299 (the word "Ottoman" is derived from his name). In 1354, taking advantage of the destruction wrought by an earthquake, his grandson Suleyman Pasha established the first Turkish fortress on the European continent in the Gallipoli peninsula.

It was around this time—a century before the famous conquest of Constantinople—that the Turks introduced the practice of *devshirme*. This most odious of all Turkish impositions was an annual "blood levy" of Christian boys. At first, the levy took the form of military forays into Christian villages. Later, once Turkish power was more firmly established, the assessment was fixed at one fifth of all Christian boys in each conquered territory. It was carried out like this:

On a fixed date, all the fathers were ordered to appear with their children in the public square. The recruiting agents chose the most sturdy and handsome boys in the presence of a Muslim judge. The recruiting agents often took more than the prescribed number of children and sold the surplus back to their parents.

The boys were raised as Muslims and given military training. The resultant corps of *janissaries*, or "new soldiers," became the elite of the Turkish military.

Devshirme was by far the most hated aspect of Turkish rule among the Christians of the Balkans. Many parents deliberately mutilated healthy sons in order to avoid losing them. Trifkovic comments:

The practice left a deep scar on the collective memory of the Balkan Christians, notably Serbs and Bulgarians, and contributed to their thorough loathing of all things Turkish that persists to this day. And yet contemporary Turkish propagandists present the tragedy of the kidnapped boys and their families as the Ottoman equivalent of a full scholarship to Harvard or Yale: "From the poor families' point of view, it was a great chance for their sons to be offered a high level of education, especially in the palace which would provide good future prospects."

Devshirme went beyond even the practices of the Arab conquerors of earlier days. Under the Arabs, Christians could be enslaved as punishment for rebellion, or families unable to pay the crushing *jizya* tax might be obliged to hand over their children to be sold into slavery, the sum thereby realized being deducted from the family's assessment. But the Turks, contrary to previous Islamic law and practice, enslaved Christians as a matter of course and even if they did not rebel against their conquerors.

As under the Arabs, local Christian collaborators willing to forsake kin and faith were exempted from the oppression visited upon their neighbors, and sometimes rose to positions of power.

Lingering suppressed guilt at the original act of betrayal turned Muslim converts into zealous oppressors of their Christian kinsmen who had retained their identity.

As Turkey declined, its provincial governors and warlords—often, though not always, local converts to Islam with a suppressed guilty grudge against their former coreligionists—grew stronger, and increasingly asserted rebellious independence. Notably in the Balkans, it was demonstrated in far harsher treatment of their Christian subjects than was either mandated or normally practiced from the Bosphorus.

This pattern has persisted into our own time. Alija Izetbegovic, the main Bosnian Muslim leader of the early years following the breakup of Yugoslavia, proudly proclaimed in his so-called Islamic Declaration that

there can be no peace or coexistence between the Islamic faith and non-Islamic societies and political institutions. The Islamic movement should and must start taking power as soon as it is morally and numerically strong enough... to overthrow the existing non-Islamic power structure.

Although Mr. Izetbegovic acted as Bosnian leader during the entire course of her husband's presidency, this statement appears to have escaped Hillary Clinton's attention. Yet it is merely a restatement of Islam's ancient three phase strategy of conquest, a pattern of progression from

Dar al Sulh—when the Muslims are a minority community, and need to adopt temporarily a peaceful attitude in order to deceive their neighbors (Mecca before Muhammad's move to Medina is the model for which the Muslim diaspora in the Western world provides contemporary example)—to *Dar al Harb*, when the territory of the infidel becomes a war zone by definition. This happens as soon as the Muslim side feels strong enough to dispense with pretense. The example was provided by Muhammad, who accepted a truce with Mecca when he was in an inferior position but broke it as soon as his recuperated strength allowed, and offered his pagan compatriots the choice of conversion or death. In Europe today, the early signs of this forthcoming stage, amounting to a low-intensity civil war, are visible in ethnic disturbances in English and French cities. The final objective all along is the *Dar al Islam*, where Muslims dominate and infidels are at best tolerated and at worst expelled or massacred.

Plenty of our contemporaries champion "dialogue" with Islam, of course, but Trifkovic observes that "of all major religions known to man, the teaching of Islam makes it the least amenable to dialogue with other faiths. Among non-Muslims it seeks converts or obedient subjects, not partners in a dialogue." The very openness of Christians to "dialogue" with them seems to Muslims a proof of the weakness of the Christians' faith and possible readiness to convert to Islam. Moreover, many Muslims find it impossible to consider their belief system objectively, as a system of *beliefs*. In the words of religious philosopher Frithjof Schuon, "Islam coincides in [the Muslim's] mind with the irresistible logic of things." The religion nurtures

a curious tendency to believe that non-Muslims either know that Islam is the truth and reject it out of pure obstinacy, or else simply ignorant of it and can be converted by elementary explanations; that anyone should be able to oppose Islam with a good conscience quite exceeds the Muslim powers of imagination.

A good illustration of the Muslim approach to inter-faith dialogue is Trifkovic's anecdote concerning a 1980 conference of the Society for the Study of Theology in Oxford. The delegates were told that a certain Abdus-Samad Sharafuddin of King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah, unable to attend in person, had requested the organizers to distribute his paper, entitled *About the Myth of God Incarnate: An Impartial Survey of Its Main Topics*. The paper simply stated the standard Muslim view of Christianity, viz., that the worship of Jesus as God incarnate is idolatry, and that the true understanding is given in the Kuranic verse: "The Messiah, Son of Mary, was nothing but a messenger. Messengers have passed away before him." The author went on to "refute" the doctrine of the Trinity with another quote from the Kuran. Yet he solemnly explained to the other delegates that his work was of monumental importance: "it shatters age-long darkness like a bolt from the blue; like a rational [!] God-sent lightening it strikes the London horizon to explode an age-long blunder in Christian thought."

We may conclude with the verdict pronounced by the distinguished Scottish orientalist William Muir (1819-1905) near the end of his long and productive career, and cited with approval by Trifkovic, that

the sword of Muhammad and the Qur'an are the most fatal enemies of civilization, liberty and truth which the world has ever yet known... an unmitigated cultural disaster parading as God's will. Hatred of non-Muslims is the pivot of Islamic existence. It not only declares all dissidents as the denizens of hell, but also seeks to ignite a permanent fire of tension between Muslims and non-Muslims; it is far more lethal than Karl Marx's idea of social conflict. ■

Only a society gone mad can unblinkingly be told that Islam is good and tolerant, that "we" (the West) have been nasty and unkind to it over the centuries — "remember the Crusades!" — and that terrorism needs to be understood, and cured, independently of Islam's teaching and practice. At the root of the domestic malaise is the notion that countries do not belong to the people who have inhabited them for generations and built their institutions, but to whoever happens to be within their boundaries at any given moment — regardless of his culture, attitude, or intentions. ■

—Serge Trifkovic, *Defeating Jihad: How the War on Terror May Yet Be Won, in Spite of Ourselves*