

## **Issues/Discussion Forum**

### **If Muslims are to Meet the Herculean Challenges of the Modern Age, It can only happen through a deep understanding of the Rational Islam of the Golden Age**

**- Steven Horowitz**

What were the cultural underpinnings during the Islamic “Golden Age” and could they be rekindled to save the Middle East from the ravages of Islamism? The answer to the second part of this question is a qualified yes. This is not my opinion (as a pro-Israeli Jew, I possess a huge skepticism that such a difficult transformation is even possible), but it was the opinion of one of the shrewdest and most moderate leaders in the contemporary history of the Arab Middle East. In one of his last interviews, and with the prospect of an untimely death as a backdrop, the late King Hussein of Jordan was asked this all-important question: “Would you agree that the Muslim decline can be dated from the 9th century when Islam missed the chance to become the religion of reason and moderation by the crushing of the Mu’tazilite movement?” King Hussein responded: “That is essentially correct, and we must do what we can to change that now.”

King Hussein was a practical politician, but also a visionary when it came to his religion. The theological inheritance that this king left to his progeny will (if acted upon) have tremendous positive political impact in the very near future. Or, if is left dormant, the Arabs will be subject to events with unparalleled consequences. This is true not only for the Jordanian royal family but also for everyone in the Middle East.

The “Golden Age” of Islam was an age unprecedented in world history for its learning and wisdom. If today’s Arabs and Muslims are to meet the Herculean challenges of the modern age, it can only happen through a deep understanding of the Golden Age, an age whose philosophical antecedents have spread out in many directions. But the very demise of this crucial period is still being sorely felt. Because the moral compass of Islam’s golden heights has been so lacking in the vital renewable energy of reason, the world now suffers from a dearth of moral comprehension, which is leading to greater and greater human antipathy.

In order to understand why humanity has found itself in such dire straits, all the peoples of the world would be wise to acquaint themselves with this Golden Age. For it is not only the Arab-Islamic world that faces such titanic challenges in the near future. All of us face the future with a deep apprehension in all aspects of the human social sphere, including the very environment of the earth upon which we reside.

The Hashemite monarchy has known for the last one hundred years that a Jewish presence within the Middle East was a positive step forward. But until the very moment that the rest of the Arab world (or at least the Palestinians) could agree formally, the various Jordanian leaders held their political cards in close proximity to what was openly possible. This was especially true of King Hussein. It was not until the Palestinian Liberation Organization met with Israel, on the Clinton White House lawn in 1993, that the Jordanian king felt he had enough proper cover in order to sign his own peace treaty with Israel.

Yet over twenty years later, the negative currents within political and traditional Islam (Sunni and Shiite) have proven far too strong for any Israeli Jew to believe that peace between Israel and the Islamic world can ever be a lasting and permanent proposition. Peace, now, does not depend on an Israeli withdrawal from a territory enshrined through the League of Nations and incorporated into the Charter of the United Nations as a homeland for the Jewish people. On the contrary, peace is now dependent on an Arab-Muslim world that seeks an interfaith understanding with the world's only Jewish state. This can only happen through the wisdom of the late King Hussein. He, alone among modern Islamic leaders, understood that the rational Islam of its theological Golden Age would be welcoming toward its Jewish brethren. He learned this essential truth from his great-uncle Faisal, who was the first to recognize that the weakness of the Arab-Islamic world could be overcome through a shift in their political and theological orientation.

But such a turn in Islamic religious reality has never had a hearing within the traditional Islam of the modern Islamist political movement. From Iran in the east, and throughout the entire Islamic world, the demonization of the Jewish people has been unrelenting in its vile contemptuousness. Meanwhile, the Islamic search for the utopia of a revelatory moment in history has led to a blind alley of complete unreality. Reason alone would teach that the leadership of the original Ummah could never be duplicated, and that the political quest for such an endeavor can only lead to an unending despotism. Unfortunately, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan under the direction of King Hussein never had a chance to

challenge the traditionalist Islamic model by thoughtfully engaging the entire Islamic world in a modern understanding of the Mu'tazilite framework.

But now is not too late for the heir of King Hussein, or any modern Islamic leader, to step forward. Currently, most of the Middle East is in the direct firing line of an extremely negative Islamist offensive, an offensive which has now engulfed the entire Middle East in a war of all-against-all. Sectarian division is only part of the problem. Moderate Jordan faces danger from any number of places. ISIS would like nothing better than to bring it down, but so too would Shiite Iran, certainly Sunni Hamas within the Palestinian camp, and even Jordan's own Muslim Brotherhood.

Then, of course, there is Syria and the myriad of Islamist parties whose goals are not only to bring down a dictator (Assad), but also to establish a most cruel form of Islamist despotism. ISIS is the very worst of many varieties within this camp. But such despotism has been a function of traditional Islamic politics ever since the demise of rational Islam. How did Islam come to such a situation, where innocent people are blown up in their mosques and wars have become endemic throughout a region which was once considered the very gate of civilization? These are precisely the questions implied within the visionary warning that King Hussein challenged all believers to grapple with.

Before his untimely death nearly seventeen years ago, Jordan's king was wise and prescient about the future. I'm certain he understood that when absolute truth is proclaimed without serious dialogue, and the community is left without choice or reason, then coercion inevitably reigns and the law becomes an empty shell.

The decline of Islam can be traced to the crushing of the Mu'tazilite movement. King Hussein, a most admired leader throughout the entire world, sincerely understood. But the king never lived to see the utter religious madness now afoot within the borders of the first Islamic Caliphate. This religious madness has become nothing less than an insane attempt by many persons — claiming Islamic legitimacy but engaged instead in a global war against all who would disagree with them (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) — to stifle rational dialogue. So who were the Mu'tazilites and what was the nature of the contribution that they made to the Islamic Golden Age?

The Mu'tazilites were followers of a school of early Islamic theology that emphasized free will and the role of reason in the understanding of revelation. Like Judaism, within Islam

there is no direct authority to interpret revelation. The Koran is credited as the direct word of the Divine, but to understand the Koran depended on the facilities of human understanding. Humans, of course, have their limitations, and those limitations can be distinctly identified from the added experience and knowledge of each passing generation. The arbitration of understanding therefore becomes a project for history, as the Ummah of yesterday passes the torch of revelatory knowledge forever forward. The Ummah is always a living, breathing and organic community composed of individuals wrestling with their own conception of morality through revelation. As individual and historical circumstances change, so too must our understanding of revelation. This is true of all the Abrahamic religions.

Who then speaks definitively for the true word of the L-rd? The answer can only be no one and everyone. When individuals sinned against Allah, the Mu'tazilites believed that no human intermediary had the right to intercede. However, when individuals sinned against their fellows, crimes were made to be punishable by law — that is, in order for justice to be served. But who was to make the laws? And how were the Koranic interpretations of law to be decided? In the original Ummah, it was Muhammad who made all the decisions. But as time passed, the question of the nature and application of the law became paramount.

In the eyes of the early Mu'tazilites (called the people of reason) Muhammad was not superhuman but was understood to be the first Muslim. He was respected as the Prophet and a great man, but like everyone else he was expected to be a practitioner of the Koran. Undoubtedly as the first Muslim, Muhammad had a clearer understanding of Koran than anyone else, but even as the Prophet, he was not considered Divine. Because Muhammad was a man, and because he used his own judgment in his application of Divine injunction, the Mu'tazilites believed that all Muslims should follow in the same pattern — that is, to use their own rational judgment. After all, the Koran constantly calls on humans to use the one facility inherent in humans, the ability to reason.

But not all Muslims agreed. Instead of the human faculty of reason, they looked for an alternative authority to explain revelation. They sought an authority whose judgment rarely wavered, and whose legal understandings would exhibit little change into the future. For these traditionalists, reason in the service of Koranic understanding, by use of autonomous human decision, needed to be replaced by the example of Muhammad's life. The emulation of the life of the first Muslim became more important than an individual Muslim's own

judgment. This had incredible implications for all of society, but especially for politics and law.

The law remains stagnant without the circulation of reason through consensual authority and individual responsibility. The absence of individual autonomy through the application of reason has had a deleterious effect on political advancement and economic initiative. The impulse toward democratic norms becomes politically stillborn within the stultifying confines of any tradition without the crucial ingredient of reason.

The Islamic Golden Age declined as reason was replaced by the authority of a rigid example. Instead of reasonable dialogue and individual judgment, society became stultified by doctrinaire authoritarianism. The dynamism of free will was replaced by the traditional fatalism of the desert tribe, as innovation receded. In this process, the Islamic Golden Age retreated theologically, politically, and economically. An age of learning and religious tolerance was superseded by a millennium of slow, yet steady decline.

Now the moral authority of traditional Islamic culture has reached its nadir in the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring. Political Islam has proved to be much more than just a “minority movement” within traditional Islam. It is now clear that this stultifying Islamism represents the unfortunate culmination of a long and steep historical decline. But the Islamic world cannot live without Islam, just as Europe cannot live without Christianity or little Israel cannot live without Judaism. Secularization, modernization, and pure reason without a moral foundation are not replacements for a long-held revelation. But without the unique context of human capacity — that is, the ability to reason — even revelation loses the presence of social vitality.

This combination of reason and revelation is the very antithesis of all forms of coercion. For it is a truism of all religion that coercion of any kind is an unwelcome and utterly divisive intrusion on the human pathway to a partnership with the Divine. Until we can all pray together, it is very doubtful that we can ever learn to live together.

Islam is in need of democracy within a rational pluralism, just as secularism needs to contain a religious moral component. Religious authority must continue to be flexible if it is to remain relevant. While secular social structures without a religious moral foundation always risk the dystopia of relativism, religion without reason risks its own violent dystopia.

This is precisely where the world is today. The freedom of the West is perceived by Muslims as a purely materialist structure without a moral foundation. How could such a place have created the conditions for two world wars, an unprecedented genocide, and now a potential ecocide? If the West truly had a living moral foundation, how could these events have happened? However, in a similar vein the West views the Muslim Middle East as a place of religious intolerance, fascist dictatorship, civil war, chaos and mass murder. Can both East and West be right?

What is the answer? Only a rational approach to religion can save us from ourselves. If we are all made in the image of G-d, what then seems to be the problem? Simple logic should suffice to give us a very easy answer. Perhaps what we are really lacking is an enlightened leadership to provide a pathway toward that answer. At this late stage in history, perhaps the wise words of the late King of Jordan can enable the courage in other leaders to challenge the entrenched traditionalism of all closed minds, wherever they might reside.

Little people (like myself) can only pray that King Hussein's words can finally be given a new life of their own. After all, the Hashemite kings are blood heirs to the Prophet Muhammad himself. I would certainly like to see a return of a "Golden Age" (including a secure Israel) in the Middle East. As the Christian Bible says: "With God, all things are possible". So let us all pray (together) that free will can trump blind determinism, and reason can once again illuminate revelation. With free will, Divine injunction, and reason, political reality must by logical necessity shift toward a moral democratic superstructure — a structure which is in very short supply both in the modern Middle East and in the very confused and frightened secular West.

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*(Courtesy: New Age Islam)*

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