



The age of horrorism (part three)

An exclusive essay by Martin Amis, continued.

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Like fundamentalist Judaism and medieval Christianity, Islam is totalist. That is to say, it makes a total claim on the individual. Indeed, there is no individual; there is only the umma - the community of believers. Ayatollah Khomeini, in his copious writings, often returns to this theme. He unindulgently notes that believers in most religions appear to think that, so long as they observe all the formal pieties, then for the rest of the time they can do more or less as they please. 'Islam', as he frequently reminds us, 'isn't like that.' Islam follows you everywhere, into the kitchen, into the bedroom, into the bathroom, and beyond death into eternity. Islam means 'submission' - the surrender of independence of mind. That surrender now bears the weight of well over 60 generations, and 14 centuries.

The stout self-sufficiency or, if you prefer, the extreme incuriosity of Islamic culture has been much remarked. Present-day Spain translates as many books into Spanish, annually, as the Arab world has translated into Arabic in the past 1,100 years. And the late-medieval Islamic powers barely noticed the existence of the West until it started losing battles to it. The tradition of intellectual autarky was so robust that Islam remained indifferent even to readily available and obviously useful innovations, including, incredibly, the wheel. The wheel, as we know, makes things easier to roll; Bernard Lewis, in *What Went Wrong?*, sagely notes that it also makes things easier to steal.

By the beginning of the 20th century the entire Muslim world, with partial exceptions, had been subjugated by the European empires. And at that point the doors of perception were opened to foreign influence: that of Germany. This allegiance cost Islam its last imperium, the Ottoman, for decades a 'helpless hulk' (Hobsbawm), which was duly dismantled and shared out after the First World War - a war that was made in Berlin. Undeterred, Islam continued to look to Germany for sponsorship and inspiration. When the Nazi experiment ended, in 1945, sympathy for its ideals lingered on for years, but Islam was now forced to look elsewhere. It had no choice; geopolitically, there was nowhere else to turn. And the flame passed from Germany to the USSR.

So Islam, in the end, proved responsive to European influence: the influence of Hitler and Stalin. And one hardly needs to labour the similarities between Islamism and the totalitarian cults of the last century. Anti-semitic, anti-

liberal, anti-individualist, anti-democratic, and, most crucially, anti-rational, they too were cults of death, death-driven and death-fuelled. The main distinction is that the paradise which the Nazis (pagan) and the Bolsheviks (atheist) sought to bring about was an earthly one, raised from the mulch of millions of corpses. For them, death was creative, right enough, but death was still death. For the Islamists, death is a consummation and a sacrament; death is a beginning. Sam Harris is right:

'Islamism is not merely the latest flavour of totalitarian nihilism. There is a difference between nihilism and a desire for supernatural reward. Islamists could smash the world to atoms and still not be guilty of nihilism, because everything in their world has been transfigured by the light of paradise...' Pathological mass movements are sustained by 'dreams of omnipotence and sadism', in Robert Jay Lifton's phrase. That is usually enough. Islamism adds a third inducement to its warriors: a heavenly immortality that begins even before the moment of death.

For close to a millennium, Islam could afford to be autarkic. Its rise is one of the wonders of world history - a chain reaction of conquest and conversion, an amassment not just of territory but of millions of hearts and minds. The vigour of its ideal of justice allowed for levels of tolerance significantly higher than those of the West. Culturally, too, Islam was the more evolved. Its assimilations and its learning potentiated the Renaissance - of which, alas, it did not partake. Throughout its ascendancy, Islam was buoyed by what Malise Ruthven, in *A Fury for God*, calls 'the argument from manifest success'. The fact of expansion underwrote the mandate of heaven. And now, for the past 300 or 400 years, observable reality has propounded a rebuttal: the argument from manifest failure. As one understands it, in the Islamic cosmos there is nothing more painful than the suspicion that something has denatured the covenant with God. This unbearable conclusion must naturally be denied, but it is subliminally present, and accounts, perhaps, for the apocalyptic hurt of the Islamist.

Over the past five years, what we have been witnessing, apart from a moral slump or bust, is a death agony: the death agony of imperial Islam. Islamism is the last wave - the last convulsion. Until 2003, one could take some comfort from the very virulence of the Islamist deformation. Nothing so insanely dionysian, so impossibly poisonous, could expect to hold itself together over time. In the 20th century, outside Africa, the only comparable eruptions of death-hunger, of death-oestrus, were confined to Nazi Germany and Stalinite Kampuchea, the one lasting 12 years, the other three and a half. Hitler, Pol Pot, Osama: such men only ask to be the last to die. But there are some sound reasons for thinking that the confrontation with Islamism will be testingly prolonged.

It is by now not too difficult to trace what went wrong, psychologically, with the Iraq War. The fatal turn, the fatal forfeiture of legitimacy, came not with the mistaken but also cynical emphasis on Saddam's weapons of mass destruction: the intelligence agencies of every country on earth, Iraq included, believed that he had them. The fatal turn was the American President's all too palpable submission to the intoxicant of power. His walk, his voice, his idiom, right up to his mortifying appearance in the flight suit on the aircraft-carrier, USS Abraham Lincoln ('Mission Accomplished') - every dash and comma in his body language betrayed the unscrupulous confidence of the power surge.

We should parenthetically add that Tony Blair succumbed to it too - with a difference. In 'old' Europe, as Rumsfeld insolently called it, the idea of a political class was predicated on the inculcation of checks and balances, of psychic surge-breakers, to limit the corruption that personal paramountcy always entrains. It was not a matter of mental hygiene; everyone understood that a rotting mind will make rotten decisions. Blair knew this. He also knew that his trump was not a high one: the need of the American people to hear approval for the war in an English accent. Yet there he was, helplessly caught up in the slipstream turbulence of George Bush. Rumsfeld, too, visibly succumbed to it. On television, at this time, he looked as though he had just worked his way through a snowball of cocaine. 'Stuff happens,' he said, when asked about the looting of the Mesopotamian heritage in Baghdad - the remark of a man not just corrupted but floridly vulgarised by power. As well as the body language, at this time, there was also the language, the power language, all the way from Bush's 'I want to kick ass' to his 'Bring it on' - a rather blithe incitement, some may now feel, to the armed insurgency.

Contemplating this, one's aversion was very far from being confined to the aesthetic. Much followed from it. And we now know that an atmosphere of boosterist unanimity, of prewar triumphalism, had gathered around the President, an atmosphere in which any counter-argument, any hint of circumspection, was seen as a whimper of weakness or disloyalty. If she were alive, Barbara Tuchman would be chafing to write a long addendum to *The March of Folly*; but not even she could have foreseen a president who, 'going into this period', 'was praying for strength to do the Lord's will'. A power rush blessed by God - no, not a good ambience for precautions and doubts. At that time, the invasion of Iraq was presented as a 'self-financing' preventive war to enforce disarmament and regime change. Three and a half years later, it is an adventurist and proselytising war, and its remaining goal is the promotion of democracy.

The Iraq project was foredoomed by three intrinsic historical realities. First, the Middle East is clearly unable, for now, to sustain democratic rule - for the simple reason that its peoples will vote against it. Did no one whisper the words, in the Situation Room - did no one say what the scholars have been saying for years? The 'electoral policy' of the fundamentalists, writes Lewis, 'has been classically summarised as "One man (men only), one vote, once."' Or, in Harris's trope, democracy will be 'little more than a gangplank to theocracy'; and that theocracy will be Islamist. Now the polls have closed, and the results are coming in, region-wide. In Lebanon, gains for Hizbollah; in Egypt, gains for Sayyid Qutb's fraternity, the Muslim Brothers; in Palestine, victory for Hamas; in Iran, victory for the soapbox rabble-rouser and primitive anti-semite, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In the Iraqi election, Bush and Blair, pathetically, both 'hoped' for Allawi, whose return was 14 per cent.

Second, Iraq is not a real country. It was cobbled together, by Winston Churchill, in the early Twenties; it consists of three separate (Ottoman) provinces, Sunni, Shia, Kurd - a disposition which looks set to resume. Among the words not listened to by the US Administration, we can include those of Saddam Hussein. Even with an apparatus of terror as savage as any in history, even with chemical weapons, helicopter gunships, and mass killings, even with a proven readiness to cleanse, to displace, and to destroy whole ecosystems, Hussein modestly conceded that he found Iraq a difficult country to keep in one piece. As a Sunni military man put it, Iraqis hate Iraq - or 'Iraq', a concept that has brought them nothing but suffering. There is no nationalist instinct; the instinct is for atomisation.

Third, only the sack of Mecca or Medina would have caused more pain to the Islamic heart than the taking, and befouling, of the Iraqi capital, the seat of the Caliphate. We have not heard any discussion, at home, about the creedal significance of Baghdad. But we have had some intimations from the jihadis' front line. In pronouncements that vibrate with historic afflatus, they speak of their joyful embrace of the chance to meet the infidel in the Land Between the Rivers. And, of course, beyond - in Madrid, in Bali (again), in London. It may be that the Coalition adventure has given the enemy a *casus belli* that will burn for a generation.

There are vast pluralities all over the West that are thirsting for American failure in Iraq - because they hate George Bush. Perhaps they do not realise that they are co-synchronously thirsting for an Islamist victory that will dramatically worsen the lives of their children. And this may come to pass. Let us look at the war, not through bin Laden's eyes, but through the eyes of the cunning of history. From that perspective, 11 September was a provocation. The 'slam dunk', the 'cakewalk' into Iraq amounted to a feint, and a trap. We now know, from various 500-page bestsellers like *Cobra II* and *Fiasco*, that the invasion of Iraq was truly incredibly blithe (there was no plan, no plan at all, for the occupation); still, we should not delude ourselves that the motives behind it were dishonourable. This is a familiar kind of tragedy. The Iraq War represents a gigantic contract, not just for Halliburton, but also for the paving company called Good Intentions. We must hope that something can be salvaged from it, and that our ethical standing can be reconsolidated. Iraq was a divagation in what is being ominously called the Long War. To our futile losses in blood, treasure and moral prestige, we can add the loss in time; and time, too, is blood.

An idea presents itself about a better direction to take. And funnily enough its current champion is the daughter of the dark genius behind the disaster in Iraq: she is called Liz Cheney. Before we come to that, though, we must briefly return to Ayed, and his belt, and to some quiet thoughts about the art of fiction.

The 'belt' ending of *The Unknown Known* came to me fairly late. But the belt was already there, and prominently. All writers will know exactly what this means. It means that the subconscious had made a polite suggestion, a suggestion that the conscious mind had taken a while to see. Ayed's belt, purchased by mail-order in Greeley, Colorado, is called a 'RodeoMaMa', and consists of a 'weight strap' and the pommel of a saddle. Ayed is of that breed of men which holds that a husband should have sex with his wives every night. And his invariable use of the 'RodeoMaMa' is one of the reasons for the rumble of mutiny in his marriages.

Looking in at the longhouse called *Known Knowns*, Ayed retools his 'RodeoMaMa'. He goes back to the house and summons his wives - for the last time. Thus Ayed gets his conceptual breakthrough, his unknown unknown: he is the first to bring martyrdom operations into the setting of his own home.

I could write a piece almost as long as this one about why I abandoned *The Unknown Known*. The confirmatory moment came a few weeks ago: the freshly fortified suspicion that there exists on our planet a kind of human being who will become a Muslim in order to pursue suicide-mass murder. For quite a time I have felt that Islamism was trying to poison the world. Here was a sign that the poison might take - might mutate, like bird flu. Islam, as I said, is a total system, and like all such it is eerily amenable to satire. But with Islamism, with total malignancy, with total terror and total boredom, irony, even militant irony (which is what satire is), merely shrivels and dies.

In Twentieth Century the late historian JM Roberts took an unsentimental line on the Chinese Revolution:

'More than 2,000 years of remarkable historical continuities lie behind [it], which, for all its cost and cruelty, was a heroic endeavour, matched in scale only by such gigantic upheavals as the spread of Islam, or Europe's assault on the world in early modern times.'

The cost and cruelty, according to Jung Chang and Jon Halliday's recent biography, amounted, perhaps, to 70 million lives in the Mao period alone. Yet this has to be balanced against 'the weight of the past' - nowhere heavier than in China:

'Deliberate attacks on family authority... were not merely attempts by a suspicious regime to encourage informers and delation, but attacks on the most conservative of all Chinese institutions. Similarly, the advancement of women and propaganda to discourage early marriage had dimensions going beyond 'progressive' feminist ideas or population control; they were an assault on the past such as no other revolution had ever made, for in China the past meant a role for women far inferior to those of pre-revolutionary America, France or even Russia.'

There is no momentum, in Islam, for a reformation. And there is no time, now, for a leisurely, slow-lob enlightenment. The necessary upheaval is a revolution - the liberation of women. This will not be the work of a decade or even a generation. Islam is a millennium younger than China. But we should remind ourselves that the Chinese Revolution took half a century to roll through its villages.

In 2002 the aggregate GDP of all the Arab countries was less than the GDP of Spain; and the Islamic states lag behind the West, and the Far East, in every index of industrial and manufacturing output, job creation, technology, literacy, life-expectancy, human development, and intellectual vitality. (A recondite example: in terms of the ownership of telephone lines, the leading Islamic nation is the UAE, listed in 33rd place, between Reunion and Macau.) Then, too, there is the matter of tyranny, corruption, and the absence of civil rights and civil society. We may wonder how the Islamists feel when they compare India to Pakistan, one a burgeoning democratic superpower, the other barely distinguishable from a failed state. What Went Wrong? asked Bernard Lewis, at book length. The broad answer would be institutionalised irrationalism; and the particular focus would be the obscure logic that denies the Islamic world the talent and energy of half its people. No doubt the impulse towards rational inquiry is by now very weak in the rank and file of the Muslim male. But we can dwell on the memory of those images from Afghanistan: the great waves of women hurrying to school.

The connection between manifest failure and the suppression of women is unignorable. And you sometimes feel that the current crux, with its welter of insecurities and nostalgias, is little more than a pre-emptive tantrum - to ward off the evacuation of the last sanctum of power. What would happen if we spent some of the next 300 billion dollars (this is Liz Cheney's thrust) on the raising of consciousness in the Islamic world? The effect would be inherently explosive, because the dominion of the male is Koranic - the unfalsifiable word of God, as dictated to the Prophet:

'Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them, forsake them in beds apart, and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them. Surely God is high, supreme' (4:34).

Can we imagine seeing men on the march in defence of their right to beat their wives? And if we do see it, then what? Would that win hearts and minds? The martyrs of this revolution would be sustained by two obvious truths: the binding authority of scripture, all over the world, is very seriously questioned; and women, by definition, are not a minority. They would know, too, that their struggle is a heroic assault on the weight of the past - the alweight of 14 centuries.

Attentive readers may have asked themselves what it is, this ridiculous category, the unknown known. The unknown known is paradise, scriptural inerrancy, God. The unknown known is religious belief.

All religions are violent; and all ideologies are violent. Even Westernism, so impeccably bland, has violence glinting within it. This is because any belief system involves a degree of illusion, and therefore cannot be defended by mind alone. When challenged, or affronted, the believer's response is hormonal; and the subsequent collision will be one between a brain and a cat's cradle of glands. I will never forget the look on the gatekeeper's face, at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, when I suggested, perhaps rather airily, that he skip some calendric prohibition and let me in anyway. His expression, previously cordial and cold, became a mask; and the mask was saying that killing me, my wife, and my children was something for which he now had warrant. I knew then that the phrase 'deeply religious' was a grave abuse of that adverb. Something isn't deep just because it's all that is there; it is more like a varnish on a vacuum. Millennial Islamism is an ideology superimposed upon a religion - illusion upon illusion. It is not merely violent in tendency. Violence is all that is there.

In Philip Larkin's 'Aubade' (1977), the poet, on waking, contemplates 'unresting death, a whole day nearer now':

This is a special way of being afraid

No trick dispels. Religion used to try,

That vast moth-eaten musical brocade

Created to pretend we never die...

Much earlier, in 'Church Going' (1954), examining his habit of visiting country churches and the feelings they arouse in him (chiefly bafflement and boredom), he was able to frame a more expansive response:

It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,

In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,

Are recognised, and robed as destinies.

And that much never can be obsolete,

Since someone will forever be surprising

A hunger in himself to be more serious,

And gravitating with it to this ground,

Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,

If only that so many dead lie round.

This is beautifully arrived at. It contains everything that can be decently and rationally said.

We allow that, in the case of religion, or the belief in supernatural beings, the past weighs in, not at 2,000 years, but at approximately five million. Even so, the time has come for a measure of impatience in our dealings with those who would take an innocent personal pronoun, which was just minding its own business, and exalt it with a capital letter. Opposition to religion already occupies the high ground, intellectually and morally. People of independent mind should now start to claim the spiritual high ground, too. We should be with Joseph Conrad:

'The world of the living contains enough marvels and mysteries as it is - marvels and mysteries acting upon our emotions and intelligence in ways so inexplicable that it would almost justify the conception of life as an enchanted state. No, I am too firm in my consciousness of the marvellous to be ever fascinated by the mere supernatural, which (take it any way you like) is but a manufactured article, the fabrication of minds insensitive to the intimate delicacies of our relation to the dead and to the living, in their countless multitudes; a desecration of our tenderest memories; an outrage on our dignity.

'Whatever my native modesty may be it will never condescend to seek help for my imagination within those vain imaginings common to all ages and that in themselves are enough to fill all lovers of mankind with unutterable sadness.' ('Author's Note' to *The Shadow-Line*, 1920.)

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