

Boris Johnson Wrote Something Unflattering About Islam 12 Years Ago – Was He Right?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



[Here](#) is the story:

Boris Johnson has been accused of “promoting hatred” after penning an essay arguing Islam caused the Muslim world to be “literally centuries behind” the West.

“After penning an essay” sounds as if Johnson just wrote it. It is only at the very end of the third paragraph that we learn he wrote this essay nearly 13 years ago, in 2007.

The frontrunner for No 10 claimed there was something about Islam that held back development in parts of the world, creating a “Muslim grievance” fuelling virtually every conflict.

“The more bitterness and confusion there has been, to the point where virtually every global flashpoint you can think of – from Bosnia to Palestine to Iraq to Kashmir – involves some sense of Muslim grievance,” Mr Johnson wrote, in 2007.

Was Johnson wrong? In 2007, when he wrote that remark, weren't the “global flashpoints” in Bosnia, “Palestine,” Iraq, Kashmir? Had he included one other “flashpoint” he forgot to mention – Afghanistan – that would only have made his point even more strongly. And in the last 13 years, what other “global flashpoints” could be added to Johnson's list? Libya, with the overthrow of Qaddafi and then the violence among various armed factions that is still going on, with no end in sight. In Israel, the Fast Jihadis of Hamas in Gaza continue their violent attempts to breach Israel's security fence, while the Slow Jihadis of the Palestinian Authority continue to wage a diplomatic and propaganda war against the Jewish State; Fast and Slow Jihadis both hate Jews, but they are also at each other's throats. In Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood regime of Mohamed Morsi was toppled by force, the military's suppression of the Brotherhood continues without letup. In Yemen, where a civil war started in 2015, and quickly became a proxy war between Shi'a Iran, which supports the Houthi rebels, and Sunni Saudi Arabia, which props up the government forces with an extensive bombing campaign. In Bahrain, the Sunni ruler has had to suppress with force the street protests of the largely Shi'a population.

Still another “global flashpoint” has been Syria, convulsed in a civil war since 2011, a war which led five million people to flee the country as refugees, while another six million have been internally displaced. Thus half the country, 11 million people out of a total Syrian population of 22 million, have had to leave their homes. In Iraq, the Sunnis have not acquiesced in their loss of power since Saddam Hussein was overthrown, and the much more numerous Shi'a are not about to relinquish any of the power that has devolved to

them; the struggle over political and economic power continues. In both Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State emerged in 2015 and swiftly took control of a large territory, with a population of eight to twelve million people. In Afghanistan, the “longest war in American history” continues; the Taliban has reconquered half the country. In Tunisia, where the “Arab Spring” started in 2011, and popular protests toppled the corrupt regime of Ben Ali, there has for years been intermittent violence between the secularists, led by Beji Caïd Essebsi, and the “moderate” Islamists led by Rachid Ghannouchi of the Ennahda Party. In Algeria, violent street protests in 2019 finally caused Abdelaziz Bouteflika to resign after 20 years as President. In northern Nigeria, both the Muslim Hausa terrorists of Boko Haram, and the Muslim Fulani semi-nomadic herders have attacked churches, murdered Christian villagers, and kidnapped Christian girls.

Boris Johnson’s claim in 2007 that “virtually every global flashpoint you can think of – from Bosnia to Palestine to Iraq to Kashmir – involves some sense of Muslim grievance,” applies with even greater force today. Arabs against Jews in “Palestine,” Berbers against Arabs in Algeria, Muslims against Christians in Pakistan and Nigeria, Arabs against Kurds in Iraq, Alawites against Sunnis in Syria, Sunnis against Shia in Iraq, Shi’a Houthis against Sunnis in Yemen, militias from Tripoli fighting for power against militias from Benghazi, while both fight other militias from Zintan – not every conflict involves “some sense of Muslim grievance” (none is involved in the Ukraine where ethnic Russians fight to join Russia), but the vast majority of them do.

The comments [by Boris Johnson in his 2007 essay] were attacked by Tell Mama, an organization which monitors anti-Muslim hate, which said he had demonstrated a lack of understanding of the religion.

The reporter for *The Independent* is far too kind to Tell Mama.

It is a Muslim group that, while claiming to monitor only “anti-Muslim hate,” manages to call into question, and attempts to punish and suppress, remarks critical of Islam and of Muslims that fall far short of “hate.”

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) said people would want to know if the likely next prime minister still believed “Islam inherently inhibits the path to progress and freedom.”

Boris Johnson does indeed think that there is something about Islam that explains why Muslim countries have fallen behind the rest of the world. He posed it in his 2007 essay as a question to which he didn’t have the answer, but was throwing it out for discussion.

So let’s discuss it. Almost all Muslim states are family despotisms, like Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan, and Syria, or military dictatorships, as in Egypt, or authoritarian regimes, as in Pakistan and Turkey. In Muslim lands, the legitimacy of the state depends on how well it reflects the will expressed by Allah in the Qur’an. A ruler may be a despot, but he must be a true Muslim. In Western democracies, the legitimacy of the government depends on how well it reflects the will of the people, as expressed, however imperfectly, in elections. Muslims ruled by despots, military dictators, or authoritarians, cannot rely on the state to fulfill their wishes. This makes for widespread discontent. And now, through the Internet, Muslims everywhere can learn about how Western democracies work, can observe electoral politics up close, and come to resent what, as subjects rather than as citizens, they must endure from retrograde regimes. There is not a single Western-style democracy anywhere in the Muslim world; Turkey, before Erdogan, came the closest, but the Turkish military were always ready if a coup was needed to keep Kemalism as the state religion.

In economics, even those Muslim OPEC states that have

collectively received, since 1973 alone, more than twenty-five trillion dollars, have nowhere managed to create modern economies. These countries are still almost completely dependent on revenues from oil, though they keep talking, especially in Saudi Arabia, about the creation of “economic cities” where new industries will be created to help make their counties less dependent on oil. To date, from Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, it’s been all hat, and no cattle.

One reason for the lack of economic development is the *inshallah*-fatalism of Muslim societies. If the distribution of worldly rewards is in the end made by Allah, why knock yourself out trying to become rich? Inshallah-fatalism dampens the desire to exert oneself. Another reason is the inculcated suspicion of innovation, or *bid’a*. For Muslim clerics, new ways of thinking about things, or doing things, are disturbing. Might the eager embrace of the new lead to a desire for innovation in the faith itself? That would never do. Silicon Valley, the MIT Media Lab, the full-speed ahead delight Americans – even more than other Westerners – take in new ways of manufacturing and distributing goods, in new ways to collect data and connect people, in our societal deification of the innovators, such as Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, is foreign to the Muslim mindset. Inshallah-fatalism, and the distrust of the new, are aspects of Islam that have economic consequences; they are part of what holds Muslims back.

Education in Muslim countries tends to favor rote learning. This privileging of mere memorization likely has its roots in the much-lauded exercise of memorizing all 6,236 verses in the Qur’an. The person who manages this is given the honorific “hafiz.” And what’s more, those who memorize the Qur’an are then repeatedly tested on it in two ways. A snippet of verse may be recited by the examiner, out of its context, and the hafiz must then supply the complete verse. Or the hafiz may be asked to recite a verse that contains a certain word.

Muslims are pleased and proud at this feat of memory.

Many people in the West take quite a different view, and are appalled at what they regard as a waste of brainpower. When education consists in great part of memorization, of repetition, of inculcation rather than discussion, this leaves its mark on the minds of pupils. Islam discourages the habit of skeptical inquiry, for fear that such a habit might lead to a questioning of some aspect of Islam itself. But that is the very habit – of questioning what has been critically accepted – that is essential to the enterprise of science. Surely this helps explain the paucity of Muslim contributions to the sciences. Only three Muslims – or possibly two, since one of the three is an Ahmadi, and thus forbidden in his own country, Pakistan, from identifying himself as a Muslim – have won Nobel Prizes in the sciences.

And Mohammed Amin, a former chairman of the Conservative Muslim Forum, said Mr Johnson's analysis risked "actively promoting hatred of Muslims."

Why would questioning the effect of Islam on its adherents "actively promote hatred of Muslims"? It might instead create sympathy for them, as the first victims of Islam, bound by the mind-forged manacles of the faith, a faith that they cannot safely leave. Mohammed Amin is merely determined to halt all Islamocriticism, which is what Boris Johnson offered in 2007 when he wrote this piece.

He wrote: "There must be something about Islam that indeed helps to explain why there was no rise of the bourgeoisie, no liberal capitalism and therefore no spread of democracy in the Muslim world."

Why was there no rise of the bourgeoisie, nor of what we call "liberal capitalism," in the world of Islam? First, the absence of democracy helped prevent the emergence of this

social class, able in the West through political action to push for policies favorable to it. Muslim societies were traditionally despotisms (and most still are today), with an absolute ruler at the top. Political power remained with the ruler's family; the ruler maintained total control over the military that, in turn, kept the populace in line. People in Islamic societies were subjects, not citizens. The ruler, however despotic, was to be obeyed, as long as he was a good Muslim. The rise of the bourgeoisie in the West required that people be allowed to acquire some wealth through their own efforts, and to be secure in their property. In Muslim societies, wealth was regarded as due to the beneficence of Allah, an Oriental fatalism captured in the exclamation "inshallah." Why work hard if in the end, the will of Allah will decide who becomes rich and who stays poor? If someone acquired too much wealth, he might be seen as a potential rival to the ruler, and his wealth could be stripped from him. Furthermore, the accumulation of property by ordinary subjects in traditional Islamic societies was difficult, given the absence of certain institutions, such as a Western-style banking system, because in Islam usury was forbidden.

Liberal capitalism required a functioning banking system, transparent mechanisms by which investments could be made and profits retained. Instead of inshallah-fatalism, there needed to be a willingness on the part of some to take economic risks, while possessing enough political power to ensure that rulers would respond to the needs of a nascent entrepreneurial class. There needed to be a developed law of property, which scarcely exists – save for inheritance law – in the Sharia. None of these desiderata are to be found in traditional Islamic societies.

*"It is extraordinary to think that under the Roman/Byzantine empire, the city of Constantinople kept the candle of learning alight for a thousand years, and that **under Ottoman rule, the first printing press was not seen in Istanbul until***

the middle of the nineteenth century. Something caused them to be literally centuries behind."

The printing press came to the Islamic world – that of the Ottomans – nearly 390 years after Gutenberg, whose first printing press dates from 1439. That printing press technology was first brought to the Ottomans, that is, to Istanbul, Salonika, Edirne, and Izmir, not by Muslims, but by Sephardic Jews from Spain. This invention was at first used only by non-Muslims; between 1727 and 1839 only 142 books were printed in the entire Ottoman Empire. It was not until the mid-19th century that the use of the printing press became commonplace.

The late adoption of the printing press in the Islamic world certainly hindered the advancement of science, an undertaking that required the rapid and inexpensive dissemination of texts that the printing press permitted, and that had led to the explosion of knowledge and discovery and invention in Christian Europe from the Renaissance on.

Historians are not certain as to why the printing press was forbidden for so long in the Ottoman Empire. One possible explanation is that the scribes, fearing the loss of their livelihoods, were dead-set against the printing press. But even more important, I suspect, were the Muslim clerics, who were suspicious of all innovation, *bid'a*, of any kind, for fear that innovations in one area might result in calls for innovations in the area of faith. The printing press was, after all, an invention of the Infidels, which already made it suspect. Furthermore, the clerics feared losing control over what was no longer produced by pious scribes but by mechanical means, which might include texts calling some aspect of Islam, or of their own role, into question.

The MCB said: "Many of us would be interested to find out whether Mr Johnson still believes that Islam inherently inhibits the path to progress and freedom."

Tell Mama said the essay portrayed Muslims as “a wave or horde of rampaging Muslims, who had little time for the intricacies and legacies of civilizations like that of Rome”.

Protesting that it suggested Muslims were somehow “mentally constrained by Islam”, it said. “That shows a lack of understanding of Islam, and there are many Muslims whom Islam has inspired to produce some of the most beautiful art forms in their love for life and beauty.”

Islam has in fact narrowed the possibilities of artistic expression by Muslims. It prohibits, for example, all musical instruments, and thus reduces music in the Muslim world to a cappella singing. Some Muslims do use instruments, but they do so in spite, and not because of, Islam. Think of all the instrumental music that was never composed, never played, never heard, by Muslims over the past 1,400 years.

Artistic expression through the fine arts is similarly limited, because images of living creatures are not permitted in Islam. This is because of the hadiths in which Muhammad declared that the angel Gabriel had told him that angels would not enter a house where there were dogs or pictures. Here are several of those hadiths:

“Once Gabriel promised the Prophet (saws) that he would visit him, but Gabriel did not come, and later on he said, “We, angels, do not enter a house which contains a picture, or a dog.”

Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 7.834 Narrated by Muslim

“‘We were with Masruq at the house of Yasar bin Numair. Masruq saw pictures on his terrace and said, “I heard ‘Abdullah saying that he heard the Prophet (saws) saying, “The people who will receive the severest punishment from

Allah will be the picture makers.’ “

Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 4.448 Narrated by Abu Tasha

“‘I heard the Messenger of Allah (saws) saying; “Angels (of Mercy) do not enter a house wherein there is a dog or a picture of a living creature (a human being or an animal).’”

Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 3.428 Narrated by Said bin Abu Al Hasan

So no portraiture was allowed, no paintings at all with human figures in them, no statues of living creatures. Muslim artistic expression was thus constrained, mainly devoted to geometric patterns in carpets, ceramics, and the tulip tiles of Iznik, to architecture, especially mosque architecture, and above all, to Qur’anic calligraphy. Visit any celebrated art museum in the West, and study what is on offer in the handful of rooms devoted to Islamic art, and you will at once see how limited the possibilities for Muslim artists have been.

The campaign behind Mr Johnson, who is almost certain to be declared the new Tory leader and prime minister next week, did not respond to a request for comment.

In the essay, he also wrote: “It is time to get deep down and dirty and examine the central charge made by everyone from Winston Churchill to the Pope, namely that the real problem with the Islamic world is Islam.

“We must be honest and accept that there is more than a grain of truth in Churchill’s analysis of the economic and social consequences of the religion.”

This last remark alludes to Churchill’s famous description of Islam’s effect on its adherents, which appeared in *The River War*, his book on the Sudan.

How dreadful are the curses which Mohammedanism lays on its votaries! Besides the fanatical frenzy, which is as dangerous in a man as hydrophobia in a dog, there is this fearful fatalistic apathy. The effects are apparent in many countries. Improvident habits, slovenly systems of agriculture, sluggish methods of commerce, and insecurity of property exist wherever the followers of the Prophet rule or live. A degraded sensualism deprives this life of its grace and refinement; the next of its dignity and sanctity. The fact that in Mohammedan law every woman must belong to some man as his absolute property – either as a child, a wife, or a concubine – must delay the final extinction of slavery until the faith of Islam has ceased to be a great power among men. Thousands become the brave and loyal soldiers of the faith: all know how to die but the influence of the religion paralyses the social development of those who follow it. No stronger retrograde force exists in the world. Far from being moribund, Mohammedanism is a militant and proselytizing faith. It has already spread throughout Central Africa, raising fearless warriors at every step; and were it not that Christianity is sheltered in the strong arms of science, the science against which it had vainly struggled, the civilization of modern Europe might fall, as fell the civilization of ancient Rome.

This searing condemnation may be deplored by Muslims, who no doubt wish that these words by Churchill had never been unearthed, but the only legitimate demand to be made of this paragraph is this: *Is it true?* And you and I, and the outspoken Boris Johnson, all know the answer to that.