

# The Confusions of Tony Blair, Part I

by Hugh Fitzgerald

Soon after the Muslim terrorist attacks of 9/11, Tony Blair let it be known that he was a great admirer of Islam, and that he had taken to carrying around with him the Qur'an, a book that he claimed he read almost every day. Islam, he knew then, was "*beautiful*" and the Prophet Muhammad "an enormously civilizing force," claims that he continued to make on every possible occasion. In 2008, he was still reading the Qur'an "every day" or "practically every day." In June 2011, he again admitted that "*I read the Qur'an [Koran] every day. Partly to understand some of the things happening in the world, but mainly just because it is immensely instructive.*"

After the killing of Lee Rigby in London in 2013, Tony Blair was certain that "***there is not a problem with Islam. For those of us who have studied it, there is no doubt about its true and peaceful nature.***" The two converts to Islam who hacked Rigby to death and then decapitated him apparently understood Islam differently. But at the same time, Blair said "the ideology behind his [Lee Rigby's] murder is profound and dangerous." And what is that "ideology"? It could not, of course, be Islam itself. Blair insisted that while Islam has a "true and peaceful nature" there is a "*problem within Islam, and we have to put it on the table and be honest about it... I am afraid that the problematic strain within Islam is not the province of a few extremists. It has at its heart a view of religion – and of the relationship between religion and politics – that is not compatible with pluralistic, liberal, open-minded societies. At the extreme end of the spectrum are terrorists, but the worldview goes deeper and wider than it is comfortable for us to admit. So, by and large, we don't admit it.*"

In 2015, Tony Blair was still reading the Qur'an "every day."

Tony Blair will now admit that this "extremist" strain is more widespread than many think, as long as he can continue to insist, defying the evidence pouring in from all over the world, that Islam itself is "peaceful" and, unlike that dangerous mutant "strain" within Islam (which, we all are supposed to repeat ad nauseam, has nothing to do with Islam itself, even though many Muslims for some reason subscribe to it) is "compatible with pluralistic, liberal, open-minded societies." He is, thus, stuck with this narrative, believing, or at least pretending to believe, that the real Islam is compatible with pluralistic, liberal, open-minded societies.

Of course Blair does not, because he cannot, adduce a single example over the past 1400 years of a Muslim country that has been "pluralistic, liberal, open-minded" in the common understanding of those words. Rather, in the ideology of Islam, free and skeptical inquiry is discouraged, innovation in religion (and in much else) denounced as *bida*, and religious "pluralism"—in the Western sense of equal treatment before the law of people of different faiths — non-existent, since to the extent that the Sharia is followed, non-Muslims are subject to a host of disabilities, including, but not limited to, the onerous Jizyah, or capitation tax.

When, in 2008, as I've noted above, Blair again told the world, as he had a few years before, that he read the Qur'an "practically every day" and still found Muhammad "an enormously civilizing force," someone begged to differ.

That someone was Robert Spencer, who wondered aloud which parts of the Qur'an Blair had been reading:

*But does Blair ever read the uncomfortable bits? The wife-beating verse (4:34)? The verse enjoining warfare against and the subjugation of Jews and Christians (9:29)? The "verse of the sword" and other verses that exhort Muslims to slay*

*unbelievers wherever they're found (9:5, 4:89, 4:91, 2:190-193)? The verse saying the Jews and Christians are under Allah's curse (9:30)? The verse that says that unbelievers are the most vile of created beings (98:6)? The verse enjoining the beheading of unbelievers (47:4)? The verse exhorting Muslims to strike terror into the hearts of the enemies of Allah (8:60)?*

Tony Blair didn't respond; he was too busy, no doubt, what with all that rereading of the Qur'an to take the time to answer those questions.

In June 2011, when he repeated yet again that he read the Qur'an "practically every day" and that he still found it "immensely instructive," one might wonder if there was more for him to learn. If indeed he has been reading the Qur'an since 9/11 (shortly after which he claims to have gotten started on this reading), every day for 15 years, that is 5,575 days of possible Qur'an reading and, if he were to devote a mere hour each day to that reading and relying on the Internet estimate that it takes 30 hours to read the complete Qur'an, Blair might easily by this point have been able to read the entire Quran about 175 times. By this time he really ought to know what's in it, including all the violent verses directed at the Kuffar. And one wonders why Blair, though he always talks about the Qur'an, never mentions the Hadith or the Sira. Is it because he is unaware of their significance, as a source both of doctrine and biographical material on Muhammad, or is it because he has read many of the "most authentic" Hadith in the authoritative collections of Bukhari and Muslim, realizes what a disturbing picture they paint of Muhammad, the Perfect Man, and prefers to pretend, like the young Turkish pseudo-reformer Mustafa Akyol, that all Islam needs by way of "reformation" is to forget about the Hadith and stick to the Qur'an, a "reform" described by Akyol as an Islamic version of the Protestant *"sola scriptura"*?

What did Tony Blair take away from his reading of the Qur'an? He discovered, yet again, that Muhammad was "an enormously civilizing force." He did not explain what made Muhammad, a ruthless warrior who took part in dozens of military campaigns, delighted in seeing his enemies decapitated, and including the murders of several poets who had mocked him, a "civilizing force." Possibly Blair meant – taking his cue from Karen Armstrong – that by subduing the warring tribes of Arabia, and bringing them to heel under his rule, he brought about a *pax islamica*. That is not the same thing as being "an enormously civilizing force."

In 2007 in *Foreign Affairs*, Blair described the Quran as being "inclusive." This description is bizarre, given that the Qur'an is the very opposite of "inclusive," presenting a world that is uncompromisingly divided between Believers and Unbelievers, Muslims and Non-Muslims, and mandates a state of permanent hostility, if not open war, between them, until the whole world becomes part of Dar al-Islam. Within a Muslim state that follows the Sharia, non-Muslims are subject to a host of legal disabilities including, most importantly, the onerous capitation tax, or Jizyah. Or perhaps what Blair meant was merely that the Qur'an is "inclusive" because, as Muslims like to claim, it covers every possible subject, which may be the view of many Muslims who are adept at reading things into, or teasing things out of, its vaguest verses, especially scientific findings that were made centuries after the Qur'an appeared.

Blair had claimed, in March 2006, that **"the Qur'an is a reforming book. It is inclusive. It extols science and knowledge and abhors superstition. It is practical and way ahead of its time in attitudes to marriage, women and governance."** That same description of the Qur'an appears in his 2007 *Foreign Affairs* article, with only the most trivial change: "way ahead" is now "far ahead."

Far ahead of its time in attitudes to "marriage"? When

polygamy is enshrined, and not only “contextually” but deemed licit for all time (Muhammad, the Perfect Man, allowed himself an unlimited number of wives, and his followers four apiece), is Islam “way ahead”? When in addition to plural wives, a Muslim could have female sex slaves, “those whom your right hand possesses”? Far ahead in attitudes toward “women”? When in Islam women inherit half as much as men (4:11), and their testimony is worth half that of a man (2:282), and they can be divorced simply by the man’s triple-*talaq*, and they are described in the Qur’an as inferior to men, for “*the men are a degree above them*” (2:228)? And the Hadith, to which Blair never refers, contains even more extreme remarks on women’s inferiority, as in Sahih Bukhari (6:301) “[Muhammad] said, ‘Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man?’ They replied in the affirmative. He said, ‘**This is the deficiency in her intelligence.**’”

“Far ahead” in “governance”? It’s unclear what Blair means here. If he means “governance” of the family, the absolute, life-and-death power of the Muslim male over his wife and children is hardly “far ahead” of what was accepted in Europe in the Early Middle Ages, for the European male did not have such complete power over his wife and children. And the tremendous power of the Muslim male over his wife and children even today is shown in the “honor” killings which in Muslim lands are so often committed with impunity, and go unpunished. That is not “far ahead,” but retrograde in its “governance” of the family.

If Blair meant “governance” in the political sense, in what way is the political theory of Islam, where the legitimacy of a ruler depends only on whether he could be considered a good Muslim, any “advance” on the political theories in the West about a good Christian king? Was being a “good Muslim” a moral advance on being a “good Christian”? European political theory, unlike that in Islam, was capable of evolution, so that, for example, Jean Bodin’s “divine right of kings” in the

16<sup>th</sup> century could develop, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the ideas of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau on the social contract, into a different theory of the legitimacy of rule, no longer depending on that "divine right of kings," but rather on whether the ruler reflected, however imperfectly, the will of the people. Islamic political theory, meanwhile, has remained unchanged through the centuries, legitimizing a ruler's despotism, as long as he could be considered a good Muslim. That is to say, his rule must reflect not the will of the people, but the will of Allah, as set down in the Qur'an.

The Qur'an, claimed Blair, both in March 2006 and in January 2007, "extols science and knowledge and abhors superstition" (the description of the Qur'an in his *Foreign Affairs* article of Jan-Feb 2007 being a verbatim version of that he offered in March 2006). There may be a verse or two from which Muslims have been able to tease out an "extolling" of science or knowledge, but the ideology of Islam discourages free and skeptical inquiry, the *sine qua non* for the advancement of science, and encourages the habit of mental submission to the dictates of the Qur'an, which habit then is extended to cover other areas of Muslim life. *Bida*, or innovation, is mistrusted, and not only in religious matters. Two historians of science, Toby Huff and Stanley Jaki, have pointed to this habit of mental submission and hatred of novelty as helping explain why the scientific revolution took place in Europe rather than in the Muslim East. As for Blair's claim that Islam "abhors superstition," the Qur'an contains many examples of Muhammad's belief in "black magic": according to 2:102, magic was taught to men by demons. Moses himself was able to practice magic (7:116). Muhammad was told to "seek refuge" from witchcraft in Sura 113, a passage that is supposed to be recited six times a day by devout Muslims. The Hadith are full of examples of "black magic" and the Prophet's beliefs and fears about its use.

One verse that Muslims like to quote as indicating support for

seekers after knowledge is part of 2:239: ***“He [Allah] has taught you what you did not know.”*** But that vague half-verse is hardly sufficient to claim that Islam “encourages science,” especially since the whole verse reads: ***“And if you fear [an enemy, then pray] on foot or on horseback. But when you are secure, then remember Allah [in prayer], as he has taught you what you do not know.”*** In other words, it’s about being saved from an enemy, and once you are safe, then praying gratefully to Allah, because he has “taught you what you do not know.” Taught you what? What you do not know, but need to know, in order to escape from your enemy. That passage is a thin reed on which to rest such a large claim about Islam extolling “science and knowledge.”

Muslims do seem to take a great interest, but not in the enterprise of pure science as much as in the science of military technology. Iran and Pakistan have spent hundreds of billions on their nuclear programs, and Muslim states are among the heaviest spenders on military technology of all kinds, but this is not to be taken as an interest in science undertaken for its own sake, to better make sense of the universe, the enterprise of science as we in the West understand and distinguish it from technology.

Devout Muslims have been trying to claim many modern scientific advances for Islam, by reading scientific discoveries into vague verses of the Qur’an, claiming that scraps of verse (so unclear that they could have practically any meaning read into or out of them), actually foretell modern advances, in biology, cosmology, “cognitive science,” and geology. But the real record of Islamic scientific advancement was, compared to what was achieved in the West, [quite small](#).

Taner Edis, the Turkish historian of science, has noted in his study “The Illusion of Harmony” that most Muslims still deny evolution; that Muslim belief in creationism is widespread; and that many in the Muslim world endow incomprehensible bits

of the Qur'an with scientific significance. Professor Edis also notes that in the Islamic world, many assume it was under Islam that the scientific revolution took place, and they have convinced themselves of the enormous scientific achievements supposedly made by Muslims. A quick glance at any Western history of modern science would soon disabuse them, assuming they were willing to recognize the dismal truth.

Pervez Hoodbhoy, one of Pakistan's leading physicists and a freethinker, was brave enough to review and praise "The Illusion of Harmony": *"Edis makes a compelling case that classical Islamic thought cannot accommodate a modern scientific culture whose basis is experimentation, quantification, and prediction. He exposes the vacuity of faith-based science using a range of examples."*

But here is Tony Blair, who reads the Qur'an everyday, and knows how deep is **Islam's extolling of science and knowledge**. He knows this far better than Toby Huff and Stanley Jaki and Taner Edis and Pervez Hoodbhoy, all of whom for some reason have not been as impressed as Blair with Islam's "extolling" of science.

For fifteen years, Tony Blair has been singing the praises of Islam and the Qur'an. Even until just last year, he insisted that "for those who have studied it, there is no doubt about its true and peaceful nature."

But something is going on with Blair. There are glimmerings of intelligent life, there are stirrings. He's having his doubts. No longer does he repeat that the "Qur'an has been "instructive" and Muhammad an "enormously civilizing force." He simply remains prudently silent on that score. In October 2015, he began to inject a more worried note, claiming that the "perversion of Islam" (he still couldn't bring himself to blame Islam itself) "is a source of a lot of the problems in the Middle East today." What that perversion consisted of, how it came to be, what Qur'anic verses and what stories in the

Hadith it relied on, Blair chose not to say. Or perhaps he's still trying to figure it all out, trying to understand why what he calls a "perversion" looks an awful lot like standard Islam. Nor did Blair notice that the same "perversion of Islam" has been causing a lot of the problems not just in the Middle East, but all over the world, in London and Paris, in Brussels and Amsterdam, in Moscow and New York, in Washington and San Bernardino and Fort Hood and Chattanooga and Orlando.

And we still can see, in his description of the problem, and his prescription for solving it, a kind of terminal misunderstanding of Islam:

*The reality is that in parts of the Muslim community a discourse has grown up which is profoundly hostile to peaceful coexistence. Countering this is an essential part of fighting extremism.*

This "discourse" is not something that has "grown up," but is as old as Islam itself, and is not tangential but central to the faith. Islam itself is "profoundly hostile to peaceful coexistence" because it divides the world uncompromisingly between Believer and Infidel, Muslim and Non-Muslim. And between the two there must be a permanent state of hostility, if not always of open war, until Islam everywhere dominates, and Muslims rule, everywhere. Blair seems to think, despite all his study of the Qur'an, that this is something new in Islam, when it is 1400 years old, as old as the attacks on the Banu Qurayza in Mecca or the Jewish farmers of the Khaybar Oasis. Islam has always been "hostile to peaceful coexistence," unless one considers the permanent subjugation of non-Muslims to Muslim rule to be a kind of "peaceful co-existence."

*There's no point in just tackling the violence unless you tackle the ideology of extremism behind the violence.*

*You've got these broad ideological strands that lie behind a*

*lot of this extremism. If you take, for example, some of the organizations in the Middle East, some of those clerics that are putting out the most extreme stuff – they’ll have Twitter followings that go into millions of people.*

Blair seems surprised that Muslim clerics, “putting out the extreme stuff,” continue to flourish, with millions of Twitter followings. But that’s because he cannot understand that the “extreme stuff” is the real Islam, the Islam which you can read about in the Qur’an and in the Hadith (unless you are Tony Blair), and which, so far, no one among our political elites has been able to find a way to combat ideologically, because almost no one wants to recognize it as mainstream Islam.

*These people are saying things about Jewish people – about even those in their own religion who are different that we would regard as completely unacceptable – and it’s those waters of extremism in which the violent extremists can swim.*

Did Blair just discover last year what is written about “the Jewish people” in the Qur’an and Hadith? These passages are not exactly hidden, but have been easy to find for the past 1400 years, and Blair himself, by his own admission, has been re-reading the Qur’an for the past 15 years. Why then his tone of anguished surprise? Surely he long ago read in the Qur’an about how the Jews “are the strongest in opposition to Muhammad”; that they are schemers (but Allah is the best schemer); that they are not to be taken as friends, for they are friends only with Christians. Surely Blair had read those passages many times over. Why, then, the tone of sudden alarm?

And is it likely that he just now discovered that Muslims sometimes declare other Muslims to be Infidels, and treat them accordingly? Apparently Blair thinks that this practice, too, which he labels “extremism,” is a new phenomenon. But it’s at least as old as Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), declaring the

invading Mongols, who had converted to Islam but had not adopted the Sharia, to be incomplete Muslims, and therefore not Muslims at all. And by now it expresses itself in the wholesale dismissal by many Sunnis of Shi'a as not just Infidels, but as the "worst kind of Infidels," worse even than Christians and Jews.

*The majority of people within Islam do not support either the violence or the ideology. What we are talking about, however, is a radical Islamist way of thinking that results in extremism by small numbers of people, but that thinking is shared by larger numbers of people, and you've got to attack both – the violence and the extremism, the thinking behind it.*

On what evidence does Blair assert that "the majority of people within Islam do not support either the violence or the ideology"? He does not provide such evidence, no results of opinion polls, for example, but he cannot allow himself to accept that most Muslims could possibly believe "the violence" (as mandated in the Qur'an) or the "ideology" (that is, the ideology of mainstream Islam, promoting hostility toward all Infidels).

Blair uses the word "extremism" for the most fanatical Muslims (Salafis, Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaeda, Islamic State), but never explains what beliefs distinguish that "extremism" from mainstream Islam. If he were to attempt to define this "extremist ideology," it would soon be apparent that these beliefs are not different in kind from what mainstream Muslims are taught, but only in the fervor with which they are held and acted upon. And refusing to recognize that melancholy truth helps to explain Tony Blair's impressive record of confusions.

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