

MUHAMMAD

Prophet of Islam

MAXIME RODINSON

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And not that a man be not sad, but arising before day and
biding circumspectly in the communion of an old tree, lean-
ing his chin on the last fading star, he beholds at the end of the
fasting sky great things and pure that unfold to delight.

*St-John Perse, Anabasis,
translated by T. S. Eliot*

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Epilogue

Maxime Rodinson was interviewed by *Le Figaro* two weeks after the World Trade Center attacks.

September 28, 2001

LE FIGARO: *Following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, many commentators wondered whether Islam and the West were incompatible. What is your analysis?*

MAXIME RODINSON: That's an old notion, a notion revived by recent events. But to put it that way is to pose the question badly. What is Islam? What is the West? Islam is a world of very different ways of thinking that are sometimes even in conflict with each other, run through with very different tendencies. [Islam] is a universe unto itself extending from the Philippines to the West Indies which has known both times of closure and retreat, as well as golden ages of openness and tolerance. The West itself has no single definition, even if, faced with the threat of the attacks, it does adhere to a limited number of values.

LF: *Hasn't the destruction of the Twin Towers exacerbated feelings of rivalry toward the Western World by the Arab-Muslim world?*

MR: Doubtless, but this is not a recent phenomenon. Since Islam's beginnings—even during Muhammad's lifetime and certainly following his death—animated debates were common, debates which might even lead to the murder of one of the participants.

LF: *Osama bin Laden's fanaticism doesn't surprise you . . .*

MR: Not at all, I'm used to it. I have been living and breathing Islam since I was fifteen. I remember having given a lecture where someone from the audience snapped at me, "Islam will overcome."

LF: *In fact, you would say that this literal fundamentalism you object to is not, therefore, so recent as we are tempted to believe today . . .*

MR: Fundamentalism in Islam is so hardly new that one could almost say it is existentially present in that religion.

LF: *"Existentially," you say. Because Islam would be a form of "ideological activism," as you term it in your book, From Pythagoras to Lenin?*

MR: Yes, among other reasons, that is certain. We find the same phenomenon in every ideology which has had the time to develop and spread.

LF: *This phenomenon which unifies different kinds of ideological activism—is it a nostalgia for a lost paradise?*

MR: Yes, that's well put! Whatever it may be, what is at work in each instance is a univocal way of seeing things, a need for a coercive orthodoxy. From that perspective, Islam and communism bear a striking resemblance. I was a communist for over 20 years. I remember declarations which at the time seemed paradoxical, almost heretical, such as Monnerot's, for example, who said that communism was a modern form of Islam! That being said, a certain number of historical fatwas typecast communism as a form of anti-Islam. It is not by chance that the doctors of the Islamic faith anathematized Plato, the presumed mentor of communism in the *Republic*.

LF: *Has this parallel seemed even more timely in the past two weeks?*

MR: No more nor less than before.

LF: *Islam and communism have common parentage—do they also have the same enemy, capitalism?*

MR: I don't know whether that can really be said. Islam and capitalism are phenomena situated on two different levels. They are different even in their essence. Capitalism is a structure of economic relations, as well as participation in that system. Islam, as I have said, is many things at once, but with recent events, the temptation may be strong to equate it to a kind of barbarism. This must obviously be resisted, for Islam is also the winged words of the great Muslim thinkers. One of my mentors, Louis Massignon, a Catholic and steeped in Islamic piety, knew what treasures were held in Islam's stores of thought.

LF: *Does the fact that communism has quit the scene leave a vacancy for aggressive affirmations of identity?*

MR: The collapse of regimes supposedly embodying communism leaves many more empty spaces. But that alone does not suffice to make the communitarianist hydra reappear. What rather strikes me is that after communism, Islamic fundamentalism should henceforth hold the place of the all-encompassing ideology, emphasizing an ardently paranoiac, conspiracy-theorist worldview.

LF: *Bin Laden asks that we not reduce Islam "to Arabness alone," and claims to be working for the umma, the transnational community of believers. Isn't that a revealing ambition?*

MR: Very roughly, one Muslim in five is Arab. This explains bin Laden's seeing himself as having a "vocation" beyond the Arab world.

LF: *These days, certain commentators condemn terrorism but try to understand the negative aspects of the United States for which the kamikazis sought to hold it responsible. What is your opinion of this way of thinking?*

MR: Trying to show how butchers were right is a joke. One may wish to find meaning in any situation. The desire to provide a meaning at all costs—*this* has no meaning.

LF: *Is jihad—holy war—a key concept in Islam?*

MR: Jihad is a propagandistic device which, as need be, resorts to armed struggle—two ingredients common to many ideological movements.

LF: *And which do not necessarily lead to the apocalypse of September 11th?*

MR: No, but which do so readily.

LF: *Precisely. By twisting the samurai tradition and reinvesting [Islam] with the Assassins' medieval practices, kamikazi-type actions are on the increase in the Arab-Muslim world. Doesn't the Koran prohibit suicide?*

MR: In fact, not really. There is even, in the Koran, despite a few verses which seem to tend in the opposite direction, a hypervaluation of martyrdom. The Koran exalts martyrdom. This holy Book's call to accept martyrdom is inextricable from a call to struggle. For here is indeed its uniqueness—for if martyrdom in the Christian tradition is often considered a struggle, it is above all a struggle against oneself.

LF: *Are we in fact watching a split between the Arab-Muslim world and modernity?*

MR: Militant Muslims claim to embody a modernity that is alternative to that of the West. In reality, I don't think this is so. On the other hand, there is incontestably a permanent tension between Islam and modernity. It remains to be said what one means by "modernity."

LF: *For you, what does the word involve?*

EPILOGUE

MR: It's a broad concept, but I observe that an attack unprecedented in its violence and scale against American interests is an action that mobilizes a number of infrastructures and logistical means which are eminently modern. In fact, Osama bin Laden is a mixture of archaism and hypermodernity—ultracontemporary because he lives in the age of total cybernetic and bacteriological warfare, and ultratraditional because his thought structure takes us back to Islam's beginnings.

LF: *As the counterattacks begin, will some Muslims be tempted to take the next step to jihad?*

MR: Some will resist, others will not. Gilles Kepel, espousing a euphoric hypothesis, believes that Muslim extremism is behind us. Whether the optimistic author of *Jihad*¹ likes it or not, let's stop reassuring ourselves so easily, by counting on any absence of reaction by Islamic masses! Gilles Kepel mistakes his desires for reality.

LF: *Can we speak of a clash of civilizations?*

MR: Here again, let us be wary of historical myopia. Civilizations have always been in conflict. In light of recent events, we are forced to side with Harvard professor Samuel Huntington² who for five years has prophesied a clash of civilizations. Despite the systematic character of his thinking, he is still more in line with reality than Gilles Kepel. I am not one of those who minimize the danger of Muslim fundamentalism. That being said, the Muslim religion is descended from the Judeo-Christian tree. I would thus be less certain than Huntington that it is an arena of civilization radically opposed, in principle, to the West.

LF: *In that case, how can you explain the virulence of its antagonism?*

MR: Because, springing from the same source as biblical monotheism, Islam grew up in jealous ambivalence with regard to the attraction of Western influence. A great part of the current fanaticism is the desperate attempt to answer the eminently political question, "Why do the Europeans advance while we accumulate delays?"

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1. Gilles Kepel. *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2002.
2. Samuel P. Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.