

## *Review Essay*

# Warrag's War: A Critical Review<sup>1</sup>

*Ahrar Ahmad*

**Books Reviewed:** *Why I Am Not a Muslim*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2003; *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2000; *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2002; *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2003.

Among other consequences of the horrific tragedy of 9/11 is the generation of a veritable cottage industry in books about Islam and Muslims. There had always existed a void regarding such books. In spite of its Abrahamic roots and its long, if somewhat troubled, encounters with the West, the significance of Arab countries in terms of western economic interests and the steady growth of diasporic Muslims settling in the developed world (easily surpassing the Jewish presence, probably even in the United States), Islam had remained a residual category entirely peripheral to American intellectual or cultural life.

The unprecedented nature and the brutality of the event that led to the Muslim "explosion" into the public consciousness exposed the woeful indifference about Islam and reinforced the Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims as mysterious, backward, and menacing. There was a predictable appetite among the public to know about Muslims, who had traditionally been pictured as quaint and dreadful "others" but were now increasingly being presented as angry and threatening "fanatics." Some of the books rushed to print were works of genuine scholarship, demonstrating experience, knowledge, and elegance. Others were obviously driven by commer-

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Ahrar Ahmad is professor of political science, Black Hills State University, Spearfish, South Dakota. The author is grateful to Drs. David Salomon and Shahid Alam for helpful suggestions, and has benefited from reviews by Drs. Jeremiah McAuliffe, Fred Donner, and Lee Smith (available on the Internet). The author is solely responsible for the ideas, opinions, and language used in this essay.

cial considerations rather than academic, and some were, indeed, shallow, trite, and often misleading.

In the latter genre, two classes of books, both critical of Islam, quickly became popular: those written from an alarmist western perspective by such authors as Steven Emerson, Daniel Pipes, and Robert Spencer, and others that were supposedly "insider" exposés and interrogations issuing from such critics as Irshad Manji, the brothers Irgun Mehmet and Emir Fathi Caner, and Mohammad Mohaddessin. The doyen of the latter group is, undoubtedly, Ibn Warraq.

Ibn Warraq, a pseudonym allegedly assumed for purposes of personal safety, literally means the "son of scribes" and is possibly derived from the name of Abu `Isa Muhammad ibn Harun al-Warraq, an `Abbasid-era free-thinker and skeptic of Mu`tazilite orientations who died, in 909, in exile. Ibn Warraq was born in Rajkot in India and moved with his religiously conservative family to Pakistan during the confusions and migrations that attended India's partition in 1947. He studied in Pakistan and at the University of Edinburgh, where he met Montgomery Watt, a widely respected scholar of Islam known for his sensitive approach to his subject, and against whom Ibn Warraq reserves his most caustic judgments.

He worked at various times as a primary school teacher, restaurateur, and tour guide; chafed under the rigors and "limitations" of Islam; had an "epiphany" of sorts during the Rushdie affair, when his long-smoldering doubts and discomforts blossomed into resentment and bitterness against Islam and led to his now famous book, *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, published in 1995 (reissued by Prometheus Books in 2003). That book, with its sneering impatience, shrill polemic, knowing tone, and ferocious indictment, made him a *cause célèbre* in the Islam-bashing environment of the post-9/11 world. He remains shrouded in relative personal anonymity (appearing in public, even on television, in obvious disguises), and has devoted himself to debunking the "myth" of Islam through his books, his website, and organizational efforts.

Since Ibn Warraq's fame (or infamy) rests with his first book, *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, it is perhaps appropriate to indicate its basic argument. Its title is taken from Bertrand Russell's book on Christianity. But while Russell made a philosophical argument, Ibn Warraq engages in a virtual broadside against Islam in a no-holds-barred attack. His arguments are not new. He suggests that Islam, through its text, tradition, and history, is inherently violent, intolerant, and misogynist. The problems and pathologies that certain parts of the Islamic world are currently confronting are not a result

of “fundamentalist Islam,” but have their roots in Islam itself. In fact, he suggests that the ideas of “Islamic civilization” or “Islamic philosophy” are really a contradiction in terms (p. 261) and are meaningless constructs, because no concepts of beauty, creativity, theological richness, legal subtlety, or moral clarity could have proceeded from Islam. If the Islamic world has sometimes demonstrated some of these features, this has been in spite of Islam, not because of it (p. 1). He concedes that there may be moderate Muslims, but firmly holds that there cannot be any moderate Islam.

Before he assails the message of Islam, he smears Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) by reducing him to some of the vilest stereotypes prevalent in the West. He is considered to be a sexual monster, a cunning manipulator of people and events, narcissistic and crude, even epileptic, schizophrenic, and pathological (pp. 89-90). The Prophet’s marriages and military campaigns, as well as the betrayals and cruelties he supposedly inflicted on others (particularly Jews and Christians), provide the grist for Ibn Warraq’s mill. He recycles, often without attribution or reference and usually in lurid and pornographic detail, many of the demonizing myths perpetrated by critics of Islam, which had gained currency due to medieval Christian writers, without making any effort to examine their evidence or provide a balanced narrative.

Any claim of seriousness that the book could have demanded is severely compromised by the attitude, material, and language he employed while discussing the Prophet. There are scholarly critiques about the Prophet’s life and decisions, and learned books and essays about him in English (e.g., Muhammad Haykal, Michael Cook, Martin Lings, W. Montgomery Watt, Anne Marie Schimmel, John Archer, R. Bodley, Karen Armstrong, etc., not to mention the extensive material available in the *sirah* literature), but Ibn Warraq’s knowledge or curiosity about them is minimal, at best. To seek to refute his portrayal of the Prophet is only to go into the gutter with him.

His critique of Islam itself is relatively more substantive, but still neither scholarly nor fair. In *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, he quotes from the Qur’an (utilizing a variety of translations) and demonstrates some familiarity with various authors and critics. In fact his affinity, indeed his dependence, on such authors is more than what can be accepted in academic discourse. His book often reads like a series of quotations culled from different sources. This is precisely why the book is so unoriginal and unimaginative. But more than that, it is fundamentally flawed and dishonest. There are several reasons for making this severe judgment.

First, such genuine scholars of Islam as R. A. Nicholson, D. S. Margoliouth, G. H. Bousquet, Ignaz Goldziher, T. Noldeke, Bernard Lewis, Maxime Rodinson, and Joseph Shacht, many of whom have fairly strong and critical things to say about certain aspects of Islam, are reduced, through selective quotations, to nothing more than foot soldiers serving Ibn Warraq's cause. Their reservations, clarifications, or intellectual contributions are not hinted at in Ibn Warraq's narrative. By the same token, scholars (e.g., Montgomery Watt, Norman Daniel, John Esposito, Edward Mortimer, etc) who are more sympathetic to Islam or plead for and seek greater understanding of the faith are excoriated as hand-wringing apologists. Moreover, using certain sources to buttress his diatribe against Islam is plainly suspect. For example, relying on Daniel Pipes to criticize Muslims<sup>2</sup> is like quoting from a Ku Klux Klan screed to argue about the asserted "inferiority" of African-Americans.

Second, he tends to argue that anything problematic or objectionable that happens in Muslim countries (e.g., the horrible cruelty of female circumcision or slavery in certain parts of Africa, the deplorable condition of women in Pakistan, the tragedy of internal conflicts in Sudan and Indonesia) are all "caused" by Islam. The fact that female circumcision or slavery are localized tribal practices not exclusive to Muslims in some regions in Africa, or that honor killings in Pakistan have absolutely nothing to do with Islam, or the fact that internal conflicts occur throughout the world (Rwanda? Sri Lanka? Northern Ireland?) because of a complex welter of conditions and circumstances, does not cross his mind. This is akin to blaming Christianity for the Vietnam War, global warming, or mindless consumerism, without drawing any concrete or logical connections between one and the others.

Third, he makes observations throughout the book that are as startling as they are incomprehensible. For example, with reference to the supposed "pagan" origins of Islam, he says that "the worship of the moon is attested to by proper names of people such as Hilal, a crescent, or Qamar, a moon, and so on" (p. 40). It is not clear how the simple act of naming someone after a natural object can, by itself, become evidence of idolatrous behavior, any more so than naming someone `Abdullah (servant of God) necessarily indicates his Islamic commitment. Similarly he relies on the authority of "several eminent scholars" to prove that the constitution of Madinah "showed that right from the start Muhammad meant to move against the Jews" (p. 92). He actually refers to only one source, and does not include any quotations from the constitution itself (which is widely available) to

make his point. He also suggests that “the traditions are full of Muhammad’s miracles, curing the ill, feeding a thousand people on one kid [a young goat], etc.” (p. 143). Yet, he ignores the simple humanness that the Prophet always claimed, and that miracles (attributed to Jesus or Moses, which are accepted in Islam) have generally been considered irrelevant to demonstrate the Prophet’s unique status.

He refers to the greatness of British rule in India, which “gave back to all Indians – Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist – their own culture” to the extent that “imperialists like Lord Curzon saved many of India’s architectural monuments, including the Taj Mahal, from ruin” (p. 209). While the first part of the sentence is entirely questionable, the last part should, at least, be predicated upon the fact that while Curzon may have “saved” the Taj Mahal it was, after all, the Muslims who “built” it. He describes the persecution and execution of the mystic al-Hallaj in 922 and suggests that it was “all because he advocated personal piety rather than dry legalism, and tried to bring dogma into harmony with Greek philosophy on the basis of mystic experience” (p. 278). Anyone with a modicum of knowledge about the case would know that the situation was far more complex than the simple reductionism implied here.

Fourth, there are many contradictions in this book. For example, he denounces Islam for its supposed fascist, totalitarian, and puritanical ethos, and then criticizes it “for the greater tolerance of homosexuality in the Islamic world” (p. 340). Similarly he suggests that Gibbon’s view of Islam as a “rational priest-free religion ... enormously influenced the way Europeans perceived their sister religion for years to come” (p. 21), but then fails to identify even one such supportive intellectual or publication or to explain the unbridled hostility toward Islam throughout most of European history. He judges and soundly criticizes Carlyle’s treatment of the Prophet as “the first truly sympathetic account of the Islamic leader” (p. 22), and then proceeds to quote extensively from him to make exactly the opposite point.<sup>3</sup> He approvingly quotes Karl Popper to indicate the nature of the scientific method (p. 193), but obviously does not realize that his own chaotic formulation is incapable of disproof (one of the essential conditions of Popperian logic). Also, it is a bit intriguing to note that while he stridently decries the “sexual obsessions” in Islam, he nonetheless refers to erotic materials from such hedonistic skeptics as Abu Nuwas or Sheikh Nefzawi (pp. 1, 105, 253, 331-32, 342-43), without clearly establishing why this inclusion was necessary or appropriate.

However, the essential intellectual problem of Ibn Warraq’s work is his myopic approach. Even the possibility of a different interpretation or

the acknowledgement that an issue is controversial (meaning that there may be another perspective) is anathema to him. Consequently, the hijab is condemned as the ultimate symbol of women's oppression. The fact that many women wear it voluntarily and proudly, or that some women may actually feel that it allows them identity, safety, and equality is not even considered worthy of mention. (Why is it necessarily more "liberating" for a woman to expose herself to men, be judged on physical criteria according to men's demands, and be slaves to the fashion industry and beauty myths, rather than compelling men to accept her in terms that she dictates?) He laments women's disempowerment in many Muslim lands, but cannot explain why the largest Muslim countries (e.g., Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Turkey) have elected women to lead them. He movingly describes the violence and vulnerabilities that women in Pakistan face, but not the objectification, trivialization, and brutality (90,000 reported rapes annually in the United States alone, not to mention other kinds of harassment) that women in the West have to endure. This is not necessarily a defense of the hijab or a denial that the position of women in many Muslim countries is absolutely abhorrent, but simply to demand a more nuanced discussion of the problem.

One central preoccupation of *Why I Am Not a Muslim* – Islam's alleged intolerance of others, particularly Jews and Christians – demonstrates similar limitations. It is easy and convenient to take some selective quotations out of the Qur'an, without referring to the circumstance or ethos within which they were placed, to "prove" Islam's inherently militant and hateful tendencies. Verses from *Surat al-Anfal* (8:39) and *Surat at-Tawba* (9:5) usually serve this purpose. But the context of these verses makes it clear that the Muslims were in a dangerous and defensive situation, and that violence was not being promoted as the first or best choice. For example, 8:38 says "Tell those who do not believe that if they cease the persecution of believers, that which is past will be forgiven them," and in 9:5 after saying that the idolaters (essentially those pagan Makkans who had broken treaties and persecuted the believers) should be slain "wherever you find them," the very next sentence says that "if they repent, establish worship, and pay the poor-due, then leave them free."

Much is made of the *jizyah* tax imposed on non-Muslims (9:29), but not why it was imposed: They did not have to pay zakat, which is mandatory for all Muslims, or serve in the armed forces. It must also be pointed out that while the West trumpets the cause of Judeo-Christian solidarity, Islam does not have the same textual, historical, literary, or theological problems that

Jews and Christians have with each other.<sup>4</sup> Of course there have been many misunderstandings and savage encounters between the Muslims and the Jews and Christians in Islamic history, but they were episodic and driven by circumstance, and not systematic or compelled by doctrine.

On reading Ibn Warraq's account, one would never guess that Islam accepts Moses and Jesus as prophets, acknowledges their miracles (including Jesus' miraculous birth), shares the same stories and legends of humanity's origin (e.g., humanity deriving from Adam and Eve), and spiritual lineage (Abraham); has very similar ideas of the virtuous life and the Hereafter; and repeatedly mentions Jews and Christians as "People of the Book" who, if they follow their religion and live righteously, "will not fear ... or grieve" (a refrain that appears in both 2:62 and 5:72). One would never know that the Qur'an explicitly states: "And do not dispute with the People of the Book (except in cases of wrong or injury), but say: 'We believe in the revelation that has come down to us and in that which has come down to you. Our God and your God is one, and it is to Him we bow in Islam'" (29:45).

In fact, Islam places itself self-consciously within a prophetic tradition, not as a novel beginning or a rupture, but as a continuation and a completion of God's messages. One would never understand the expansiveness of the Qur'an's spirit when it says "to each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way" (5:51); that "if God so willed, He could make you all one people" but He did not, so that "you all may strive as in a race for virtue" (16:93); that "there is no compulsion in religion" (2:256); that the Truth has been conveyed and "let who will believe and let who will reject" (18:29); and, finally, that "I worship not that which you worship, nor will you worship what I worship. To you your way and to me mine" (109:1-4). It is not the Qur'an that is petty and hateful – it is Warraq's reading that is.

Similarly his blanket condemnation of Islam as inherently undemocratic is both misplaced and misleading. Democratic implications are underscored in *Surat al-Shura*, where it is suggested that only those people "who conduct their affairs by mutual consultation" (42:38) are dear to God. This is sometimes interpreted to refer to consultation among a select group of advisors, family members, or the ulama. But the chapter itself indicates no such limitation. In fact, *Surat Al-Imran* suggests that Muslims should try to forgive and pray for those who have demonstrated weak faith and judgment, and even "consult them in affairs of the moment" (3:159). Consequently, no test of virtue or intellect limits the franchise or restricts people from participation.

Moreover, the Qur'an emphasizes the significance of human agency as a transforming force. It reminds the faithful that "verily, never will God change the condition of a people unless they change what is in themselves" (13:3). Thus, the believers are not supposed to be passive or timid recipients of a ruler's dictates, but active participants seeking to improve their lives and communities. Muslims are not merely permitted but are encouraged "not to be cowed, but to defend themselves" against any oppression. Any blame for such action is "only against those who oppress humanity with wrong-doing and insolently transgress beyond bounds through the land defying right and justice" (42:41-42).

It is also noteworthy that injunctions to "fulfill your contract (or obligations)" (5:1), not to "devour each others property" and allow "traffic and trade in mutual goodwill" (4:29), and that nobody can bear the burden of another because "every soul draws the meed of its acts on none but itself" (6:164) all seem to indicate a system of individual integrity and social responsibility that is wholly consistent with democratic norms. Moreover, Islam's opposition to monarchy, its robust egalitarianism, and its concern for social justice and legal legitimacy (What other religion has allowed five different jurisprudential schools to coexist and flourish?) make it possible to argue that undemocratic regimes exist in many Muslim countries today not because of Islam, but in spite of it.

Admittedly, while Ibn Warraq's agenda remains the same, the language in the introductions to his next two books, *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad* and *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary* becomes less abrasive, his tone less mocking.<sup>5</sup> In these compilations, he assembles a variety of writings, many rather dated (from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), some obscure, some impressive, some very long (contributions from Henri Lammens extend to 167 pages in the first book) and some very short (only one or two pages as in Claude Cahen and Michael Schub's contributions in the second). Many of the essays about the Prophet make the point that Islamic historiography should be more firmly based on evidence and logic and try to avoid the hagiographic enthusiasms and circularity that sometimes inform Islamic scholarship. There are several essays (e.g., by Lawrence Conrad, Andrew Rippin, F. E. Peters, J. Koren, and D. Nevo) on sources, methods, debates, approaches, and analytic frameworks regarding Islam's early history. Others are devoted to the work of John Wansbrough, the iconoclastic and provocative theorist writing on early Islam.



*What the Koran Really Says* has the ambitious objective to “desacralize” (to use the term coined on p. 13) the Arabic language, script, and scripture. He seems to think that simply placing Islam in the Middle Eastern milieu in terms of language, social influences, intellectual origins, or theological affinities with other religions and rituals is enough to question its authenticity. One is left wondering why that would necessarily be so, since nobody has suggested that Islam developed in a vacuum. One is further puzzled why discussions of a particular word in the Qur’an and its varied interpretations (e.g., the words *an yadin* elicit three separate chapters), elaborations on the Qur’an’s strophic structure (two chapters), or whether its organization in the established `Uthmanic codex or rescension is chronologically or thematically consistent or not (nobody claimed that it was), would, *ipso facto*, destroy its legitimacy and authority.

The fourth book, *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out*, contains “testimonials” sent to his organization – the Institute for the Secularization of Islamic Societies – about why people have left Islam. They are mind-numbingly repetitive and cliché-ridden, varying little from Ibn Warraq’s own themes. The keener early chapters describe Islam’s supposedly intolerant and violent response to apostasy. But, it is curious to note that instead of praising the openness of the `Abbasid period in which five schools of law, many Sufi orders, huge translation projects, and Mu`tazilite skepticism were all possible (in fact, classical Greek scholarship found its way into the European lexicon through the agency of Arab intellectual mediation), he only mentions people who faced persecution.

Was any other society at that time any more tolerant than Islam? Should Islam be faulted (as he seems to argue) because some early Arab thinkers and poets were not believers? Moreover, some of his poster-children for persecution are dubious examples at best. For instance, al-Rawandi was “expelled by the Mutazilites,” not persecuted by the Muslim rulers (p. 51); al-Razi’s strident criticism of religion was actually “witness to a remarkably tolerant culture and society” (p. 56); and al-Ma`ari was charged with heresy but “never prosecuted or punished” (p. 71). He points out that people are leaving Islam (“225 baptized in France alone in 2000,” p. 99; “many” in India; and “tens of thousands over the last twenty years” in Indonesia, p. 101) to underscore his argument about the alienating suffocation that Islam is supposed to represent. By that same line of reasoning, would he argue or accept the fact that since, by all accounts, Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world, therefore it is the most emotionally enriching and the spiritually uplifting religion in existence today?

If Ibn Warraq's arguments were limited to pointing out that Muslims need to be more intellectually engaged in their understanding and practice of religion; that Muslims need to foster an environment that allows critical enquiry and dissident discourse; that Islam must be rescued from the grip of sometimes narrow-minded and bigoted mullahs and madrassahs; that Islam's awkward embrace of modernity must evolve in directions that encourage scientific learning, progressive thinking, and pluralist orientations; that Muslims must overcome their tendency to blame others for problems they face; that Muslims must transcend their petty squabbles and unite for nobler causes, and so on, then surely even many Muslims would agree with him.

There is a long tradition of Muslim critics and reformers, such as Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), Rifa`a al-Tahtawi (d. 1873), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (d. 1898), Muhammad `Abduh (d. 1905), Qasim Amin (d. 1908), al-Muwallihi (d. 1930), Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), Muhammad Hussein Haykal (d. 1956), `Abd al-Raziq (d. 1966), Taha Husain (d. 1973), Ali Shari`ati (d. 1977), Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), and others who, with varying passions and priorities, have tried to address similar issues. In today's world, scores of Muslim scholars and thinkers are participating in a rich and vibrant discussion about the identity, doctrinal imperatives, and the future of Muslims in a turbulent and challenging world.<sup>6</sup> But Ibn Warraq will have none of that; he wants to throw the baby out with the bath water. Instead of a finger-wagging lecture to educate and inspire Muslims, he simply lifts a finger in a rude gesture.

Ibn Warraq is no Luther exposing the corruptions and distractions of the Catholic Church. Neither is he a Voltaire arguing for the privatization of religion. He is merely a posture of defiance sustained by intellectual hubris, more reckless than courageous, more heckling than wise. Islam privileges the concept of "intention" over action or consequence. His intention is neither scholarly nor humanistic, but malicious and vindictive. He quotes from al-Ma`ari in his *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out*: "We mortals are composed of two great schools, enlightened knaves or religious fools" (p. 65). Clearly, Ibn Warraq is no religious fool. To what extent he is "enlightened" is less clear.

## Notes

1. The title of this essay is taken from a sentence in his *Why I am Not a Muslim*, where he says that the book "is my war effort" (p. xiii).
2. On page xv, he acknowledges his debt to Pipes for the entire first chapter.

3. How was it possible for the *eighteenth* century to have “so readily adopted the myth of Muhammad as a wise and tolerant ruler” (p. 19) if Carlyle’s book, published in 1841, was the first “sympathetic account of the Islamic leader” (p. 22)?
4. It should be pointed out that it was not the Muslims who slaughtered the Jews in 1099 after the conquest of Jerusalem by the Crusaders. Saladin, in fact, invited them back after he reconquered Jerusalem in 1187. Nor did the Muslims expel the Jews from Spain in 1492 after the Spanish *reconquista*. In fact, the Ottomans welcomed them into their empire in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. And, it was not Muslims who brutally exterminated almost 6 million Jews in the Holocaust in the 1940s or send back ships full of Jewish refugees from their shores. It is also noteworthy that there is very little in the Islamic world that can compare to the viciousness and contempt shown toward the Jews by the Catholic Church (or even by Reformers such as Martin Luther), or the dark and hateful caricature of Jews so abundant in western literature (expressed even in Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot).
5. Incidentally, he has a penchant for borrowing titles from others. His first book took its title from one by Bertrand Russell, *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad* reflects the title of Albert Schweitzer’s book on Jesus, and *What the Koran Really Says* echoes the title of Manfred Barthell’s book on the Bible.
6. The number of Muslims engaged in this discussion is most impressive. We list just a few of them here: Khaled Abou Fadl, Abdul Karim Soroush, Muhammad Arkoun, Fethullah Gülen, Taha al-`Alwani, Tarek Ramadan, Bassam Tibi, Fatima Mernissi, Abdulaziz Sachedina, al-Ashmawi, Farid Esack, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Amina Wadud, Abdullahi an-Naim, and Rachid Ghanouchi. Their perspectives are not necessarily the same.