



**THE SUICIDE OF REASON:  
RADICAL ISLAM'S THREAT TO THE WEST**

by Lee Harris  
Basic Books, 312 pages, \$26

Reviewed by SADANAND DHUME

**E**ARLY IN THE book, Lee Harris quotes a Chechen terrorist involved in the 2002 attack on a Moscow theater that left 169 people dead. “We will win in the end,” the Chechen declares, “because we are willing to die and you are not.” The sentiment is familiar to anyone who follows the global Islamist movement, which seeks to impose Shariah law on society and the state. Expressed in remarkably similar ways, it surfaces in al Qaeda press releases in Pakistan, jihadist propaganda videos in Iraq and Islamist T-shirts in Indonesia. Fittingly then, it sets the tone for an expansive, thoughtful and unusually frank meditation on the troubled encounter between Islam and the West.

Mr. Harris, who lives in Stone Mountain, Georgia and contributes to a slew of mostly conservative publications, holds a stark view of the world. The modern, liberal West, he believes, faces two closely related threats: an exaggerated confidence in reason and a deep underestimation of the power of religious fanaticism.

The argument goes that children reared in the West are encouraged to develop into rational human beings, capable of taking a disinterested view of events and prone to

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*Mr. Dhume, a Washington, D.C.-based writer and journalist, is the author of My Friend the Fanatic: Travels with an Indonesian Islamist (Text Publishing, 2008).*

apportion blame and moral censure evenly between their opponents and themselves. In the Islamic world, by contrast, fanaticism has evolved as both a cultural defense mechanism and an agent of conquest.

It is fanaticism that allowed Islam in its early years to obliterate the Sassanian civilization of the Persians and the Christian culture of the Byzantines, permanently altering not merely their political institutions but their entire way of life. This force allows no questioning of its core tenets. It privileges duties over rights, the community over the individual and the future over the present. It has now resumed its ancient struggle with the West with renewed vigor.

This is a challenge that Mr. Harris believes the West is ill-equipped to meet. Most people in advanced democracies have come to believe that reason—and by extension reasonable behavior—is innate to the human condition. In fact it stems from a particular tradition, the Enlightenment, and the peculiar historical circumstances of three countries: France, the United Kingdom and the United States. Thanks in large part to them, in the West both cultural norms and education hardwire most citizens to think and behave rationally. This is achieved early in childhood and established at “a physiological and precognitive level.”

In short, Westerners are conditioned to feel ashamed of temper tantrums, unreasonable outbursts or impulsive acts of aggression. So, for example, when fervent Christians are ordered to remove a copy of the Ten Commandments from an Alabama courthouse they protest by peacefully waving placards rather than by trashing

the premises or assaulting the judge. The thought of bombing an embassy because of a cartoon, shooting a nun over an obscure reference to medieval history by the Pope, or jailing someone for the high crime of naming a teddy bear Mohammed is simply unfathomable.

By contrast, according to Mr. Harris, Muslims are brainwashed from an early age by a “shaming code” that demands that they reject anything that threatens to subvert the supremacy of their faith. While Americans drug their most aggressive boys—alpha male children in Mr. Harris’s parlance—with Ritalin, Muslims do everything they can to ensure that theirs are tough, aggressive and ruthless. Americans are proud of their boys entering Harvard; Muslims apparently prefer theirs to enter paradise as martyrs.

Despite the somewhat overheated tone, this book offers much that is commendable. The rational mind does indeed have trouble grasping the reality of religious fanaticism. Thus the constant—and at times comic—reach for “deeper” explanations for Islamist violence: poverty, lack of democracy, historical grievances over territory. (For some mysterious reason, Cambodian peasants, Vietnamese living under one-party rule and Hindu refugees from their ancestral homeland of Sindh appear not to have discovered that the proper response to their circumstances is to blow themselves up on buses or pilot aircraft into skyscrapers.) Mr. Harris also recognizes a simple fact that is too often overlooked by the pundit class: reduced to its core, the entire debate about terrorism, Islam and Islamism is simply about what people believe and how they are willing to act on those beliefs.

And yet on the whole Mr. Harris is more wrong than right. For one, he fails to distinguish between Islamists and ordinary Muslims, the majority of whom, like people of any faith, are nonviolent. Most

Muslims, and indeed many nonviolent Islamists, would indeed prefer a ticket to Harvard than to a martyr’s paradise. Mr. Harris also fails to acknowledge that religious fanaticism, though particularly potent in Muslim lands, is hardly a Muslim monopoly.

Finally, he underestimates the resilience of Western societies. Cultures based on individual rights, the capacity for self-criticism and rational thought are in fact infinitely stronger than any tribal society can ever hope to be. It’s no accident that the British, the French and the Americans have dominated the planet for more than 300 years. While Islamism does indeed threaten cherished gains of the Enlightenment, such as the freedom to ridicule religion, its eventual triumph in the West is far from certain. All told, the odds of Danish Muslims one day learning to draw blasphemous cartoons probably match those of amputations and public floggings making their way to central Copenhagen.

In reality, it is in Muslim-majority countries that Islamism poses the greatest danger. The movement thrives in places like Pakistan and Indonesia that lack strong institutions such as impartial courts or an honest civil service. Deeply embedded cultural norms and the threat of violence force secular liberals in Muslim countries to tiptoe around religious sensibilities. This cedes the rhetorical high ground to Islamists, who are invariably pious and whose ideas are rooted in an interpretation of their faith. A Portuguese or Chilean Catholic who favors contraception and gay rights is free to declare that he couldn’t care less what the Bible says or the Pope thinks. His Malaysian or Bangladeshi counterpart who shows similar disregard for Islam is either very brave or very foolish.

Indeed, in the Muslim world the slightest whiff of disrespect toward the Koran or the prophet Mohammed is an invita-

tion to violence. Those Muslims who believe in gender equity, the separation of the mosque and the state, and freedom of conscience are reduced to quibbling over the interpretation of Koranic verses and the traditions of the prophet. Hence the never-ending quest by liberal Muslim intellectuals, such as those associated with Malaysia's Sisters in Islam or Indonesia's Liberal Islam Network, to define what constitutes "authentic" Islam.

Unfortunately, these worthy efforts

alone are not enough to counter the well-organized and tenacious adherents of Islamism, who are usually backed by the weight of tradition, the bulk of clerical opinion and the resources of the oil-rich Middle East. Ultimately, by failing to enlarge the terms of the debate, by failing to make Islam as open to criticism as any other belief system, it is Muslim liberals—not Western rationalists—who are complicit in their own extinction.