

Media and Religion in the Arab-Islamic World

This is an edited version at the 11th of the annual [Templeton Lectures on Religion and World Affairs](#), given by Abdallah Schleifer, Philadelphia, September 2006 At the time Schleifer was serving as Washington Bureau chief of Al Arabiya. He is now in Dubai serving as an advisor on training and public affairs to Al Arabiya.

The past few decades have borne out the warning made more than thirty years ago by Jacques Ellul, the French moral philosopher and sociologist, that the phenomenal development of mass media would revolutionize politics, with the flood of information and discontinuous facts overwhelming any sense of historic context. Now more than ever, with religion and politics often having become overtly intertwined, the lack of historic context is a massive problem.

We have gotten used to this dismal situation where the parade of facts usually lacks the vital context, especially in the context of religion. And if discontinuity in making sense out of the facts that appear in respectable Western media is a problem, in much of the Arab-Islamic-world media, even determining what is a fact is a problem.

As a recent example, when Pope Benedict XVI spoke on September 12 at Regensburg on Faith, Reason and the University, the Western media seized upon one particular paragraph as the breaking story, without regard to how it fit into what the Pope saw as the profound coexistence between Faith and Reason in Christianity, which he did not see in Islam.

Any number of scholars—both non-Muslim and Muslim—have contested that exclusivist point. And this was not the Pope speaking *ex cathedra*, nor was this a new doctrine guiding relations with Islam to replace the Church's standing document *Nostra Aetate*, which affirms the extraordinary commonalities between Islam and Christianity. The *Nostra Aetate* also noted how practicing Muslims “value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.” The Regensburg paper was an academic paper of debatable quality, by a theologian for theologians, arguing some points that many Muslim theologians would take issue with and advancing an understanding of the militantly secular modern West that many of the same Muslim theologians no doubt share with the Pope.

Fact and Context

My point, however is that, taken out of context, the quote quickly was construed as some sort of papal insult to Islam. When you combine this with the reluctance of the Arab press, in particular, to gather facts, then you get what you got. The discontinuity in the initial stories that appeared in the Western press was intrinsic: first, in ignoring context, and second, in ignoring not just the official papal perspective on Islam and the

long collaboration and dialogue between Muslims and Catholics set in motion by John Paul II, but also Pope Benedict's remarks a year ago when meeting with representatives of Muslim communities in Cologne, Germany. In Cologne, the Pope insisted that dialogue was an absolute necessity and that Catholics and Muslims must seek paths of reconciliation.

Even the issue of a relationship between violence and Islam, which was an aside in the academic paper, had as its most direct commentary Pope Benedict's own recent words commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the inter-religious meeting called Prayer for Peace initiated by John Paul II. Those words were: "Demonstrations of violence cannot be attributed to religion as such but to the cultural limitations with which it is lived and develops in time."

This is an observation applicable to the massacres associated with the Crusades; the Almohad persecutions of non-Muslims in Spain; the compulsory conversions of Jews and Muslims that followed the Reconquista of Spain; the Cossack and other pogroms in honor of Easter; the gory passages in the Book of Joshua; or for that matter the exhortations by extremist rabbis quoting those passages to ethnically cleanse Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza of all Arabs—both Muslim and Christian. As for Pope Benedict XVI, he went on to observe: "Attestations of the close bond that exists between the relationship with God and the ethics of love are recorded in all great religious traditions."

But despite our own journalistic attraction to conflict and confrontation and our own immediate discontinuity from the background, and despite its often secularist bias, the Western press has a corrective: the follow-up story that attempts to develop an

alternative narrative to the original breaking story and the op-ed column. So papal clarification as well as intelligent analysis found significant space in the Western media.

In contrast, in the Arab world, with rare exception, once the state speaks there is little turning back. In one of the most recent precedents of a media-driven “Muslims vs. the West” drama turned violent, some Arab and Muslim states played a demagogic role in cynically overreacting to the Danish cartoons last winter. And once populists in the Arab World have spoken, there has been little reevaluation.

There has been little interest in most of the Arab press in gathering more facts to a story than one paragraph taken out of context, and no significant reference to the facts of Catholic-Muslim relations over the past few decades. It is also significant that the two immediate violent episodes centering around that one paragraph following the first press reports—the murder of a nun and the torching of Catholic churches—occurred in two of the three most lawless parts of the Muslim world: Somalia and the West Bank (the other of course now being Iraq).

The most obvious and absurd point about the violence in the Muslim world in response to the Pope’s quotation (and burning the Pope in effigy is metaphorical violence) is that all this violence is to protest against a Pope reportedly saying that Islam is violent.

The Selection of Facts

But let me also point out that selection of what facts do get reported is often curtailed by the confrontation line. In much of the media of the Arab-Islamic world the problem is not simply discontinuity between events and reportage, but the difficulty of getting any facts reported once a confrontational line is drawn, be it with Europe, the Pope, America, or Israel or elements within that state who are then portrayed as the spokesmen for some monolithic Israeli society.

For example, there is the tendency of Yusuf Qaradawi, a popular sheikh who is closely associated with one of the Islamist movements and whose reach in the Arab world has been greatly enhanced by his regular appearances on Al Jazeera satellite news channel, to allude to “the Jews” when discussing some specific issue in the Arab-Israeli or Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Of course, in part this reflects the transformation of a clash that, however much religion may get involved or exploited, is nevertheless basically between two rival nationalisms, Arab and Israeli, or Palestinian and Israeli, into a total confrontation between two religions, Judaism and Islam, a perspective that has been popularized not just in Palestine but throughout the Arab and Muslim world. As always happens with extremist perspectives, this is absolutely mirrored by the ultra rightwing religious nationalist forces in Israel and their supporters in America.

I pointed out to Sheikh Qaradawi at a conference a few years back that among “the Jews” were a few thousand peace activists who were risking their lives and their reputations as patriotic Israelis for the sake of the West Bank Arab villagers, who were being prevented by force from harvesting their olive crops by the religious nationalist settlers. The activists became human shields, and their nonviolent presence as victims of

settler assault, would force the otherwise passive Israeli Defense Force in the neighborhood to intervene and protect both the Israeli peace activists and the Arab villagers. By attempting to frustrate the settlers' campaign of *stealth ethnic cleansing*, these Israeli peace activists were doing more to preserve a Palestinian presence on Palestinian land than anyone else in the region.

Little or nothing of this story, which has gone on for several years now, has appeared in the Arab press. The Jerusalem Bureau of Al Arabiya did cover the story, and thanks to one of my former journalism students at the American University in Cairo (AUC) who writes for major Arab media, this story has at least appeared in the Cairo press. But this story is not convenient to Arab media, which embraces and at times incites the street's take on Palestine. Of course, if the issue is domestic—a question that concerns the large Coptic Orthodox Christian community in Egypt and their relations with the Muslims, or even one of the handful of Egyptian Jews remaining—then we will read in Egyptian state media about the heavenly religions (meaning Christianity and Judaism).

There are other no-go topics when media and religion intertwine. I believe Pope Benedict, even more than his successor, wants a frank as well as friendly dialogue with Muslim religious leaders and Arab and other Muslim governments. That dialogue has to do with the issue of reciprocity. European Muslims, backed up by the Arab and Muslim states, have clamored for and received permission to build large central mosques in Rome, London, and Washington, and these mosques have been generously funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, among others. But still today no church may be built in Saudi

Arabia, nor until a year ago could one be built in Qatar. This is not an issue that will ever be raised by most Arab media.

The Arab press becomes furious over the slightest discrimination that befalls Muslims in Europe and America, but there is little or no sense of equity, of equivalence, of an elementary quid quo pro as in the case of church building in Arabia and mosque building in Rome. Indeed, often the opposite is the rule.

Not long after 9/11 the Egyptian managing editor of the student newspaper at the AUC flew to New York. This young lady, like most Egyptian women, is a muhagaba: she wears a large scarf over her head and around her neck. For most women who chose to put on the hijab, it is a question of piety or public conformity in the wake of a very broad religious revival underway in Egypt since 1967, and now reaching into the ranks of many highly Westernized upper middle class youth, whose older sisters would not have worn the hijab.

She breezed through customs and security at JFK Airport. Just outside the gates she was greeted by a reporter and photographer representing one of the two main Egyptian newspapers. The reporter asked if she had been hassled in any way or inconvenienced by the Homeland Security personnel at Passport Control or at Customs. She said no, not at all. The news team went off in search of another would-be victim.

The mainstream American media is intrinsically decent. When injustices appear to have been done to Muslims solely because they appear to be Muslim—Muslim names, a Middle Eastern look, a beard, a head veil—those stories get reported in the American

press. Aside from the Islamophobe margins of our media (and most of that media is online not in print or broadcasting), Muslims get a fair break in these stories. And then there are the positive stories, like the case of the Justice Department intervening as a friend of the court on behalf of a Muslim student who was suing a school district that barred her entry into her classes because she was in hijab. The Justice Department saw the exclusion as a violation of the first amendment right to practice one's religion. To my knowledge this story never appeared in Arab media, at least not in the Egyptian press.

Neglect of Accuracy

This brings me to my next point. Why are such stories so unusual? They are true and deserving of recognition. Accuracy is the very beginning of truth, of getting things right, for it is easier to be accurate than to be able to perceive complex truth. Yet much of the Arab press takes a casual attitude towards accuracy.

Sloppiness is a universal credo in much of the Arab media. Indeed, the Mufti of Egypt, one of the highest ranking religious figures in Cairo, is forced to spend considerable time and energy clarifying and correcting the misquotes, invented quotes, and mistranslations that appear whenever he is interviewed by the Egyptian press. Egypt's leading newspaper, *Al Ahrām*, has attributed to me remarks that were not mine when reporting on a talk I gave in public and in English in Cairo. Perhaps the reporter could not afford a translator and had to fabricate. But another time, a reporter interviewed my assistant in Arabic since I was not available. The interview appeared in full in a respectable Arabic newspaper and was attributed entirely to me.

Such disregard for facts and for accuracy is profoundly un-Islamic. In theory, if modern media had arisen organically in the Arab world, deriving its style and values from within traditional Arab-Islamic culture, it would have been perhaps the most obsessively accurate and objective media that the modern world would have known. That is because in Islam the word is paramount. The Quran is the cosmic equivalent of Christ in traditional Christian understanding, not the Prophet Mohammed, who is the vessel of this revelation and whose life is a commentary on this revelation, but not revelation itself, as in the case of Christ, who is the living revelation.

In Islam, the Quran is the uniquely, perfectly preserved revelation—which would be the textual equivalent of immaculate, existing though eternity, not made or “created” as in the rationalist terminology in the classical period debate as to the nature of the Quran, a debate that the rationalists lost. The Quran is the Word of God made word as Christ is the Word of God made flesh, which by definition is a pictorial event—we understand the Word made flesh, Christ’s life and Christ’s Passion in visual or pictorial terms.

The Word as word. It is not so much that Islam is iconoclastic—quite the contrary—but that its icons, its representations of the sacred inner essence of all things are aural rather than visual or pictorial. In Islam, the manuscript or the calligraphied Quran is a rendering of the sound of an original recitation, of a sacred recitation granted to the Prophet by the Angel Gabriel, the same Angel who announced to the Virgin Mary that she was the chosen vessel for the coming of the Word made Flesh.

But how to interpret this Quran? It contains all of the Names or attributes of God, such as Ar Rahman (the Most Merciful), Ar Raheem (the Most Compassionate), Al Haq (the Truth or the Reality), Al Hai (the Ever Living)—Names and attributes as to the nature of God which are at the core of the mystical dimension of Islam known as Sufism. But it is also in its expository form a guide to prayer, to purification of body and soul, and to social relationships. For the Muslims, the Prophet's life and his sayings, is the sacred commentary, the interpretation of the Word. The Quran tells the Muslim to maintain prayer, the Hadith (the verified sayings of the Prophet). It tells the Muslim that that means to perform canonic prayer five times a day, and how to prepare for and perform those prayers.

The time and manner of the prayer and the content of canonic prayer has not varied since the time of the Prophet, and the language of prayer remains in the language of revelation: Arabic, even though the majority of Muslims in the world, all of whom recite their prayers in Arabic, do not understand Arabic. An American Muslim can parachute into the most obscure village in Sumatra and immediately join in and follow or even lead canonic prayer. It is an example of how profoundly "catholic" if I may mix my metaphors, how conservative, and how ritualistic Islam is, revolutionary Muslims, Islamists and modernist Muslims to the contrary.

So it became imperative in the earliest years of the Islamic community after the passing of the Prophet and his companions to accurately assemble canonic collections as to every certified statement of the Prophet. The collection of these reports, or news about the prophet's own words, constitute a sacred news. The key lay in what modern

journalists describe as sourcing, tracing any given hadith back to the Prophet and the persons who actually heard the Prophet speak, through a chain of reputable sources, which meant a reputation for truthfulness and moral rectitude. This was particularly necessary because in an age of faith, such as the earliest centuries after the Prophet, political struggles among the Muslims were inevitably colored by religious justification, and the temptation to forgery, to invent politically useful hadith must have been great.

With all this as background, one might assume that journalism in the Muslim world, and particularly in the Arabic-speaking cultural core of the Muslim world, would be the modicum of soul-searching honesty and painstaking accuracy and sourcing. And there are positive values to be found in Arab journalism—an aversion to blasphemy. Arab journalists do not blaspheme God, or any of His Prophets.

Origins of Arab Journalism

In the area of accuracy, sourcing, and veracity, the Arab media, however, and in particular the Arabic-language press, can be scandalous. How to understand this dichotomy? How to explain why the Arab media seem adverse not only to the broader canons of journalism but also to the Muslim heritage that insists on the accuracy of the word? When the printing press came, it did not do so within an organic development. It was brought by the sword, specifically by Napoleon's brief but profoundly important defeat of the Mamluk dynasty and conquest of Egypt; profound because this defeat occurred not on the periphery but in the heartland of Islam.

Napoleon retreated, but the printing press remained, along with the idea of France as the gateway to modernity or at least to the technology of survival in the contemporary world. Conceivably an organic development into an authentic Arab-Islamic journalism honoring accuracy might have arisen in the wake of the late eighteenth-century Hadith Revival that swept the Muslim world, but was particularly noticeable in Egypt given Cairo's prestige as a gathering place for scholars clustered in and about Al Azhar. This Hadith Revival, like the late eighteenth-century Sufi reform movements, was a religious and spiritual response within orthodoxy to the shambles of a religious culture in such a state of protracted, tensionless equilibrium that degeneration was inevitable.

The Hadith Revival asserted the direct and clear speech of the Prophet and his companions to the overly formal, stylistic, and embellished court Arabic. But the Revival had barely begun when the Napoleonic Conquest occurred. Any number of scholars who prior to the conquest would have been drawn into the ranks of the Revival were now trying instead to come to grips with the demoralizing implications of a military defeat in the very heartland of Islam for a religious civilization that had until then known only triumph however qualified—the loss of Spain or of Sicily offset by the Ottoman conquests in the Balkans, the conquests of the Crusaders offset by the Muslim conquest of India and the successful counter-Crusade.

With religious thought in disarray and the technology of the printing press in place, this mid-nineteenth century void was soon to be filled by the more Westernized Arabs from Syria and Lebanon (many of whom were Christian) in contact with modern French culture and influenced by the aggressively laic if not agnostic quality to much of

the nineteenth century Parisian press. Instead of hadith, with its insistence on sourcing and accuracy and its quest for objectivity, the secular and often non-Muslim pioneers of Arab journalism were drawn to the belle letter tradition within Arabic literature—Adab literature—which had more to do with literary flourish and self-expression, interpretation, opinion, and literary stance than with accuracy and sourcing.

This tendency was reinforced by the French continental perception of news as a vehicle for analysis—often a most partisan or ideological analysis—rather than news as an objective in itself. It contrasts with the ultimate Anglo-American model, which in its mercantile rather than revolutionary origins sought accuracy and objectivity if only for utilitarian reasons.

The merchant needed fast, accurate information about shifting commodities prices or changing political conditions affecting trade and stability. This utilitarian perspective operated on a far different dimension than the search for veracity for the love of God, but in the end, rigorous sacred journalism and a utilitarian need for accuracy and truth would have married well. But by the late nineteenth century, when the British assumed imperial authority in Egypt, French cultural domination in Egypt was secure and the unique character of the Arabic language press was already defined.

But the French are not entirely to be blamed. There was also the rise of republican nationalist-socialist police states and their Soviet mentors in Egypt, Syria and Iraq—the vital players in the Middle East state system and the nationalization of the press, which was now in the service of the whims of the ruling party rather than the whims of the

journalists and former publishers. The printed word became more irresponsible than ever at the same moment it became more servile.

Arab television, which came into being during the high tide of republican police states, did not even attempt journalism. Its photographers covered only occasions of state, and there were no correspondents, since it was “information” not news that was sought. Anchors could do the job of reading state news agency wire copy describing these ceremonial occasions while unedited footage was transmitted. Onto this scene came something new, an odd byproduct of the first war against Saddam Hussein, and some hope.

CNN Effect

Arab satellite television, inspired by CNN International’s coverage of the 1991 Gulf War changed all that. Suddenly a new cadre of Arab journalists inspired by CNN and trained by the BBC were hosting open-debate talk shows on the Orbit network broadcasting from Rome and field reports for lively news bulletins on the pioneer channel MBC followed by a short-lived experiment of an all-news BBC Arabic Television service—both broadcasting from London. All of these strands were pulled together with the launch of Al Jazeera from Qatar, at the center of which—setting standards for this 24/7 news channel—were a corps of BBC-trained journalists.

With the arrival of Al Arabiya the competition between the two Arab all-news channels (Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya) stimulated reform and improvements in state TV news programming, particularly in Egypt, Jordan, and Abu Dhabi, although sometimes

only cosmetic. Nevertheless, by 2005, Bernard Lewis could note in *Foreign Affairs* that Arab satellite television “brings to the people of the Middle East a previously unknown spectacle—that of lively and vigorous public disagreement and debate.”

Hope for the Future

There are other interesting countervailing trends. MBC, the satellite network that owns Al Arabiya, has been broadcasting programs by Hamza Yusuf, a young American Muslim scholar and dai'ie, or Caller to Islam. Hamza speaks flawless Arabic, and his perspective has been shaped by years of study in the Arab world with Sufi sheikhs. He speaks against the sort of unthinking rage that characterizes so much of popular protest in the Arab world, a rage he admits he himself sometimes cultivated until 9/11. Hamza has a great following among educated Arab youth. Other private satellite channels have also started to counter-program Al Qaradawi and the hundreds of even more vituperative Salifite sheikhs who justify violence and invoke rage as some sort of valid religious sentiment in mosques across the Arab world and in Europe.

The most popular of the Callers is Amr Khalid, who attracted large followings of educated middle-class and upper-class Egyptians to his talks at mosques and in hotel ballrooms and more recently on his own television show carried by Iqra channel. His

message encourages orthodoxy married to compassion, as was traditionally the case. He is generally indifferent to the sort of political issues on which Islamist preachers thrive. Other young men like the Egyptian Moez Massoud and the Yemeni Habib al Jifri have surfaced in recent years with a similar message of personal piety and the practice of religion for the sake of ethical and spiritual realization rather than as a militant ideology, and they are also broadcast on Iqra and Abu Dhabi satellite channels. A new channel launched by the Saudi master entrepreneur Prince Al Walid Bin Talal to be a voice of religious moderation has become another vehicle for these young dai'ie, whose impact on the young Muslims seems to vindicate the thesis of Marc Gopin, who suggested in a recent article in the *Christian Science Monitor* that the antidote to religious extremism is not the emptiness of secularism, but the viable and proven alternative of religious compassion.

During the Danish cartoon disturbances, these young dai'ie urged dialogue with the Danes rather than confrontation.

Indeed, when two or three thousand Arabs demonstrate hysterically in the streets of any Arab capital, we do wrong to automatically assume they represent the views of the millions more who are not committing acts of violence and demonstrating the rage that the Quran and the Prophet caution Muslims against.

Let me sum it all up. Until recently, the media in the Arab-Islamic world by and large have tended to aggravate numerous political and religious pathologies through their disregard for truth and accuracy, a habit shaped by their literary and propagandist antecedents. They have been the least faithful to Islam's own standards, leading to

dangerous distortions of this religion. Paradoxically, the CNN effect, by magnifying these very tendencies, has led to a counteraction. Such countervailing trends spearheaded by the Arab satellite news channels promise that the media in the Arab-Islamic world will not only adhere more closely to standards of honesty and accuracy, but in doing so will become more faithful to the demands of Islam itself. Perhaps, that's the best news of all.

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<http://www.fpri.org/enotes/20061011.middleeast.schleifer.mediareligionarabislamicworld.html>