

The Good & the Bad

Stephen Schwartz on Islam and Wahhabism

A Q&A by Kathryn Jean Lopez

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Stephen Schwartz, an author and journalist, is author of *The Two Faces of Islam: The House of Sa'ud from Tradition to Terror*. A vociferous critic of Wahhabism, Schwartz is a frequent contributor to *National Review*, *The Weekly Standard*, and other publications.

Kathryn Jean Lopez: What is Wahhabism?

Stephen Schwartz: Wahhabism is an extremist, puritanical, and violent movement that emerged, with the pretension of "reforming" Islam, in the central area of Arabia in the 18th century.

It was founded by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who formed an alliance with the house of Saud, in which religious authority is maintained by the descendants of al-Wahhab and political power is held by the descendants of al-Saud: This is the Wahhabi-Saudi axis, which continues to rule today. From its beginning, Wahhabism declared the entirety of existing Islam to be unbelief, and traditional Muslims to be unbelievers subject to robbery, murder, and sexual violation. Wahhabism has always viewed Shia Muslims genocidally, as non-Muslims worthy of annihilation. Wahhabism has always attacked the traditional, spiritual Islam or Sufism that dominates Islam in the Balkans, Turkey, Central Asia, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Wahhabism and neo-Wahhabism (the latter being the doctrines of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Pakistani Islamists) are the main source of Islamic extremist violence in the world today. Wahhabism represents a distinct, ultraradical form of Islamism. Wahhabism is completely subsidized by the Saudi regime, using oil income.

Wahhabism has always maintained a two-faced policy regarding the West. It has always depended on the armed forces of the Christian nations — Britain, the U.S., and France — to secure its domination in the Arabian peninsula, while it violently attacks Jews, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists, as well as traditional Sunnis, Sufis, and Shias, throughout the rest of the world. Thus, the presence of U.S. troops guarding the Saudis did not begin with the Gulf War in 1991. From 1946 to 1962 the U.S. maintained an airbase in Saudi Arabia, and before that the British assisted the Wahhabi-Saudi alliance against the Ottomans. When the Saudis needed to clear the Grand Mosque in Mecca of protestors in 1979, they employed French paratroops to kill Muslims within the walls of the mosque.

Lopez: How widespread is it?

Schwartz: Wahhabism is official in Saudi Arabia. It is influential in Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. It has a substantial following in Yemen, which also has many Shia Muslims. It is unpopular in Bahrain and irrelevant in Oman.

Outside the Peninsula, Wahhabism is generally unpopular. But where trouble is found, Wahhabism may thrive. Hamas in Israel represents pure Wahhabism. Forms of neo-Wahhabi or Wahhabized ideology have been powerful in Egypt (the Muslim Brotherhood) and in Pakistan — in both countries neo-Wahhabis lead attacks on other Muslims and other faiths. But in both countries mainstream Muslim scholars continue to struggle against Wahhabism. Wahhabi aggression was defeated in Algeria and Tajikistan.

Wahhabi infiltration continues in Chechnya, to the detriment of the just struggle of the Chechens against Russian imperialism, and in Kashmir, where it is an obstacle to resolution of the conflict. Wahhabi extremism and terrorism continue to plague Nigeria, Uzbekistan, Indonesia, and the Philippines, although its real supporters in these countries are few in number.

But Wahhabi infiltration failed in Bosnia-Herzegovina and suffered a smashing repudiation in Kosovo. Albanian Muslims in Macedonia and Albania dislike Wahhabism, more intensely in the former than in the latter. Wahhabism and its surrogate, the Deobandi ideology of the Taliban, have been defeated in Afghanistan. Wahhabism has no real following in among the Muslim masses in Francophone West Africa, Morocco, Libya, the rest of Central Asia, India, or Malaysia.

As to other Middle Eastern regions and states: Saddam Hussein has used Wahhabism to give his regime an Islamic cover, but Wahhabism is deeply unpopular in Iraq. Kurdistan is mainly Sufi in its Islam and aside from a handful of mercenary extremists Kurds reject Wahhabism.

Syria, although a radical Arab state, is Islamically pluralist and rejects Wahhabism completely. Jordan is ruled by Hashemites, who are traditional enemies of Wahhabism. Turkish Muslims loathe Wahhabism because of its role in subverting the Ottoman caliphate. Iran loathes Wahhabism as much or more, because of its massacres of Shias and wholesale destruction of Islamic holy sites, among other issues.

And other trouble spots: Sudan is a case unto itself, although Wahhabi influence has been present in the Khartoum regime. Wahhabi infiltration is a serious problem in East Africa.

In the Western European immigrant Muslim communities, Wahhabism has a presence in France but has been weakened by the atrocities in Algeria. Britain has a loud Wahhabi, neo-Wahhabi, and Wahhabi-wannabe element but little real support for it among local Muslims. Wahhabism and Islamic extremism in general are weak in Germany, where most Muslims are Turkish and Kurdish.

Lopez: How much of a threat is it within our borders?

Schwartz: Unfortunately, the U.S. is the only country outside Saudi Arabia where the Islamic establishment is under Wahhabi control. Eighty percent of American mosques are Wahhabi-influenced, although this does not mean that 80 percent of the people who attend them are Wahhabis. Mosque attendance is different from church or synagogue membership in that prayer in the mosque does not imply acceptance of the particular dispensation in the mosque. However, Wahhabi agents have sought to impose their ideology on all attendees in mosques they control.

The entire gamut of "official" Islamic organizations in the U.S., particularly the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) are Wahhabi fronts. In other such groups, like the American Muslim Council (AMC) and the Muslim Students Association (MSA) Wahhabism is in crisis, because of the devastating effect of 9/11. In addition, the Wahhabis are deeply compromised by the exposure of individuals like John Walker Lindh, Richard Reid, José Padilla, and John Muhammad.

Lopez: Why were 15 of the 19 9/11 terrorists from Saudi Arabia?

Schwartz: For three reasons.

First, although no more than 40 percent of Saudi subjects, at the most, consider themselves Wahhabis, the Wahhabi clergy has controlled education in the kingdom, so that all subjects have been raised in an atmosphere of violent hatred for other Islamic traditions and for the other faiths.

Second, the Saudi regime is undergoing a deep social crisis and movements of protest have been diverted by the ultra-Wahhabi faction of the royal family, toward support of Bin Laden and his gangsters.

Third, the main object of protest in the kingdom is the flagrant hypocrisy between Wahhabi Puritanism and Saudi royal decadence. Although the majority of young people want to be free of Wahhabism altogether, there remains a section of the populace that reacts — as it always has — to Saudi hypocrisy by a flight into ultraradicalism.

The involvement of 15 Saudis out of 19 hijackers reflects an inevitable outcome of Wahhabi ideology, not a special tactic by Osama bin Laden.

Lopez: Why does Saudi Arabia seem to not have to answer for its citizens' roles in the 9/11 attack? Why is it not subject to closer scrutiny?

Schwartz: Cheap gas, a.k.a. "big oil."

Lopez: If Wahhabism is not Islam, why aren't more Muslims vocally renouncing the Wahhabists?

Schwartz: Nobody can say that Wahhabism or any other form of Muslim religious radicalism, is "not Islam," anymore than one can say that one or another extreme element in Judaism or Christianity do not belong to those faiths. Islam includes many strains. Over 1,000 years, pluralism within the faith was the norm, and traditional Muslims shied away from arguing that what they disliked was "not Islam," or that Muslims they opposed were "unbelievers." But with the rise of Wahhabism and, particularly, the benefits of petrodollars, the Wahhabi-Saudis have arrogated to themselves a position of leadership in the world Islamic community or umma. Their claim of preeminence is not Islamically sound, in the opinion of many scholars.

Leading Muslims outside the U.S. denounce Wahhabism, and many denounced the atrocity of 9/11. Unfortunately, however, most of U.S. media is completely incompetent in finding, listening to, or understanding these voices. U.S. media does not interview anti-Wahhabi sheikhs or imams or muftis in the Islamic world. U.S. media paid no attention when the head of Bosnian Islamic scholars, Mustafa efendija Ceric, preached eloquently against terrorism. U.S. media did not notice when an Albanian daily — in a country with a Muslim majority — hailed the U.S. action in Afghanistan last year with the headline "Nobody Veils the Statue of Liberty's Face." Nobody in the U.S. media has followed up on reports by myself and others showing that Kosovar Albanian Muslims would like to fight for the West in Iraq. Worse, U.S. media has reported very little of the mobilization of 70 million Indonesian Muslims against extremism in the aftermath of the Bali horror.

U.S. media listens to the so-called "Arab street," which is essentially irrelevant, filled as it is with yelling loiterers, or engages in polling exercises asking loaded questions. This, of course, reinforces the view of Muslims as unanimous haters of the West and America. To understand

the struggle of the world's traditional Muslims against Wahhabism, you have to get away from the "Arab street" and meaningless people wandering around. You have to sit down with serious Islamic clerics and thinkers and dialogue with them in a way they understand and respect. I did this in the Balkans. This is one of several reasons I never tire of pointing out that, just as Orwell went to Spain, not Russia, to understand Stalinism, I went to Sarajevo, not Riyadh, to learn about Wahhabism.

I have never seen a single serious interview with an Islamic religious figure on Western television. This is in itself a shocking fact. Of course, first an interviewer would have to know who to interview and what questions to ask. But if you don't know who or what to ask you have no business proclaiming how much of the Islamic world hates us and supports terror. Proper media coverage of Islam, meaning the views of serious clerics and intellectuals, seems unlikely to happen in a media industry where Barbara Walters remains transfixed by Saudi princes handing out charity and Bill O'Reilly preens himself by referring to Islam as "the enemy's religion." In the wars with Japan and Vietnam, Buddhism was the religion of much of the enemy, but we never saw wholesale smears against Buddhists in the U.S. public square.

Of course, for much of the media, the primitive and simplistic image of Muslims as uniformly extremist and terrorist is easier to report, more popular, and "better TV" than that of a complex conflict inside a world religion. It also supports the left-wing claim that it's all our fault, or Israel's. It's so much easier to say they all hate us because of our hegemony and Zionism than to say, as I do, that they don't all hate us, and that the real issue is the battle for the soul of Islam.

As for the situation in the U.S., condemnation of Wahhabism and even of terrorism have been sparse for the following reasons:

Wahhabis (CAIR, etc.) are granted status by U.S. media as the main Islamic spokespeople. They issue ameliorative statements intended to end discussion of the problem, and they closely watch the community and prevent traditional Muslims from expressing themselves openly about Wahhabism and its involvement with terrorism. The U.S. media let them get away with this.

Most immigrant Muslims in the U.S. came to this country to get away from extremism and are horrified to see that their faith is in extremist hands here. They believed, before coming here, that the U.S. government would never permit such a thing to happen. However, their children are often indoctrinated and radicalized by extremists operating through Muslim schools, Islamic Sunday schools, and radical campus groups. That the U.S. government turned a blind eye to the Wahhabization of American Islam is deeply shocking and disturbing for them. They feel intimidated and defeated. The fact that the U.S. political and media elite have done almost nothing to enable traditional Muslims in this country to oppose Wahhabism makes the situation that much worse.

Traditional Islam rejected involvement in politics, especially radical politics. For this reason also, traditional Muslims in this country have been slow to rally against Wahhabi influence.

Finally, traditional Muslims in this country and around the world were devastated by 9/11. Their reaction was one of shock, horror, and deep depression. Even many of those who tried to deny Muslim involvement in 9/11 did so because the alternative, admitting the role of terrorism in Islam today, was almost inconceivable. This is not because of agreement with the terrorists, but because of revulsion from them. Islam may not appear as "the religion of peace"

to others, but most ordinary Muslims believe it is such. The evidence of 9/11 was so overwhelmingly negative many of them can best be described as profoundly demoralized.

Lopez: How would you like to see the U.S. deal with Saudi Arabia?

Schwartz: First, we have to demand, and obtain, from the Saudi authorities, a thorough and transparent accounting of Wahhabi-Saudi involvement in 9/11 — the ideological background, funding, recruitment — everything. This is indispensable for our own moral health.

Second, we have to demand that the Saudi state cut off all support for the international export of Wahhabi extremism.

Third, we have to support traditional Muslims in their efforts to oppose Wahhabi influence and restore theological pluralism within Islam.

Lopez: How can the U.S. deal with the Wahhabism within its borders?

Schwartz: First, the Saudi embassy must be informed that all support for Wahhabi extremist activity, including mosques and schools, in the U.S. must end. Wahhabi hatemongering institutions like the Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences in America (IIASA), in Fairfax, Va. and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) in Alexandria, Va., as well as the U.S. office of the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), should be shut down completely. Their assets should be seized and their facilities padlocked.

Second, the U.S. government has no alternative but to monitor extremist discourse among Muslims in this country, including in mosques and in prison missions. Nobody would object, on grounds of protection for religious advocacy, to federal investigation of terrorist incitement among Christian antiabortion activists or ultraextremist Jews. No such exemption can be granted Muslims.

Third, U.S. non-Muslims of good will must assist and support traditional Muslims in creating an Islamic establishment in this country that is loyal to our government and to our traditions of interreligious respect. There is no obstacle to this in traditional Islam. But this also requires opposition to Islamophobia — the incitement of hatred against Islam as a faith — among non-Muslims.

Lopez: You are identified with Sufism. What attracted you to Islam? When and why did you make the plunge?

Schwartz: This is a personal matter and a long, involved story, but I will say this: I am a Sufi, and a disciple of the great 13th century Spanish Muslim mystic Ibn Arabi. I believe with him in the unity of the monotheistic faiths. Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship one God — the same God — Creator of the universe. We should therefore see one another as, ultimately, members of a single religion, not three distinct and hostile faiths. As I have put it: from the Jews, we receive the Sacred Law; from the Christians, the message of love and solidarity in the world; from the Muslims, intensity of belief.

I was attracted to Islam because of my origins in California. California is a place with immense Spanish influence. Spanish culture is a blend of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions. I had a long and close relationship with Catholics, and Spanish Catholic thought shows a deep Islamic impress. As I traveled and wrote in California, Latin America, and Spain, I became increasingly interested in Islamic civilization. I was also interested in the

considerable connections between Islamic spirituality and the Jewish tradition of mysticism, or Kabbalah.

Further, I was intrigued, beginning 35 years ago, by the connection between Islamic spirituality and such non-Islamic traditions as Central Asian shamanism and Buddhism. Long ago and far away, I once thought seriously of becoming an academic in this area.

But my real knowledge of Sufism and of Islam emerged from my literary, historical, journalistic, and humanitarian engagement with the Bosnian Muslims and Albanian Catholics and Muslims, during the Balkan Wars of the 1990s.

My authentic education in these issues came during many years of work with the Daniel Dajani, S.J., Albanian Catholic Institute, in San Francisco. Albanian Catholics are remarkable in that although they resisted Turkish rule, and defended their faith at great risk, they never developed an Islamophobic mentality. They viewed the Turks as oppressors but the Muslims as believers. While working with the Albanian Catholics I also began to study Albanian Sufism, which is the only example of a really vigorous indigenous Sufism present in Europe today. I later studied the Sufi influence in Bosnian Islam, as well.

I went to live and work in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Albanian lands, and the rest fell into place. But that story must wait for another time, and much more elaboration, except to note the essential lesson: no Muslims in the world have suffered more than the Bosnians in recent times. Yet neither the Bosnians nor the Albanian Muslims ever turned to Wahhabism or Islamic extremism. They remain Europeans, and their Islam is European. Indeed, I believe Balkan Islam represents a powerful Islamic force for interfaith reconciliation in the West and the world.