

Interview

Prof. Dr. Paul Silva, Editor-in-Chief, JAMMO, Talks to Prof. Dr. Sahib Mustaqim Bleher, on The Politics of, for and Against Islam

**Prof. Dr. Sahib Mustaqim Bleher, PO Box 844, Oldbrook, Milton Keynes MK6 2YT, UK
info@mustaqim.co.uk +44 7092 233 559**

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INTRODUCTION



Prof. Dr. Sahib Mustaqim Bleher, Islamic Scholar and Professor of Linguistics, Member of the Chartered Institute of Linguists, UK, and Chartered Institute of Journalists, UK; Co-founder and General Secretary of the Islamic Party of Britain.

Professor Paul Silva explores with Professor Sahib Mustaqim Bleher, historically contentious issues in the relationship between the principles and practice of Islam on the one hand and the political history of Islam in view of its paradoxical reality today. Namely, that although Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in modern times, its political influence remains limited at state level in the Middle and Far East and Africa as well as at the international level whilst it is viewed radically as a threat to world stability by the West in contradistinction to its dictum of Peace.

PS: Dr Bleher, introducing you to our readership; you've written many books on and about Islam amongst your other writings on the Media and Education. You have even translated the Qur'an from Arabic to English and are a linguist proficient in English, Arabic, French, Urdu and German, which is your mother-tongue; put briefly, how and why did you become a Muslim?

SMB: Travelling through Turkey, Iran and Pakistan as a young man in the late 70s brought me into contact with Muslim culture and people for the first time. Back in Germany, I wanted to find out more about Islam and, luckily, started with reading a translation of the Qur'an rather than some Orientalist refutation. From the outset the Qur'an struck me by the beauty of its language, which shone through even in translation, and it became soon apparent to me that this combination of simplicity in style, yet complexity in meaning could not perceivably be of human authorship. Moreover, the Qur'an mentions events and facts which were not known at the time and place of its revelation and it was revealed over a 23-year period, often commenting on the daily affairs of its recipients then, yet in its present arrangement, which is entirely different from the original chronological order of revelation, it still is entirely coherent. Convinced of the

veracity of Islam I began wondering whether it was something I could also put into practice and started by fasting for the first time in my life. The beauty of the Qur'an also spurred me on to learn Arabic to allow me to read it in its original, and progressing in my studies I subsequently translated several titles from Arabic into German, which in turn led to a professional shift of moving from journalism to translation.

PS: Speaking about the lucidity of the Qur'an, can you talk about the revelations and authorship of The Qur'an and draw distinctions and parallels between its contents and style to The Torah, The Bhagavad Gita and The Bible?

SMB: From the perspective of Islamic theology, the Qur'an is seen as a direct verbal revelation - not merely inspired - and as the culmination of God's revelation to mankind, "confirming what has gone before" of earlier revelations, yet also setting the record straight where those earlier teachings have been corrupted. Islam perceives a continuous guidance delivered through a long chain of prophets, from Adam through to Muhammad, and adapted to the needs of humanity at its state of development at each point in time. In my book "The Bible's Witness" I have shown how the Qur'an and the Old and New testaments of the Bible agree with and reflect Quranic teachings. (Bleher, 1984). Unlike those earlier scriptures, however, writing was extant at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, and whilst Islam, like earlier scriptures, is also based on an oral tradition, it was committed to writing during the prophet's lifetime in a language which continues in existence today, therefore, the problem of authenticity does not arise as it does with, for example, the books of the Bible, which were written down many generations after the event and also largely only survive in translations in a language other than that of the original text, the original language, like for example Aramaic in the case of the New Testament, having become extinct.

The Muslim approach is essentially the same with regard to the scriptures and oral traditions of other religions: they are owed respect as potential divine revelation, but their content is only accepted as valid in as much as it is confirmed by the teachings of the Qur'an.

PS: Moving on from you becoming a Muslim to your leadership role as the Secretary General of the Islamic Party of Britain, which is now defunct and as an Imam, "flying Imam" the title you chose for your political blog "flyingimam.com". How did that come about and what's your assessment of the purpose, success and failure of the Islamic Party of Britain circa 1987-2003?

SMB: After having moved to the UK, initially benefitting from the library resources of a research institute, the Islamic Foundation in Leicester (now the Markfield Institute of Higher Education), whilst working on a translation, I became interested in the promotion of Islamic Education in the UK and founded "The Muslim Education Services" in London with the help of some sponsors to develop a unified approach amongst the then still fledgling Muslim full-time schools and a common curriculum. In the late 80s we spearheaded a political and media campaign around one of the school's bid for state funding which coincided with the so-called "Rushdie Affair". (Rushdie, 1988). I have been actively involved in politics since the age of fourteen, and both these events left no doubt in my mind that if Muslims in the West wanted to make serious progress, they needed to engage at the political level. In spite of having been in Britain for well over half a century at the time, Muslims were generally still marginalised. The majority of them were convinced by their leaders to unquestioningly follow the Labour party and obtained

various local concessions in return. The purposeful vilification of Islam during the Rushdie affair, in many ways a test run for the more wide-spread vilification of Islam after the first Iraq war and ever since, made it apparent to me and other like-minded Muslims, many of them also converts, that political engagement had to be “on our own terms” outside the fold of the existing parties. We founded the “Islamic Party of Britain” in 1987 with the two-fold aim of organising Muslims and moving them from a purely cultural to a more political expression and, at the same time, communicating to the host community that Islam had serious alternatives to offer for the benefit of society as a whole, doing away with the notion of minority rights which had hitherto been the only political expression of Muslims in the UK. A key focus was on the propensity of an interest-based economy to self-destruct and the promotion of interest-free alternatives. (Swan and Pidcock, 2009). Sadly, it was too early for these concepts to be understood, especially by a Muslim community with a lack of political experience and acumen, and rather than supporting our endeavours the majority of established Muslim organisations saw us as a threat to their ambitions of controlling the agenda of Islam in Britain on behalf of their usually foreign sponsors. After the hysteria of 9/11 campaigning as an Islamic Party in Britain became more or less impossible. Since the more recent banking crisis the validity of our focus on banking and economy has proven correct, and we continue to campaign on those issues but no longer through the vehicle of a political party, and the means of restarting a political movement are not available to us.

However, we learned a lot about Islam in the West and the structures which hold it back from progressing, and the materials we produced through our party magazine “Common Sense” of which I was the editor throughout, remains available in the archive section of our website which we continue to maintain. (<http://www.islamicparty.com/commonsense/comsense.htm>) The Islamic Party of Britain was founded in 1987 and is still a going concern, although greatly scaled down. Political campaigning and the regular magazine were suspended in spring 2003, partly due to a lack of finance and partly due to the hostile climate after 9/11/2001.

“Flying Imam” is based on being both an Imam and a private pilot. I was an imam at Woodhill high security prison from 1995 till 2004 and I continue to give guest sermons at various mosques in the UK.

PS: The term, “Islamic” in its current usage by ‘tight-neatly’ controlled Media today is understood pejoratively denoting radicalism or what is commonly referred to as Jihadist; is there radical Islam and what is its effect on the perception of Islam as a religion of peace, if any? What are the structures and leadership of what is considered radical Islam historically?

SMB: What is termed radical or Jihadist Islam is not just something invented by the media to discredit Islam, but it is a reality, although it is a small minority of vociferous groups within Islam as a whole, given a disproportionate exposure in the mainstream media for evident political reasons. A few years ago I teamed up with David Livingstone, a historian of religion and convert Muslim living in Canada to research this phenomenon, culminating in our publication “Surrendering Islam - The subversion of Muslim politics throughout history until the present day”. (Livingstone and Bleher, 2010). What I wanted to figure out is why a near century of settlement in the West had left Muslims at the margins and without meaningful political representation or influence. Nor had their religion, in spite of its potent message, had much of an effect on their host communities. What we found out was that Islamic activities had been

tightly controlled to make sure that they would not produce a genuine political movement capable of threatening the status quo.

Whenever we went campaigning on behalf of the Islamic Party of Britain, we found ourselves confronted with so-called radical Muslims denouncing all involvement in the politics of the “disbelieving” society as an innovation and unlawful (haram) under Islamic law (sharia). Those groups come in various shapes and are known under various names, but their common fervour to try and stifle the political organisation of Muslims and political expression of Islam was striking. At the same time, their radical rejection of the host community, given a platform by the media as if they were the only voice speaking for Muslims, increased the gulf of understanding between the two sides. Neither of this was a coincidence.

Britain as the then still dominant colonial power used subterfuge regularly to bring about change in the Middle East. In the Arabian Peninsula they sponsored a tribal chieftain, Abdul Wahhabi (his followers subsequently being called Wahhabis) to “liberate” the Holy City of Mecca from Ottoman rule. The method employed was a doctrine of literal interpretation of the Qur’an whilst everybody who did not share this interpretation was denounced as having left the fold of Islam and had to be fought. By permitting the declaration of war against allegedly deviant fellow-Muslims, those groups were found to engage in fighting other Muslims instead of the colonial intruders, and wherever they went, the British followed, eventually establishing Saudi-Arabia with its British-approved king in the heartland of Islam. (Algar, 2002; Livingstone and Bleher, 2010 op. cit.).

In India the British founded the movement known as Ahmediyyah/Qadiani (Ahmad, 1994) for similar reasons, who preached that due to their developed culture being closer to the ideal of Islam than that of the Muslims themselves they had to be followed rather than fought. In Turkey, the seat of the Islamic caliphate, the British were instrumental in establishing the Masonic Young Turk movement. (Dreyfuss, 1980; Pidcock, 1992). In Palestine, Jerusalem being the third holy place of Islam after Mecca and Medina, they created a Jewish homeland, today’s Israel. (Schneer, 2010).

After the Second World War this strategy continued under American leadership. (Ganser, 2005). With the help of ex-Nazi officers the United States established a “rapid deployment force” in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood. (Livingstone and Bleher, 2010). These could be called upon to ferment strife which in turn would allow the outside powers to intervene. When Nasser expelled the Brotherhood after a failed assassination attempt, they found refuge in Saudi Arabia where, financed by petrol dollars, they created a global organisation, the Muslim World League, largely controlling mosques and Muslim organisations in the West. The Afghan Taliban and the so-called “Salafis” are both offshoots of the Wahhabi/Brotherhood movements. Only recently, during the “Arab Spring”, the United States used the same network to engineer the reshaping of the Middle East, whilst in the West those groups are employed to discredit Islam as an alternative in the minds of the majority population.

PS: Wouldn’t it be more appropriate to state that they “re-created” a Jewish homeland so as not to suggest that the Jewish people did not live there prior to creation of a Jewish State in 1948?

SMB: No, re-created would support their claim to the land. After the exile Jews lived in and around Jerusalem in a predominantly Arab/Muslim society just as they did everywhere else in the Arab world, their numbers in e.g. Iraq, Morocco and even Iran being far greater than those who lived in Palestine. The creation of a "Jewish homeland" in Palestine (and those are in fact the words of the Balfour declaration) was a political act in line with Theodor Herzl's Zionist teachings of the need to establish a state in the Promised Land. It is to this day opposed by Orthodox Jews who believe that the diaspora may not end and Jews may not establish a state before the coming of the Messiah.

PS: Are you then saying that Jewish people have never had any homeland throughout oral and recorded history? What has become of the promise of God to Abraham?

SMB: They had a homeland in Palestine until they were forced into exile in Babylon. The promise to Abraham, who is buried in Hebron/al-Khalil (the latter meaning friend of God, a name given to Abraham), is through both his progeny, the Israelites through Moses and the Ishmaelite's through Muhammad.

PS: Most critics of the Salafi/Wahhabi Islam you describe come from Muslims describing themselves as Sufis, yet in your book "Surrendering Islam" you are equally critical of the Sufi tradition. Can you explain why?

SMB: Sufis tend to claim that they only add a further dimension to the practice of Islam through heightened spirituality in an endeavour to unite with God. Leaving aside the theological problem that the complete otherness of God does not entertain such unison, my key issue with Sufism is its esotericism and elitism. Essentially, Sufism is based on the premise that in addition to the public message of the prophet, he also brought a private, even secret, message taught only to the initiated, as the masses were not ready for it. This message is passed on from teacher to disciple in parallel to the general message of Islam, and to my mind this violates the universality of the message so emphasised by Islam. The heavy reliance on a spiritual teacher also makes Sufism a most suitable vehicle for political manipulation as I have shown in "Surrendering Islam".

PS: The central theme of "Surrendering Islam", as I understood it, is that the Abrahamic religions have all descended into the Luciferian occultism and need the Mahdi and Jesus to redress the balance. Can you correct me if I'm wrong and also elaborate on the relationship between the Islamic Mahdi and Jesus (Prophet Isa) in Islam portrayal of end times?

SMB: When realising a problem, it is the duty of every Muslim and the Muslim community as a whole to try to restore equilibrium. They can, however, only do so within the limitations placed upon them by their respective situation. This is expressed in the Qur'an by quoting the prophet Shu'ayb (Jethro) as saying: "I only endeavour improvement to the best of my ability". (Qur'an 11:88). Man is judged on his intention and the effort he makes. Success, on the other hand, is from God alone. If the time is not right for a change, the change won't happen in spite of all the best effort to bring it about. Like other Abrahamic traditions before, Islam has experienced deviation and corruption, although this has not gone as far as altering the scriptural text itself, hence there is no need for a further prophet. However, restoring the Muslim community requires sound political and spiritual leadership, and for this the Islamic tradition looks to the Mahdi at

near the end time, a time of great turmoil, equivalent to what is described in the Bible as Armageddon. Yet even the Mahdi will not suffice in confronting the Anti-Christ (Dajjal), the ultimate all-powerful tyrannical ruler of the world at that time, a task left to Jesus who is said to descend from heaven, where God took him to save him from the ignominy of death on the cross, on the shoulders of two angels near Damascus, the scene of that final battle. He will join the Mahdi's forces and kill the Anti-Christ and establish a just rule for forty years. He will break the cross, in other words, clear his name and restore the Unitarian teachings of Christianity which were superseded by Pauline teachings and the Trinitarian doctrine of Emperor Constantine. His final resting place will be a tomb next to Prophet Muhammad's. (Bleher, 2000 and 2005).

PS: Are you saying that the Qur'an teaches that Jesus did not die on the cross as the Christians believe and that Jesus will work with the Mahdi to eliminate the Anti-Christ and after establishing a just rule for forty years he, Jesus would die and be buried next to Prophet Muhammad? Given Jesus' ascension was some two thousand years ago, what then would be the purpose of his physical death post his forty-year rule?

SMB: Yes, all that. Jesus' birth and ascension are of the miracles given to him, but in line with the Quranic statement "every soul will taste death" his return and completing a normal life ends the state of suspension, not very different, for example, from the sleepers in the cave who were asleep for 300 years to then live out the remainder of their time (Surah Al-Kahf, the Cave), some commentators equate them with the sleepers of Ephesus. However, his return as the Messiah also gives him the unique position amongst the prophets of returning to correct his teachings after they have been distorted, a gift not given to other prophets.

PS: Before the late 1980s the term "black" unites the divergent non-white ethnic minorities in Britain, such as the Africans, Caribbeans, and South Asians. By the late 1980s, the majority of Muslims in Britain who are South Asians started to demand politics of inclusion and equality, distinct religious and cultural rights for Muslims (Ansari, 2005; Maxwell, 2006); would you say on reflection and in view of later developments such as the riot in Oldham, 2001; Burnley; Bradford, and the terrorist attack in New York 9/11, which you've already mentioned with the banking and economic crisis; terrorist attacks in London in 2005 blamed by the media and governments on radical Islam that there has been a cultural shift in the Muslim communities in Britain and is it in reaction to racism or poverty, or both?

SMB: The post-colonial struggle against discrimination by natives of former British colonies - and in a similar fashion against discrimination in France by former French colonial subjects - started out as and remained during the 70s and 80s an anti-racism struggle. However, just as the identity of a people is multifaceted, discrimination takes place at different levels, focusing on race, culture, language, religion, class etc. Many of the failings of the anti-racism movement are due to an oversimplification of racism. Whilst Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were all non-white ethnic minorities from South-East Asia, they were at least as divided amongst each other through their history and religion as they were separated from the white host community.

When the ethnic minority lobby made inroads into mainstream politics it soon became clear to Muslims that it would not end discrimination against them, in fact such discrimination became even more pronounced. The message from establishment was that whilst a different skin colour

might to a certain degree be tolerated when it comes to access to power, a divergent culture or religion would not.

In most European countries where immigrants settled from those countries' former colonies, they are now in their third or even fourth generation, yet they continue to be referred to as Arabs (in France) or Asians and Blacks (in the UK) or Turks (in Germany) rather than as French, British or German. Whilst official forms in the UK now contain more racial categories than South-Africa used to have, allegedly in order to monitor and eradicate racial discrimination, it is very much window-dressing, as equality of access to the corridors of power does not exist even for the grand and great grandchildren of former immigrants. Since well before 9/11, effectively from the time of the first Iraq war, anti-Islamic sentiment became the acceptable face of racism, leading to a perceived need amongst Muslim communities to fight what was subsequently termed "Islamophobia" (Runnymede Trust, 1997).

Another strategy employed in particular in Britain seems to have been entirely missed in the literature on anti-discrimination and social integration, namely destabilisation of communities through new waves of immigration. It is a myth promoted for political ends that the British government is helpless in the face of large-scale immigration from outside Europe; to the contrary, such immigration is carefully planned and managed for its perceived benefit to the UK economy. However, it has a devastating effect on the ambitions of older immigrant communities to try and establish themselves, turning the clock back as it were. Just as they have succeeded in developing social and community structures, gained access to professions and better housing and are claiming better wages, they are faced with newcomers who are at the mercy of the labour market, willing to work cheap and live in substandard conditions whilst at the same time allowing right-wing politicians to play the "race card" again.

PS: What do you think is really preventing Islam from developing its full potential?

SMB: The problem is highly complex and not easy to answer in a few paragraphs. There are both external and internal factors. After the geographical map of the former Islamic caliphate in the form of the Ottoman Empire was redrawn by the victors of World War One, they gradually replaced direct rule with puppet regimes and also introduced a new nationalism hitherto alien to Muslim thought. At the same time, as I have already referred to, they subverted Islamic movements, thus controlling both the government and the opposition. National politics of and affiliation with their home countries also dominated the minority Muslim communities establishing themselves in the West. This, together with a tendency to ghettoization prevented the building of bridges with the host communities and limited the influence of indigenous converted Muslims to a marginal role.

Colonial rule also supplanted the Islamic legal and educational system with its own. The destruction of traditional institutions and methods of learning coupled with the great emphasis on individuality and freedom of choice increasingly lead to Muslims, insufficiently grounded in the teachings of their own creed, choosing their own personal brand of Islam, picking and choosing various elements that suited them without a deeper understanding of their interconnectedness, a process greatly accelerated by the advance of the internet.

In this regard, it did not help from a political point of view that Islam is essentially a "lay church",

in other words, there is no institutionalised priesthood. In effect this meant that the destruction of Islam's political authority in most cases also weakened its religious authority.

Those and other factors contributed to Islam losing much of its universal appeal as an ideology for the betterment of society and humanity, emasculating it into a private religion as tolerated by the secular state and reducing its political impact to one of identity politics.

PS: How does wearing the hijab and the fact that non-Islamic countries seem to be more accepting to Islam in that one can find at least a handful of mosques in most countries in the West, Britain, France, the USA, but hardly any churches, Hindu and Buddhist temples in the Gulf States, Iran and Pakistan especially tie into this narrative? Can the Sharia laws be modified and brought to the twenty-first century or must the amputating of limbs and the beheading of the guilty be accepted as simply capital punishment befitting the crime as use of lethal injections administered in most states in America is often justified by the supporters of the death penalty?

SMB: The reduction of Islamic law to hijab and amputation (the age-old Orientalist obsession with an eroticised harem and portrayal of Muslims as barbaric) says more about the inability of the West to engage in serious discussion with Muslims than about Islam. (Khan, 2006). Islam mandates the head cover (hijab), not the face cover (niqab), so when the French decided to legislate against the tiny minority of Muslim women having opted for the latter dress choice and impose a fine, this was really an attempt to attract right wing voters at the expense of religious tolerance, and having dictated a dress code to women they also effectively had to give up the high ground with regard to individual liberty and women's rights. Islamic Sharia has always been adaptable. At a time of famine the second caliph of Islam, Umar ibn al-Khattab, is said to have stated that he would much rather cut the hand of a person hoarding and withholding food from the poor than that of one compelled to steal out of hunger. Islamic law is not reduced to a few punishments which have their place as ultimate deterrents; it is a complete code of law covering every aspect of life. For a particular punishment to be justly awarded, justice first has to be established within society at large, for the individual may not be held responsible for the failings of his government or the community in which he lives. If, on the other hand, somebody were to threaten the civility of an established orderly and just society without want, then the seriousness of the punishment must equally reflect the seriousness of this violation of public peace and security.

It is little understood that the Islamic code of law, the Sharia, does not differ all that much in its make-up from other known bodies of law, all of which originally were designed to rule and administer justice in the name of God. The Islamic Sharia is made up of statute law, derived from the Qur'an and prophetic tradition, and therefore constitutionally inviolable and divine, and case law, developed through analogy and reasoning and thus, essentially, man-made. By the way, since in the treaty of Lausanne Greece conceded its Turkish minorities of Thrace the right to have their internal matters governed under their own law, the Islamic Sharia became by definition of this inherited status incorporated into European law, so all those inflammatory warnings about the threat posed to the Western legal system by Sharia law are pure rhetoric. (Panico, 1997; Human Rights Watch, 1999).

PS: What is the eschatology of Islam for the world?

SMB: There are two key concepts of Islam which are often overlooked: balance and justice. According to Islamic teachings, man is an eternal soul inhabiting a temporal body, and his focus thus ought to be on that which lasts at the expense of that which wanes. Life on earth is seen as a test during which one's actions earn one reward or punishment in the life to come. The purpose of actions beyond mere survival is to restore the perfect balance that existed in creation prior to having been corrupted by man's disobedience to God's law. Complete justice will remain unattainable on earth and will be meted out in the hereafter. However, by emphasising man's duty to change the status quo, Islam becomes a social religion, renouncing asceticism or monasticism as an escape from the burden of responsibility. Gratitude to God's abundant gifts can only be expressed by benefiting one's fellow man since God Himself is free from all want.

Please excuse my use of "man" as meaning both men and women. Islam does not view the soul of a male or female body any different in worth. I do feel, however, that the introduction of so-called non-sexist language (he/she, s/he etc.) has mutilated language unnecessarily, although the English language due to being less gendered than many other languages has maybe suffered the least in this assault.

PS: What will happen to the Earth in the medium and long-term in the teachings of Islam since it's a testing ground?

SMB: Throughout history, times oscillate between improvement and deterioration or, as the Qur'an puts it: "These are the days of God we alternate between people". (Qur'an 3:140). At times of prosperity (spiritual and material) the objective is to look after and safeguard the received blessing and pass on teachings and welfare to future generations. At a time of strife and hardship, the objective is to fight oppression and restore a state of peace in which the human spirit can develop unhindered. On the spiritual level, inevitably things get progressively more diluted the further we are away from the time of the divinely sent teacher, and the spiritual void brought about by excessive materialism will eventually lead to the Armageddon scenario I described earlier. With the coming of the Mahdi and the return of the Messiah, there will be a period of spiritual and material bliss once more, but this too, will not last, and when mankind descends once again into forgetting its destiny and gets absorbed in the trivial pursuit of individual self-interest, that will be the time when "the trumpet is blown", the time where life on earth will be curtailed through major cosmic events, the dead will be raised from their graves and all souls will be gathered for judgment.

PS: Does the Qur'an teach of the New Jerusalem literally or otherwise? As is in the Bible: "...I will write upon him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God which is New Jerusalem which cometh down out of heaven from my God and I will write upon him my new name" Rev 3:12; similar passages are in Rev 21:3; Isaiah 65:18 etc.

SMB: As for Jerusalem, it is mentioned specifically in surah al-Isra', the night journey which covers the Prophet Muhammad's night journey to Jerusalem where he prayed with all the other prophets. This establishes Jerusalem as a highly spiritual city and many Muslim commentators perceive it as a barometer of God's pleasure with His people, so when the Jews were in favour they ruled Jerusalem, and when they lost favour, they were driven out, likewise the Christians later and today the Muslims. There are, however, no specific predictions about Jerusalem in the Qur'an, nor does the Qur'an cover the events surrounding the Mahdi or of Jesus' return; those are based on the prophetic tradition (hadith).

PS: What does the hadith say about Jerusalem, though?

SMB: It is the second place built for the worship of the one God after the Kaabah, it is the third holiest place after Mecca and Medina and the only one besides them designated for pilgrimage, with prayers there counting a multiple of those said elsewhere. It was the prayer direction for Muslims prior to the Kaabah. The Anti-Christ will not be allowed to enter it and will be killed by Jesus near Ludd before reaching there. All its surroundings are blessed according to the Qur'an.

PS: What does it mean to you to be a Muslim and how do you respond to those who claim that the name Allah is one of three deities worshipped in and around Mecca and Medina before the advent of Prophet Muhammad?

SMB: Literally, Islam being derived from the Arabic stem word s-l-m – meaning peace and submission –, a Muslim is someone attaining peace with himself and his environment through submission to his Creator. As such, this is an unobtainable ideal, so in real terms a Muslim is someone striving to attain peace through submission. Submission to God means putting the commandments and teachings of God as communicated through his revelation, the Qur'an, and his prophet, Muhammad, before his own, often selfish, desires. In practice, this state of mind has to be translated into action, hence the sayings of the prophet that "A Muslim is one from whose tongue and hand people are safe" and "The best of people are those who benefit mankind most". (At-Tabarani).

As for claims that Allah is the name of some pagan god or a moon god, or the quite ludicrous word games in the film clip

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=FJiCU6Jw0Co&feature=endscreen> which tries to derive meanings from words out of context, for example Amen as being derived from Amun, the moon god, or Amun-Ra, an Egyptian sun god, whereas it is derived in Arabic and Hebrew from the root a-m-n, belief/certainty (e.g. Iman) and simply means I believe, I confirm; hence it is said at the end of prayers: The name Allah is the name of the one God worshipped by all monotheistic Abrahamic traditions. It is found in the Bible, e.g. "Eli, Eli lima sabakhtana" as the alleged words of Jesus on the cross, and the vocative Allahumma (oh Allah) is found there in the form of Elohim.

Out of shyness of calling the name of God, the Jews started calling him Jahwe (yah huwa - oh he who is) instead and in English, too, write G-d instead of God, but in all Semitic languages (Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic) His name is Allah, Elah, Eli etc.

PS: How is the politics of Islam, as taught in the Qur'an, different to or in synchronisation with the politics of the Islamic countries, today? In other words, what is the politics of Islam, what is the politics for Islam and what is the politics against Islam?

SMB: For historic reasons, the "Enlightenment" politics of the French Revolution established the separation of Church and State, and through the two-fold propaganda of human rights and democracy - lofty concepts which are preached but not practiced by their protagonists - Western governments have also imposed this separation on Muslim nation states, although the concept is entirely alien to Islam. Islam being a system which, as long as its inviolable principles are

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safeguarded, has no problem in adapting to both historic and local circumstance, has never been in need of a Western-style reformation, nor does it ever consider a ruler as infallible or beyond the reach of the law by which all men are judged. (Abdelkader, 2011)

Since the administration of justice is impossible without the power of enforcement, Muslims aspiration since the destruction of the Ottoman caliphate is the return to an Islamic state. However, such an Islamic state cannot simply be established by decree or through changing a few prominent legal provisions. Rather the change has to be holistic and all-encompassing, with the legislative and executive as well as the economy of the state being governed by Islamic principles. Just as a three-legged stool will not stand, attempts to establish an Islamic state at the political level only, with the economy remaining interest-based and dependent on the World Bank and IMF, can only result in failure. Such failure is often used as an argument that Islam is not viable in the modern world, whereas the truth is that a partial mix-and-match Islam is not viable due to inherent contradictions, whilst a complete Islamisation of a society within specified borders has not yet been tried since the collapse of Ottoman rule. There is plenty of discussion whether such a change would have to be brought about from the bottom up or from top down. (Sabet, 2008). Undoubtedly, rebuilding a system is a lot more difficult than maintaining or repairing an existing one.

It is also doubtful, whether such an enterprise will at all be possible within the limitations of the modern nation state since the belonging to an Islamic state cannot simply be based on geography, thus, whilst there have been attempts to transform the government of various Muslim countries, there is also a pan-Islamism which does not recognise those nation states, mostly arbitrarily established by outside forces, as legitimate.

Islam as a political system is dependent on Islam as a belief system. Since Islam does not approve of an oppressive state, it heavily relies on the willing participation and self-restraint of the members of society. Therefore, any attempts at resurrecting an Islamic state or even caliphate must first and foremost concentrate on education in the endeavour to win hearts and minds. Given the present fragmented condition of Muslims globally, various opportunities to fill the power vacuum after the end of the cold war were missed, and the new balance of power in the world is being fought between the United States and China, with Islam being side-lined politically. However, ideologically it remains a vibrant and potent force with viable alternatives addressing the plethora of problems faced by the nations and peoples of the world today, which is why there is no let-up in the propaganda against Islam, for even without political and military might, Islam poses a strong challenge to the supremacy of the present global ruling elite.

PS: By whom do you mean “the present global ruling elite” and how conclusive is the evidence that such class really exist without descending into the realm of conspiracy theorists?

SMB: I prefer to deal with "conspiracy fact or practice" rather than "theory"; joking aside, this question is far too complex to answer in a short sentence. Suffice to say that the world is governed and not left in chaos or to its own devices and that hence somebody must be at the helm. Whether these are the visible top people in the most influential countries or whether other people behind them who direct their actions, either way those people are the global ruling elite who determine the course of events to which people across the globe are subjected.

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