



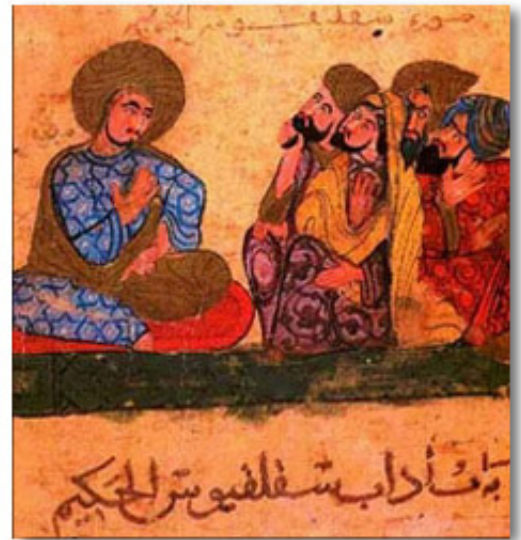
Monasteries and Madrassas: Five Myths About Christianity, Islam, and the Middle Ages

H.W. CROCKER III

Does Islam need a Reformation? Not unless you think it would benefit from additional dollops of Puritanism; further encouragement to smash altars, stained glass, and other forms of “idolatry”; prodding to ban riotous celebrations like Christmas and Easter; and support for fundamentalist Islamic schools that insist on sola Korana and sola Sunnah.

Indeed, it would seem that Islam has already had its reformers. Railing against the corruption of the West (let's call it “Rome” for short) have been such modern Islamic Luthers as the late Ayatollah Khomeini, the cave-dwelling Osama bin Laden, the voice of young Islam — the Taliban (literally, the Islamic students) — and the puritanical Wahhabi sect of Saudi Arabia, which is most assuredly modern as it was not even founded until the 18th century, the age of the Enlightenment.

What would a Reformation bring to Islam that it does not already have? The Calvinists imposed stiff penalties for infringements of dress codes and behavior, but these rules don't go beyond the sharia law of Saudi Arabia. Luther denied the divine right of the pope and affirmed the divine right of princes (uniting church and state, which were previously separate), but that doctrine is already well-established in Islam, where mosque and state are meant to be united. The Protestant reformers repudiated the Catholic Church for dallying too much with classical thinkers and decadent artists (like Raphael); many of them condemned the Catholic doctrine of free will (believing, as do the Muslims, in a kind of fatalism); and they damned Catholics for putting too much emphasis on Thomistic logic and reason, and not enough on the literal interpretation of the Scriptures.



No one accuses Islam of such sins. When it comes to taking Islam back to its pure, uncorrupted form, as embodied by the Prophet himself — an assassination-approving †, polygamous leader of jihads — it would be hard to outdo bin Laden and his fellow reformers.

Granted, the West is not what it once was. Rather than Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel, we have Andres Serrano and his infamous *Piss Christ*. Instead of the optimism of the Renaissance, we have the modern (pagan) pessimism that sees Nature's gods plotting their revenge on over-populating, polluting humanity. Instead of a confident West seizing its imperial mission to spread peace, commerce, and Christian charity and morality, the modern West is ambivalent about asserting its own values. There are even some in the West — including its Muslim converts — who think the Mohammedans' stronger strictures against abortion, homosexuality, and secularism (if not Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, *et al.*) give them a certain moral superiority over such as the Dutch and liberals everywhere. Still, this remains, I trust, a minority view.

But let it suffice that clearly Islam does not need a Reformation. If the printing press, as it is often said, fanned the Protestant revolt against united Christendom, the Internet has just as surely fanned the Islamist revolt against the West. We've had quite enough jihadists posting their "I protest" theses on the Internet, thank you very much.

But if Islam doesn't need a Reformation, it would definitely benefit from a Counter-Reformation. Just think of it. Wouldn't it be wonderful if Kabul were to become a center of baroque art, if the street corners of Tehran were dotted with choral groups singing the hymns of Palestrina, if the vibrant artists' quarter of Islamabad were full of painters dabbling in the style of Rubens, Caravaggio, and Poussin? Ah, yes, if only. Alas, few expect this to happen within our lifetimes — or ever.

Despite the alleged glories of Islam's past, we're told that militant Islam is now stuck in the Middle Ages. But Islam is no more stuck in the Middle Ages than it is stuck in the Renaissance or the Counter-Reformation. As Margaret Thatcher's official biographer (and Catholic convert) Charles Moore has written, "'Mediaeval' should not be a synonym for 'barbarous.' Ely Cathedral and trial by jury and Giotto are mediaeval." So, indeed, are the Magna Carta, Chaucer, and Dante. So are the great monastic orders, the invention of the university, and the development of science. So are chivalry, capitalism, and the idea of progress. We don't associate any of these things with modern (or for that matter, historical) Islam.

Granted, the Middle Ages represent a thousand years of history, and the early Middle Ages (roughly 500 to 1000 A.D.), sometimes known as the Dark Ages, certainly had their chiaroscuro moments. The rough playfulness of the Vikings was not universally admired. If you were a pope between the waning days of the ninth century and the opening of the eleventh, you had about a one in three chance of being murdered in office, and survivors could be exiled or deposed. And aside from a variety of barbarians, Magyars, and Mongols, there were the Muslims who in this period jihaded their way over half of Christendom, and were only kept from completely swamping the West by the valiant Charles Martel, who defeated them at the Battle of Tours (and at subsequent battles).

But chiaroscuro is both light and dark, and there *was* light in the early Middle Ages. It shone most brightly in the monasteries, which not only — and famously — preserved classical learning, but also led the West in innovation in agriculture, technology, and trade. The Church provided schools, charitable houses, and the theological rationale for abolishing slavery (as it was abolished in the medieval West, while flourishing in Islam, which was then enjoying its alleged "Golden Age"). Being still Roman, the Church took on many of Rome's administrative governmental duties as well.

The achievements of the "Dark Ages" were monumental. As the historian Christopher Dawson noted, "In reality that age witnessed changes as momentous as any in the history of European civilization; indeed, as I suggest in [*The Making of Europe*] it was the most creative age of all, since it created not this or that manifestation of culture, but the very culture itself — the root and ground of all the subsequent culture achievements [of Europe]." Here, as Dawson adds, the Catholic historian has the advantage

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because he can better understand that these were “not dark ages so much as ages of dawn, for they witnessed the conversion of the West, the foundation of Christian civilization, and the creation of Christian art and Catholic liturgy.”

The result was that Europe blossomed in the high and late Middle Ages (1000 to 1500). Wealth and learning spread, and in place of the ruins of Rome, medieval man created a society that was far more humane, far more respectful of women, far more elevating of the individual, far more bourgeois (that is, with a far larger middle class), and far more inventive than the glorious civilizations of the Classical world. The Middle Ages were a wonderful bloom of their own even before they flowered into the Renaissance.

Islam, it should be clear, is not stuck in any previous incarnation of the West, and it is certainly not stuck in the Middle Ages, the Catholic “Age of Faith,” when monks, priests, farmers, merchants, kings, bishops, and knights created the dynamic civilization — the admixture of Classical, Catholic, and Germanic culture — that is the West. Even in his humblest estate, as a peasant, medieval man was not Taliban man. His assumptions were wildly different. He believed in a suffering Christ who came into the world as a helpless babe and died on the cross, rather than in a conquering prophet who thought it blasphemous to believe God would lower Himself to such indignities. Medieval man believed in honoring God and making merry and for this world gave not a cherry, to paraphrase the poet (and priest) William Dunbar, “the Chaucer of Scotland.” While medieval man loved feasts, celebrations, gay colors, and merrymaking, he also believed that service, labor, and commerce were honorable; that self-improvement and progress were possible; and that God had created a world that every man could understand through reason, so that every common farmer — no matter his vassalage to his feudal lord — could find ways to improve his agricultural techniques, improvements that benefited himself as well as his lord, because every man was entitled to his own rightful share of his labors.

He was, as we are, Western man, with everything that assumes. As the popular medieval scholar Morris Bishop put it, even today (or in 1968, when he was writing), “A highland farmer in Macedonia, a shepherd in the Auvergne mountains, live a life more medieval than modern. An American pioneer of the last century, setting out with oxcart, axe, plow, and spade to clear a forest farm, was closer to the Middle Ages than to modern times. He was self-sufficient, doctoring himself and his family with herbs, raising his own food, pounding his own grain, bartering with rare peddlers, rejoicing in occasional barn dances for all the world like medieval *karoles*.” The American pioneer and the medieval peasant were us, and we were them, and neither one of us is Muslim. And for some of us, the idea of conversing with a man from the Middle Ages (or from the American frontier) is a much more attractive prospect than the thought of trying to converse with an iPod-attached, text-messaging 20-something whose life is lived in the aptly named “blogosphere.”

The myth of the barbarous Middle Ages is part of the ignorance of our age. Protestants originally propounded the myth, secularists have promoted it, and the facts deny it. So let us sally forth like medieval knights to lance five of the biggest myths about the Middle Ages.



Myth One: Medieval Christendom was barbarous, while Islam was refined.

Since we've been talking about the Mussulmen, let's start with the myth that in the Middle Ages, Christendom was barbarous, while Islam was refined. Here's a simple test: Have you ever heard and enjoyed Gregorian chant? If you're lucky, you've done more than that; you've actually heard the work of medieval composers performed on period instruments. Both the music and the instruments are

recognizably our own. It bridges naturally to what most people generically call “classical music.” (Our system of musical notation dates from the Middle Ages, coming from the monasteries, and most especially from the eleventh-century Benedictine monk Guido D'Arezzo.) Mohammed, on the other hand, like his Talibanic followers, prohibited music. Allah, he said, commanded him to abolish musical instruments, and warned that “Allah will pour molten lead into the ears of whoever sits listening to a songstress” — or, needless to say, a medieval troubadour.

Thanks to Danish cartoonists, we're all pretty familiar with Islamic attitudes about drawing or painting a likeness of Allah or his Prophet. The Prophet himself, however, actually forbade to his people any visual art that represented any form of fauna, from men to cattle, which puts rather a crimp on artistic freedom — freedom that was widely enjoyed in the Middle Ages, let alone the Renaissance. While Islamic architecture is rather attractive — to my taste, anyway — it is not often noted that it took its inspiration from Byzantium, and in some cases was even built by Byzantine workers. Islamic literature — aside from *The Thousand and One Nights* and a handful of other poems or stories — is paltry compared with the Western stuff; and unlike the Western stuff, it is largely the work of dissenters and heretics. It seems that Muslim *literateurs* have always tended to play the role of Salman Rushdie to the reigning imams.

As for science, mathematics, and technology, the Muslims were quite good at preserving and adopting the Classical heritage of the Christians (and the achievements of the Zoroastrian Persians and Hindus) whom they conquered. They were rather less good at going beyond it, which is one very large reason why the West made progress and Islam did not. The other big reason is that while Western medieval churchmen taught natural law and that God had created a rational and orderly universe, Islamic theologians countered that nothing — certainly not reason — could limit the power of Allah; he was beyond all such constraints; and Muslim leaders were contemptuous of the West. In the twelfth century, Muslim philosophers emphatically turned against the pagan Classics. Practical Western man, on the other hand, cared not for Muslim religion, but he was certainly willing to accept and advance on Islamic learning, just as he accepted and advanced on Classical learning. The West's adoption of Arabic numerals (and the zero, which the Mussulmen got from the Hindus) is one striking example. Another is that when the Islamic philosopher Averroes wrote his glosses on Aristotle, they were more influential in the West than they were in the Islamic world. And the much-maligned Crusaders were no bigots — they happily adopted Eastern foods and dress and trade.

It was not medieval man whose civilization faced a millennium of marching into the darkness; it was the Mussulman. By the end of the Dark Ages, Islam's “Golden Age” was just about finished. As Norman Cantor, the celebrated scholar of the Middle Ages, has written, “The Islamic world had not yet entered its deep decline in 1050...but by and large the greatest days of Islam had ended.... In the year 1050, in every country in western Europe, there were groups of people engrossed in some kind of novel enterprise. Europe no longer lagged far behind Byzantium and Islam in any way, and in some respects it had surpassed the greatest achievements of the two civilizations with which the Latin-speaking peoples now competed for hegemony in the Mediterranean.” The West was always inventive — even in the Dark Ages. It is part of our spirit, just as the supremacy of the Koran before all else is part of the spirit of Islam.

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Then as today, fundamentalist Islamic schools drilled their students in rote recitation of the Koran. Catholic schools, then as now, taught religion, philosophy, mathematics (from accounting to higher mathematics), and Latin, among other subjects. It is a common Protestant jab that Catholics don't know Holy Scripture. It's a jab one can't make at a *madrassa* -educated Muslim.

In the Middle Ages, it is true, most Catholics knew Scripture from what they heard in church or saw represented in stained-glass windows or what they read — or heard recited — from such books as *The Heliand*, the Saxon Gospel wherein Christ the Champion enters Fort Jerusalem for the last mead-hall feast with His warrior companions. But they accepted the teachings of their authoritative Church and kept themselves busy building breweries, creating intoxicating liquors, laying roads, building towns, and inventing and mass-producing the stirrup, the horse harness, and the water mill (technically, the water mill was invented by the Romans, who made but slight use of it; it came into its own in the Middle Ages). They also created an agricultural revolution with three-field crop rotation and improved agricultural tools and technology, product specialization, land and naval transportation, and the sanctification of commerce.

The sole cultural advance that one might grant Islam over the medieval West is the invention of the harem. Nevertheless, even the male chauvinist might think that the harem rather shortchanges women. The rationalist might add that it creates social pressures that can be rather unhealthy (leaving lots of unattached, untamed men about). The churchman might reasonably add that the celibate monks, nuns, and priests made rather better use of their sexual sacrifice than did the eunuchs who guarded the harems. The Western clothier would suspect that the burkha was invented to hide some of the shortcomings (by Western standards) of the odalisques. And finally, medieval monarchs, like modern Western man, could always get around Church teaching by practicing serial hypocrisy rather than by stockpiling women in special quarters. This monarchical practice has filtered down into business management where overstocked warehouses (harems) have given way to “just-in-time inventory” (serial monogamy), another tribute to Western efficiency.



Myth Two: Medieval women were oppressed.

While we're on the subject of the fairer sex, let's dispense with the feminist idea that the Catholic Middle Ages were an era of oppression against women. That's rather hard to square, on the face of it, with medieval devotion to the Virgin Mary; the medieval invention of courtly, romantic love; the practice of chivalry; and the existence of queens and princesses. In every case, we have men making pledges of loyalty, fidelity, honor, and protection to women — women, it might be noted, with power and favor, whether it be royal, romantic, or divine.

The New Testament has a rather higher estimation of women than does the Koran. Jesus consistently treats women with respect. Christians, from the beginning, did as well. The idea of woman as a “sex object” is profoundly un-Christian in a way that it is not unpagan or un-Islamic. Christianity has no temple prostitutes or harems, no slave girls or houris. The New Testament never recommends scourging women, nor does it compare women to a field to be plowed (as the Koran does). In Islamic law, divorce is a matter of three words (“I divorce you”); women are property, and women have essentially two purposes (you can guess what these are).

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In the medieval West, both polygamy and divorce were illegal. Women could govern from thrones or pontificate from the libraries of nunneries, and they could rule the roost of a middle-class home just as any other Western *hausfrau* has done over the last 2,000 years.

Women were free to dress as they liked and could go to the tavern — even brew the beer — if they liked. They held jobs and learned crafts and trades. If peasants, they worked the land with their husbands.

They could become saints and lead men into battle (like Joan of Arc).

Especially if they were in religious orders, they were well-represented in elementary education, nursing, and the other “caring professions” (as we would call them today). If they were noblewomen, they inherited and wielded property (and received all due feudal obligations), joined their husbands on hunts (or on Crusades), and went to a court school where they were taught art, manners, and household management (everything from medicine to oenology, from sewing to accounting, from gardening to how to handle servants). They were also patrons of the arts. If women were barred from classical schools and universities, which they were, it was less on Christian grounds, strictly speaking, than on classical ones — on the Aristotelian insight that women are the subordinate sex.

Just how “subordinate” women were might be seen in the bawdy — and quite “liberated” — Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. She should put paid to any idea that medieval women were oppressed. The Wife of Bath, after all, selects her husbands — five in total — on the basis of money (she boasts of picking the first three clean of cash before they died) or manly chests, including the handsome pallbearer of the fourth. She finds happiness with her fifth (and favorite) husband after trading blows with him and convincing him of her rights. (The fight starts when she angrily rips a page from the book he has been reading aloud, *The Book of Wicked Wives*.) In all this, she cites Scripture, noting that “I have the power during al my lif / Upon his proper body, and nat he: / Right thus th'Apostle tolde it unto me, / And bad oure husbundes for to love us weel.” Her tale — and life — is rather more hilarious and scandalous than today's “medieval” Islam would allow. In the Western Middle Ages, however, she was a recognized type, as she would be if she were plopped down in your living room today.

Myth Three: Medieval culture was crude and ignorant.

Chaucer brings us face to face with medieval culture, and far from being crude and ignorant, we regard it as being a still-bright feature of our literary heritage. If medieval castles and cathedrals, art, crafts, and music aren't enough; if *Beowulf*, the *Song of Roland*, the *Poem of the Cid*, and the *Morte D'Arthur* don't speak to you; if Boethius, Boccaccio, Dante, Petrarch, and Machiavelli are as nothing; if you have no respect for St. Anselm, St. Francis, and St. Thomas Aquinas, to select a mere handful of the literary riches of the period, there's really not much more to say.

Myth Four: Medieval politics were despotic.

Similarly, medieval politics were neither crude and ignorant, nor totalitarian and despotic. Far from it; the Middle Ages — from the start — practiced separation (and conflict) between church and state. It was the Reformation, the desire of the state to absorb the Church, that combined church and state with the creation of state churches.

Medieval politics supported a wide dispersion of power, which is what

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feudalism was, and why England's nobles — led by the Catholic archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton — were able to hold King John accountable with the Magna Carta. Medieval man believed in the great hierarchy of society, where every man and woman had rights and responsibilities and was individually responsible before God.

Medieval man was never threatened by totalitarianism. A totalitarian state was not even possible until the Reformation abolished the Church as a check on state power. Before that, feudalism preserved an extreme form of federalism, where even city-states (like Italy's merchant republics) flourished. In the Middle Ages, not only could a merchant launch his own business, but twelve-year-old enthusiasts could launch their own Crusade (the Children's Crusade), and a failed crusader like St. Francis could launch his own religious movement. The Middle Ages might be torn by war, conquests, political rivalries, knightly jostlings, and wars against the Albigensian heretics or the Muslim infidels. But politically, the Middle Ages were, if anything, a time when the dispersal of secular power was closer to anarchy than despotism, and the Church was generally on the side of political — if not religious — libertarianism in order to protect itself from ambitious monarchs and princes.

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Myth Five: The Middle Ages were uniquely violent.

The Middle Ages were certainly violent enough, but they had no Hitler, Stalin, or Mao. The Middle Ages did have its inquisitors, but the various myths surrounding the inquisitions are nowadays pretty well debunked, and anyone who wants to can know from the relevant historical scholarship that the inquisitional courts of the Middle Ages did not strike fear into the people of Western Europe. Their scope was limited, their trials and punishments more lenient than those of their secular counterparts. Inquisitional punishment was often no more than penance, and throughout much of Europe, the inquisition never appeared at all. It was not a major feature of the Middle Ages. From its 13th-century imposition against the Albigensians through the Spanish Inquisition — the most “notorious” inquisition, which operated under a royal rather than a papal charter — the history of inquisitional courts runs over the course of roughly 600 years, expiring in early 19th-century Spain. In the 350 years of the Spanish Inquisition, for which meticulously kept records have been preserved, the grand total of those sentenced to death is perhaps 4,000.

When it comes to body counts, the thousand years of the Middle Ages can't come close to the hecatombs of the enlightened 20th century. If the wars of the Age of Faith are to be regarded as a scandal that discredits Christianity, what are we to surmise from the state-authorized genocides, mass murders, and class eliminations of the pagan national socialists and the atheistic communists, who managed in the course of 70 years, less than one man's lifetime, to kill incomparably more people — by a factor of untold tens upon tens upon tens of millions — than were killed in the entirety of the Middle Ages?

There was fighting aplenty in the Middle Ages. There were outrages on the battlefield, murders in cathedrals, and massacres in cities. But modern man is in no position to sit in judgment on medieval man as his moral inferior. In the Middle Ages, the national socialists would

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have been denounced as heretical, a papal Crusade would have been called against them, and today we would be reading books about how the Catholic Church violently and unjustly suppressed — through inquisition and Crusade — a “heretical” German movement that only wanted to wear shorts, hike through the forests, sing pagan songs, free the people from Romish superstition, advance secular learning and science, and break the political and religious power of Rome. We’ve heard that story many times before, as with the romanticization of the Cathars.

But medieval man has had to suffer many such slurs, from the myth that he believed the world was flat (a myth foisted against him by anti-Catholic propagandists in the 19th century) to the myth that Islamist homicide bombers are “stuck in the Middle Ages” rather than part and parcel of 21st-century Islam. The Middle Ages were more glorious and commendable than many seem to know. Medieval man deserves our toasting tankards; better medieval man than MTV or al-Jazeera man. Cheers.

† The original “assassins” were dissident Shiites; the word is Arabic; Mohammed himself urged his followers to “kill any Jew that falls into your power.”

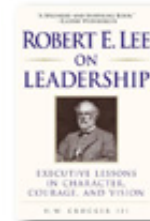
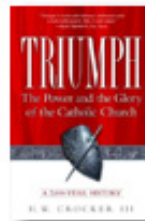
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THE AUTHOR

H. W. Crocker III is the author of [*Triumph: The Power and the Glory of the Catholic Church: A 2,000-Year History*](#). His prize-winning comic novel [*The Old Limey*](#) and his book [*Robert E. Lee on Leadership*](#) are available in paperback. His latest book is [*Don't Tread on Me: A 400-Year History of America at War, from Indian-Fighting to Terrorist-Hunting*](#).



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