

## CHAPTER 4

# THOSE WHO LOVE DEATH

### *Islam's Fatal Focus on the Afterlife*

On October 4, 2014, inside Chicago's O'Hare Airport, three American-born teenagers were apprehended by the FBI. The two brothers, aged nineteen and sixteen, and their seventeen-year-old sister were on their way to Turkey, where they planned to cross the border into Syria and join Islamic State. The three left behind letters for their parents, devout Muslims who had immigrated to the United States from India. The eldest, Mohammed Hamzah Khan, explained that "Muslims have been crushed under foot for too long," adding that the United States is "openly against Islam and Muslims," and that he did "not want my progeny to be raised in a filthy environment like this."<sup>1</sup>

But the sister took a different tack. She wrote to her parents: "Death is inevitable, and all of the times we enjoyed

will not matter as we lay on our death beds. Death is an appointment, and we cannot delay or postpone, and what we did to prepare for our death is what will matter.” In a striking irony, the girl who wrote those lines celebrating the primacy of death was planning to become a physician.

Like her brothers, she had attended a private Islamic school for nearly all her educational life. There she had demonstrated the highest facility with the Qur’an, becoming “Hafiz,” meaning that she had memorized the entire text in Arabic.

In short, the decision of these siblings to join IS was not the result of knowing too little about Islam, much less of ignorance of the sacred texts. Nor can we ascribe their choice to poverty, social deprivation, or limited opportunity. The family lived in a comfortable Chicago suburb, the children attended private school, they had computers and cell phones—although, in a classic example of cocooning, the parents got rid of their television when their eldest child was eight because they wanted to “preserve their innocence.”

Rather, this was a choice directly underpinned by contemporary Islamic philosophy and, in particular, its contempt for many of the central values of the West. In the words of a local Islamic community leader, Omer Mozaffar, who teaches theology at the University of Chicago and Loyola University Chicago, Muslim parents “think ‘American’ equals ‘immoral.’”<sup>2</sup>

And it is not simply our American shopping malls, chain restaurants, movies, and music downloads. It is our values, our social fabric, our very way of life. Americans are raised to believe in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Muslims such as the Chicago Three, by contrast, are educated to venerate death over life—to value the promise of eternal life

more highly than actual life here on earth. They see their primary purpose in this life as preparing for death: in the words of that Chicago teenager, “what we did to prepare for our death is what will matter.”<sup>3</sup> Death is the goal, the event that matters because it leads to the prize of eternal life.

Many Muslims today believe this with a fervor that is very hard for modernized Westerners to comprehend. By contrast, the leaders of IS and similar organizations know exactly how to exploit the Islamic exaltation of death—to the extent that three American teenagers would spend \$2,600 on plane tickets with the ultimate goal of hastening their own deaths.

## Life and Afterlife

The afterlife is as central to the Islamic mind as the clock has become to the Western mind. In the West, we structure our lives according to the passage of time, what we will accomplish in the next hour, the next day, the next year. We plan according to time and we generally assume that our lives will be long. Indeed, I have heard Westerners in their eighties talking confidently as if they have decades still to live. The old Christian preoccupations with mortality—so vividly expressed in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or in the poetry of John Donne—have receded in the face of rising life expectancy, actuarial calculation, and increasingly secular thinking. In the Islamic mind, by contrast, it is not the ticking of the clock that is heard, but the approach of the Day of Judgment. Have we prepared sufficiently for the life that will come after death?

The problem before us, then, is not simply one of better

education: the people who hold this belief are not ignorant laborers but highly educated and skilled engineers and doctors. Focusing on death is what they are taught from the beginning of their lives. It was what I was taught from the beginning of mine.

From the time I could learn the most basic lessons, I was taught that our life on this earth is short and that it is temporary. During my childhood, countless people died: relatives died, neighbors died, strangers died—from disease, from malnutrition, from violence, from oppression. Death was on our lips all the time. We got so used to it and it became such a part of us that we wouldn't speak without mentioning it. I could not make the simplest plans with a friend without saying, "See you tomorrow, if I'm alive!" or "If Allah wills it." And the words made perfect sense because I knew that I could die at any time.

I was also told that all of your life is a test. To pass that test, you must follow a series of obligations and abstain from all that is forbidden, so that when it comes to the final trial of judgment before Allah, you will be admitted to paradise, an actual place with water and date trees heavy with fruit. Thus, from the beginning, as a Muslim child, I was taught to invest my actions, my thoughts, my creativity not in the here and now, but in the hereafter. The ultimate lesson I learned was that your real, eternal life starts only after you die.

I believed all of this without question—until I reached Holland. There no one talked about death, let alone life after death. Without equivocation they said, "See you tomorrow!" And if I replied, "If I'm alive!" they would look at me quizzically and say, "Of course you'll be alive. Why ever not?"

## Martyrdom vs. Sacrifice

What are the origins of the Muslim cult of martyrdom? After Muhammad's *hegira* to Medina, he and his small armies faced far larger, more powerful forces. Both the Qur'an and the hadith describe how Muhammad and his cohorts defeated them because Allah was on their side. Allah blessed their wars as *jihad*—holy war—and declared that the most glorious Muslim warriors were the *shaheed*, the martyrs. So the men on the field not only welcomed war, they welcomed death in war because it elevated their status in paradise.

The belief that this life is transitory and that it is the next one that matters is one of the core teachings of the Qur'an. For the believer looking to find glory in death, there are numerous passages like this: "Only he who is saved far from the Fire and admitted to the Garden will have attained the object (of Life): For the life of this world is but goods and chattels of deception" (3:185). Elsewhere, the Qur'an emphasizes the transitory nature of the world. "Thou seest the mountains and think them firmly fixed, but they shall pass away as the clouds pass away" (27:88). Everything on earth is temporary; only Allah is permanent.

Such is the importance of martyrdom in Islam that martyrs have all their sins forgiven and automatically ascend to the highest of the seven levels of paradise. One sentence in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought* drily captures this concept. After burying martyrs, usually in the clothes in which they had fought, "most jurists were of the opinion that there was no need to say the funerary prayers over the martyr's body, the assumption being that all his sins

had been forgiven and that he would ascend to heaven right away.”<sup>4</sup>

The Qur’an includes a very vivid depiction of paradise for the believing, repentant Muslim, far more precise than any visions of heaven in Christianity or the even more nebulous versions of a possible hereafter in Judaism:

There will be two Gardens containing all kinds (of trees and delights); In them (each) will be two Springs flowing; In them will be Fruits of every kind, two and two. The Fruit of the Gardens will be near (and easy of reach). In them will be (Maidens), chaste, restraining their glances, whom no man or Jinn before them has touched; Like unto Rubies and coral. Is there any Reward for Good—other than Good? (55:46–60)

As if that were not detailed enough, here is a hadith narrated by the famous scholar al-Ghazzali:

These places [in paradise] are built of emeralds and jewels and in each building there will be seventy rooms of red color and in each room seventy sub-rooms of green color and in each sub-room there will be one throne and over each throne seventy beds of varied colors and on each bed a girl having sweet black eyes. . . . There will be seven girls in each room. . . . Each believer will be given such strength in the morning as he can cohabit with them.<sup>5</sup>

These virgins “do not sleep, do not get pregnant, do not menstruate, spit, or blow their noses, and are never sick.”<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, there is relatively little in this Qur’anic discussion of paradise for women. It is also unclear whether a woman’s paradise is the same as a man’s, or what a woman’s

paradise might be like. Even in death, there is an assumption that a woman is less than a man. Nouman Ali Khan, who is listed by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre in Amman, Jordan, as one of the world's five hundred most influential Muslims, is a very Westernized (and very glib) cleric who also heads the Bayyinah Institute in Dallas. Wearing a crisp blue dress shirt, he explains on YouTube that, once in heaven with Allah, all of a wife's annoying traits are removed. "So don't get depressed," he says, joking that when you first encounter your wife, you will say, "So you're here too? I thought this was . . ." Only in *jannah*, in paradise, does your wife have the traits that you actually want.

For Christians, heaven is simply a place without suffering, a place of peace. The precise nature of that peace is seldom spelled out. For Muslims, by contrast, paradise is a goal, a destination, a place infinitely preferable to the one where we reside. "Dear wise brother," says the Egyptian imam Sheikh Muhammad Hassan in an online sermon, "your real life starts with your death, and so does mine."<sup>7</sup>

How exactly does the preeminence of the hereafter get drummed into Muslims? To start with, it is invoked five times a day in ritual prayer. Then there are the constant reminders. The next life is the life that matters, not this one, you are told. You will not please God by going to your job and working hard. You will please God by spending more time praying, more time proselytizing, by fasting during Ramadan, by journeying to Mecca. You can be redeemed, you can salvage whatever you have lost, not by devoting yourself to improving your life in the here and now, but by following religious dictates and achieving entry into paradise. And the most spectacular way to enter paradise is as a martyr, by the open embrace of an early death.

In as many generations as my Somali grandmother taught me to count back in our lineage, Islamic conceptions of the afterlife have remained remarkably fixed. Death in holy war and martyrdom continue to be the most hallowed pathway to paradise. The Enlightenment, evolution, Einstein: none has modified the overarching Islamic vision of paradise or hell, nor its centrality in Islamic theology.

### Sacrifice in the Non-Muslim World

Of course, other religions have the concept of an afterlife. Christianity, too, has a tradition of venerating martyrs. John Foxe's 1563 *Book of Martyrs* was one of the most popular publications of the English Reformation. Yet there are important differences in the way the other monotheistic faiths now understand both concepts.

Of the three great religions, Judaism has the least comprehensive concept of the afterlife. Indeed, early biblical writings say very little about what happens after death. When an individual transgresses in the Torah, God punishes the wrongdoer or his descendants in this life. Unlike either Christianity or Islam, Judaism did not see violent death as something that would bring a person closer to God. Over time, some strands of Judaism developed a clearer conception of an afterlife, but in the wake of the Holocaust, many Jews have returned to the religion's original conceptions, seeing life on earth as the primary focal point.

Christianity, by contrast, has the idea of heaven at its very heart. That there is life after death is at the very core of Jesus's teaching. He himself demonstrated that with his own Resurrection after his death on the cross. For believers, entrance



to the kingdom of God was not based on status—indeed, according to Jesus, the most lowly would be first in line: the poor, the ignorant, the young. Admission was based on being pure of heart, on loving one’s neighbor as oneself. People who hoped to enter the kingdom—the “godly”—had to behave on earth toward one another as if they were already there. Persecution of the early Christians encouraged an enduring cult of martyrdom, to be sure. But unlike Muslim martyrs, Christian martyrs were nearly always the unarmed victims of cruel executions, a select few of them attaining sainthood precisely because of their sublime sufferings.

Unlike Islam, Christianity has never been a static religion. A three-tiered universe features in much medieval iconography, with heaven on top, earth in the middle, and hell below. That was later modified to include Purgatory, a kind of waiting room for those who had not fully atoned for their sins on earth and must endure additional purgation before being admitted to heaven. As we have seen, the Reformation was initially a revolt against the Catholic Church’s practice of selling shortcuts out of Purgatory. But it was not a revolt against the notion of an afterlife. On the contrary: the wars of religion that raged in Europe from the 1520s to the 1640s saw a revival of the early Church’s cult of martyrdom. As Catholics and Protestants burned each other alive, the list of Christian martyrs grew steadily longer. And the more wars Christians fought—whether against one another or against “heathens” abroad—the more the ideal of the warrior martyr took hold. Christianity and Islam never resembled each other more closely than in their periodic military collisions, from the Crusades onward.

Today, in our age of space travel and deep drilling beneath the earth’s surface, it has become difficult to maintain a literal

conception of an actual heaven above and a hell below. Scientific and medical advances have radically modified the Christian conception of the afterlife, rendering it metaphorical for many believers. To be sure, there are still many Christians who regard the Bible as a factual account of the history of the world from the Creation to the Resurrection. But there are at least as many for whom it is a largely allegorical work, the spiritual meaning of which transcends the acts, miraculous and otherwise, that it purports to record.<sup>8</sup> There are sincere and reputable people on both sides. They disagree, but their disagreement has not undone Christianity. And neither side is blowing anyone else up over it. Week in and week out, rabbis, ministers, and priests do not stand before their congregations, preaching about the world to come and exhorting them to seek martyrdom as a fast track to heaven. Bereaved Christians still seek solace in the thought that they will be reunited with lost loved ones in the hereafter, but no priest today would urge his flock actively to seek death for themselves and others in order to receive a posthumous reward. Murder and suicide are proscribed, not encouraged.

Indeed, most Jews and Christians today recoil from the notion of human sacrifice. For example, most modern believers are deeply uncomfortable with the story of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice his son Isaac to appease God. What has persisted in the Judeo-Christian world is the concept of self-sacrifice as a noble act *when it aims to preserve the lives of others*. In the United States, we expect the men and women of our armed forces to be willing to die to protect their fellow citizens. The president and Congress award the Medal of Honor to military personnel who have taken heroic actions to save others.

If you want to understand the completely irreconcilable

difference I am talking about, you need only compare two groups of people: the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, flying their hijacked planes into the World Trade Center, and the New York City firefighters running up the stairs of the burning Twin Towers, determined to save whoever they could, regardless of the risk to their own lives. The West has a tradition of risking death in the hope of saving life. Islam teaches that there is nothing so glorious as taking an infidel's life—and so much the better if the act of murder costs you your own life.

## Martyrdom and Murder

As we have seen, Islam is not unusual in having a tradition of martyrs. What is unique to Islam is the tradition of murderous martyrdom, in which the individual martyr simultaneously commits suicide and kills others for religious reasons.

The first modern “martyrdom operation” was in fact inflicted on the perpetrator's fellow Muslims.<sup>9</sup> It was carried out in November 1980 by a thirteen-year-old Iranian boy who strapped explosives to his chest and blew himself up underneath an Iraqi tank during the early part of the Iran-Iraq War. Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini immediately declared the boy a national hero, as well as an inspiration for other volunteers to sacrifice themselves. And in the intervening years, such martyrs have stepped up by the thousands. Suicide bombing remains one of the most common ways in which Shia and Sunni Muslims kill each other.

Another early martyrdom operation was the 1983 suicide bombing of the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Lebanon, which left 241 American military personnel dead. The attack, conducted by members of a then-obscure group called Islamic

Jihad, so shocked the American public that President Reagan ordered the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops, handing the jihadists a prestigious victory and confirming the tactic's effectiveness. Since then, Palestinian militants have used suicide bombings repeatedly against Israeli targets. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, suicide bombings became a recurrent feature of an insurgency that rapidly took on the character of a Sunni-Shia civil war. Suicide bombings are now commonplace events all over the Muslim world, from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Nigeria.

The psychology of suicide bombing is complex. Muslim clerics take great pains to reject the term "suicide," preferring "martyrdom." Suicide, they explain, is for those without hope. Martyrs are living successful lives, but nobly choose to sacrifice their lives for the higher good. These purveyors of death are recognized and honored as well. Within the Palestinian territories, streets and squares are named for them. Mothers of suicide bombers talk as if their sons had gone off to get married. This is not a strange, inexplicable failure of parental love, as some Westerners might like to believe. It is part of an alternative ideology. In this ideology, death is—to quote the seventeen-year-old would-be martyr from Chicago—"an appointment" that must be kept.<sup>10</sup>

True, while the martyrs' ultimate goal might be paradise, for years there were also significant monetary incentives for suicide bombers. The Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein openly paid the families of Palestinian suicide bombers up to \$25,000 for attacks on Israelis. Officials from the Arab Liberation Front would personally deliver the checks, with the compliments of Baghdad.<sup>11</sup> In addition, charities from Saudi Arabia and Qatar have sent money to the families of Palestinians killed in operations against Israel.

Yet it is impossible to explain the cult of murderous martyrdom purely in these material terms. The parents of the 9/11 attackers were not enriched by their sons' bloody deed. In very few societies can it truly make economic sense for a young person—in whom a family must have invested at least a childhood's worth of food, clothing, shelter, and education—to self-destruct.

In the aftermath of 9/11—to date, the most spectacular martyrdom operation ever undertaken—American commentators debated whether the terrorists who flew the hijacked planes into the World Trade Center were “cowards” for attacking a civilian target. Elsewhere, anti-Americans of every stripe hailed the terrorists as heroes. In fact they were neither cowards nor heroes—they were religious zealots acting under the deluded belief that they would not suffer at all as the planes collided with the towers, but would go directly to paradise. You cannot call someone a coward who does not fear death but rather longs for it as an express ticket to heaven. Indeed, you cannot define them at all using the usual Western terminology.

### Modern Martyrdom

Today the call to martyrdom can be heard not just in mosques, but also in schools and in the electronic media, from television to YouTube. The argument is a subtle one that is not well understood in the West. During an interview on Al-Aqsa television in May 2014, Dr. Subhi Al-Yazji of the Islamic University in Gaza acknowledged, “the Islamic concept of sacrifice motivates many of our youth to carry out martyrdom operations.” But he added:

Contrary to how they are portrayed by the West and some biased media outlets, which claim that they are youths of eighteen to twenty years who have been brain-washed, most of the people who sacrificed their lives for the sake of Allah were engineers and had office jobs. They were all mature and rational. Some people claim that they did this for the money. [But] take, for example, someone like brother Sa'd, who was an engineer, had an office job, owned a home and a car, and was married—what made him embark on jihad? He believed that the Muslim faith requires us to make sacrifices.<sup>12</sup>

Ismail Radwan, an Islamic University professor and spokesman for Hamas in Gaza, explains what the reward will be for those who embrace death. “When the Shahid (Martyr for Allah) meets the Lord,” he writes, “all his sins are forgiven from the first gush of blood, and he is exempted from the torments of the grave. He sees his place in Paradise. He is shielded from the Great Shock and marries 72 Dark-Eyed [Virgins]. He is a heavenly advocate for 70 members of his family. On his head is placed a crown of honor, one stone of which is worth more than all there is in this world.”<sup>13</sup>

In part because the Palestinians have been the most frequent proponents and practitioners of suicide bombing, they have developed the most elaborate and detailed rationalizations of martyrdom. To many of them, the afterlife is not a theoretical, abstract concept; it is exceedingly real.<sup>14</sup> As the Tel Aviv disco bomber explained in his will, written before his June 2001 attack, which left twenty-three Israeli teenagers dead, “I will turn my body into bombs that will hunt the sons of Zion, blast them and burn their remains. . . . Call out in joy, oh mother! Distribute sweets, oh father and brothers!

A wedding with the black-eyed [virgins] awaits your son in Paradise.”<sup>15</sup>

As a mother of a three-year-old son, I can imagine nothing more unbearable than his death. So I have tried hard to understand the psychology of Mariam Farhat, the Palestinian “mother of martyrs” also known as Umm Nidal, who positively encouraged three of her sons to undertake attacks on Israel that cost them their lives. “It is true that there is nothing more precious than children,” she said before one of her sons died in a suicide attack she herself had planned, “but for the sake of Allah, what is precious becomes cheap.”<sup>16</sup> Her son Muhammad Farhat attacked an Israeli settlement school with guns and hand grenades, killing five students and wounding twenty-three others before being killed himself. Why did she condone this? “Because I love my son,” she replied, “and I wanted to choose the best for him, and the best is not life in this world”:

For us there is an Afterlife, the eternal bliss. So if I love my son, I’ll choose eternal bliss for him. As much as my living children honor me, it will not be like the honor the Martyr showed me. He will be the intercessor on the Day of Resurrection. What more can I ask for? Allah willing, the Lord will promise us Paradise, that’s the best I can hope for. The greatest honor [my son] showed me was his Martyrdom.<sup>17</sup>

The Palestinian academic Sari Nusseibeh commented that Nidal’s words made him “recall the words of the hadith that ‘Paradise lies under the feet of the mothers.’”

As the organization Palestinian Media Watch explains, this message “comes from all parts of society, including religious

leaders, TV news reports, schoolbooks, and even music videos. Newspapers routinely describe the death and funerals of terrorists as their ‘wedding’. . . . The longest running music video on PA TV, originally aired in 2000 and broadcast regularly in 2010, shows a male martyr being greeted in Islam’s Paradise by dark eyed women all dressed in white.”<sup>18</sup> Yet this cult of murderous martyrdom is no longer confined to the Palestinians. It is not only in Gaza that kindergartners are dressed up as suicide bombers. All across the Muslim world, children are being inculcated with a death wish. On Egyptian television, the child preacher Abd al-Fattah Marwan extolls “the love of martyrdom for the sake of Allah.” On Al-Jazeera, a ten-year-old Yemeni boy chants a poem he has composed himself, promising, “I will become a martyr for my land and my honor.”<sup>19</sup>

In Somalia, fathers recruit their children, some as young as ten, to become suicide bombers and film their “martyrdom operations” with the same pride as an American father filming his son scoring a goal or hitting a home run. The leaders of Boko Haram likewise raise their children to be martyrs.<sup>20</sup> Finally, and inevitably, the cult of death has reached European Muslims. In 2014 a British-born woman calling herself Umm Layth tweeted a breathless comment on her new life as the wife of a Syrian IS fighter: “Allahu Akbar, there’s no way to describe the feeling of sitting with the Akhawat [sisters] waiting on news of whose Husband has attained Shahada [in this case meaning martyrdom].”<sup>21</sup> At the time she wrote those words, Umm Layth had more than two thousand Twitter followers.

Such ideas are already established in America. Consider the very popular *Methodology of Dawah el-Allah in American Perspective*, by Shamim Siddiqi, a leading commentator on Muslim



issues, and published by the Forum for Islamic Work. The book sets out how Muslims can establish an Islamic state in the United States and more broadly in the West. It presents both the preferred ways of reaching potential adherents—through mosques, conferences, television and radio appearances—and the best strategies for doing so. But what is most striking is the book’s death-laden language, starting in its very first pages. It is dedicated to those “who are struggling and waiting to lay down their lives for establishing God’s Kingdom on earth” and quotes the Qur’an on its dedication page: “Of the believers are men who are true to that which they covenanted with ALLAH. Some of them have paid their vow by death (in battle), and some of them still are waiting; and they have not altered in the least” (33:23). Siddiqi focuses on how the ideal Muslim must sacrifice everything for the sake of the Islamic movement and “expect rewards from Allah only in the life hereafter.” The perfect Muslim “prefers to live and die for [the hereafter]. He gladly gives up his life for its sake. . . .”<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, this isn’t mere rhetoric.

### Fatalism in This World

I can already hear the complaints: Oh, but you are merely citing the extremes; the overwhelming majority of Muslims are not sending their children off to die. And no, of course they are not. But this fixation on the afterlife has other—subtler but also pernicious—consequences.

The Islamic view of the relative insignificance of everything we see with our own eyes is that this world is merely a way station. While martyrdom is the extreme reaction, it is not the only reaction to this view of the world. The question

arises: Why bother, if our sights are trained not on this life but on the afterlife? I believe that Islam's afterlife fixation tends to erode the intellectual and moral incentives that are essential for "making it" in the modern world.

As a translator for other Somalis who had arrived in Holland, I saw this phenomenon in various forms. One was simply the clash of cultures when immigrant Muslims and native-born Dutch lived in close proximity to one another. In apartment complexes, the Dutch were generally meticulous about keeping common spaces free of any litter. The immigrants, however, would throw down wrappers, empty Coca-Cola cans, and cigarette butts, or spit out the remnants of their chewed qat. The Dutch residents would grow incensed at this, just as they would grow incensed by the groups of children who would run about, wild and unsupervised, at all hours. It was easy for one family to have many children. (If a man can marry up to four wives and have multiple children with each of them, the numbers grow quickly.) The Dutch would shake their heads, and in reply the veiled mothers would simply shrug their shoulders and say that it was "God's will." Trash on the ground became "God's will," children racing around in the dark became "God's will." Allah has willed it to be this way; it is there because Allah has willed it. And if Allah has willed it, Allah will provide. It is an unbreakable ring of circular logic.

There is a fatalism that creeps into one's worldview when this life is seen as transitory and the next is the only one that matters. Why pick up trash, why discipline your children, when none of those acts is stored up for any type of reward? Those are not the behaviors that mark good Muslims; they have nothing to do with praying or proselytizing.

This, too, helps explain the notorious underrepresentation

of Muslims as scientific and technological innovators. To be sure, the medieval Arabic world gave us its numerals and preserved classical knowledge that might otherwise have been lost when Rome was overrun by the barbarian tribes. In the ninth century, the Muslim rulers of Córdoba in Spain built a library large enough to house 600,000 books. Córdoba then had paved streets, streetlamps, and some three hundred public baths, at a time when London was little more than a collection of mud huts, lined with straw, where all manner of waste was thrown into the street and there was not a single light on the public thoroughfares.<sup>23</sup> Yet, as Albert Hourani points out, Western scientific discoveries from the Renaissance on produced “no echo” in the Islamic world. Copernicus, who in the early 1500s determined that the earth was not the center of the universe but rather revolved around the sun, did not appear in Ottoman writings until the late 1600s, and then only briefly.<sup>24</sup> There was no Muslim Industrial Revolution. Today, there is no Islamic equivalent of Silicon Valley. It simply is not convincing to blame this stagnation on Western imperialism; after all, the Islamic world had empires of its own, the Mughal as well as the Ottoman and Safavid. Though it is unfashionable to say so, Islam’s fatalism is a more plausible explanation for the Muslim world’s failure to innovate.

Significantly, the very word for innovation in Islamic texts, *bid’a*, refers to practices that are not mentioned in the Qur’an or the *sunnah*. One hadith translated into English declares that every novelty is an innovation, and every innovation takes one down a misguided path toward hell. Others warn against general innovations as things spread by Jewish and Christian influences and by all those who are ruled by misguided and dangerous passions. Those who innovate should be isolated and physically punished and their ideas should be condemned

by the ulema.<sup>25</sup> It was precisely this mentality that killed off astronomical research in sixteenth-century Istanbul and ensured that the printing press did not reach the Ottoman Empire until more than two centuries after its spread throughout Europe.

Zakir Naik, an Indian-born and -trained doctor who has become a very popular imam, has argued that, while Muslim nations can welcome experts from the West to teach science and technology, when it comes to religion, it is Muslims who are “the experts.”<sup>26</sup> Hence, no other religions can or should be preached in Muslim nations, because those religions are false. But look more closely at his point: Naik is implicitly acknowledging the success of the West in this world. All Muslim nations have to offer, he concedes, is a near-total expertise on the subject of the next world.

### Reasons to Live

There must be an alternative. In some ways, the words of Prime Minister Golda Meir of Israel are even more true today than when she spoke them: “We will only have peace with the Arabs when they love their children more than they hate us.” I would only substitute for the word “Arabs,” “Medina Muslims.” For while the phenomenon of murderous martyrdom was once a peculiar feature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it has now spread throughout the Muslim world. This exaltation of the afterlife as a tenet of Islam is in desperate need of reform.

In the early fall of 2013, more than 120 Muslim scholars from around the world signed an open letter to the “fight-

ers and followers” of Islamic State, denouncing them as “un-Islamic.”<sup>27</sup> Their letter, originally written in classical Arabic, makes the point that it is forbidden in Islam to kill emissaries, ambassadors, and diplomats, as well as the innocent. It even says it is “permissible” in Islam to be loyal to one’s country. But the letter does not question the overall concept of martyrdom or challenge the primacy of the afterlife. Predictably, it has had a very limited impact. There are no IS fighters laying down their arms as a result of it; no would-be Western jihadists have been persuaded by it to abandon the search for martyrdom in Syria.

We need to go much further. Until Islam stops fixating on the afterlife, until it is liberated from the seductive story of life after death, until it actively chooses life on earth and stops valuing death, Muslims themselves cannot get on with the business of living in *this* world.

Perhaps Islam can take a page from the Protestant Reformation in this respect. As we have seen, the sociologist Max Weber theorized that Protestantism, though still focused on the afterlife, fostered a more constructive engagement with the world with the doctrine of “election,” whereby the “godly” were deemed to have been preselected to be saved in the afterlife. Simply put, certain Protestant sects tended to encourage the decidedly capitalistic virtues of diligence, frugality, hard work, and deferred gratification. According to Weber, the Protestant ethic gave rise to a distinctive and transformative “spirit of capitalism” in North America and northern Europe.

Might a similar process be possible within the Islamic world? Could there be a comparable “Muslim ethic”—one that might lead in time to a greater engagement with this

world? Perhaps. There is no doubt that Islam has its own commercial tradition. Muhammad himself was a caravan trader. There are entire chapters of sharia devoted to things such as contracts and rules for trade. And, as Timur Kuran has shown, sharia is not overtly hostile to economic progress; in the Ottoman Empire it established commerce-friendly legal rules and institutions. It was just that European legal systems were more conducive to capital formation.<sup>28</sup>

Explanations abound for the relative economic backwardness of many Muslim countries, ranging from corrupt governance to the “resource curse” of plentiful oil. But I am not one of those who think Muslims are condemned to economic failure. On the contrary, in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, there is ample evidence that a capitalist ethic can co-exist with Islam. Anyone who takes the time to walk through a North African souk will see how readily Muslims engage in trade. As Hernando de Soto has noted, it was frustrated entrepreneurs, driven to self-immolation by the depredations of corrupt dictatorships, who launched the Arab Spring.

If imams started talking about making *this* world a paradise, rather than preaching that the only life that matters is the one that begins at death, we might begin to see economic dynamism in more Muslim-majority economies. Giving capitalism a greater chance to thrive in Islamic societies might be the most effective means of redirecting the aspirations of young Muslims to the rewards of life on earth instead of the promise of rewards after death. Such opportunities would give them a reason to live, instead of a reason to die. Only when Islam chooses *this life* can it finally begin to adapt to the modern world.