

THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEW

ALL-AMERICAN SHEIKH

Religious scholar Hamza Yusuf discusses the arc of Islamic civilization, the causes of Middle East conflict, and running the first Muslim liberal arts college in the United States

As he tells it, **Sheikh Hamza Yusuf**, born Mark Hanson in Walla Walla, Washington, hails from a family of seekers. His journey to Islam began at age 17, when a head-on automobile accident led him to serious reflection on the meaning of life. In a spiritual quest over the ensuing decades, he converted from Christianity to Islam and studied with Muslim scholars in Britain, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria, Morocco, and perhaps most notably, with Sheikh Murabit Al-Hajj and Sheikh Abdullah Bin Bayyah of Mauritania. Today, Yusuf is widely regarded as one of the leading Western scholars of Islam and one of the most influential Muslims in the United States.

In 1996, Yusuf, 55, co-founded the Zaytuna Institute, which in 2009 became Zaytuna College, located in Berkeley, California, America's first Muslim liberal arts college. As Zaytuna's president, and in the classroom as a professor, he is on a mission to upgrade the quality of Islamic education, revive the classical teachings and sciences of the faith, and prepare Muslims for the modern world. Zaytuna offers a rich curriculum designed to integrate Islam and Arabic with the Western canon. "Mr. Yusuf dazzles his audiences," the *New York Times* wrote in 2006, "by weaving into one of his typical half-hour talks quotations from St. Augustine, Patton, Eric Erikson, Jung, Solzhenitsyn, Auden, Robert Bly, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, and the Bible." Earlier this year, Zaytuna became the first accredited Muslim institution of higher education in the country.

Yusuf has also been a passionate opponent of U.S. policies in the Middle East as well as a vocal critic of Muslim extremists—condemning the September 11 attacks as an act of "mass murder, pure and simple." *Cairo Review* Managing Editor **Scott MacLeod** interviewed Yusuf on August 27, 2015, in his office at Zaytuna College, located in Berkeley's tranquil Holy Hill neighborhood, known for its small theology schools and seminaries.

▷ **Sheikh Hamza Yusuf**,
Washington, DC, Oct. 5,
2015. *Stephen Voss for the
Cairo Review*

CAIRO REVIEW: *What does the Muslim faith mean to you?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: I essentially see Islam as a culmination of the Abrahamic traditions. I came



out of the Abrahamic traditions. I was an Orthodox Christian. My father was Roman Catholic, Irish Catholic, my mother was half-Greek and half-Irish, so her father, who was an Archon in the Greek Orthodox Church, raised us Greek Orthodox and my father didn't have a problem with that. My mother was very open-minded and she raised me to believe that religion, for most people, was largely an arbitrary phenomenon because they tend to take the religion they were born into. So, if we were in Sri Lanka we would be Hindus or Buddhists or in Poland we might be Jewish or Catholic. I really took that to heart. I did go through the various religions when I was 17, and Islam was the last on my list. There is something very troubling about Islam for a lot of Westerners because it's the similar that's not similar. We have about fourteen hundred years of conflict, with few bright spots: Sicily during Roger II, or Frederick II, the Peace and Friendship with Islam, Eternal Enmity to Rome. Then Spain, during a very brief, shining moment, the Convivencia, when there were Jews, Christians, and Muslims living together relatively harmoniously. But I think for most Western people there's just a lot of prejudice that's there. I was fortunate that I was raised in a household that—my mother had antibodies towards racism, sexism, prejudice, so we were raised not to look at things with a prejudicial eye as much as anybody is capable of doing that. When I studied Islam, I felt this has my Abrahamic faith with a lot of the things missing that bothered me about the Abrahamic faith. It was, for me, a very good fit.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What does it mean that you're a Muslim and not a Christian?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: Everything that I loved about Christianity I got to bring into Islam. I didn't see Islam as an abandonment of my Christian upbringing. I saw it as a fulfillment of it. I really didn't have any conflict there. The Ten Commandments, I got. Jesus is a prophet as opposed to an incarnation of the divine, but one of the highest honored prophets. Mary is still a virgin in the Islamic tradition. The love of Jesus is in the Quran, but also the justice of Moses. So the Quran, although it appeals to the better angels of ourselves and asks us to be more Jesuit in our attitude towards the neighbor, it also allows for the redressing of wrongs. Muslims get that choice between the Mosaic justice and the turn-the-other-cheek of Christianity. I really felt that Islam was a fulfillment of that Abrahamic trinity of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Final Testament.

CAIRO REVIEW: *In the sweep of this history of fourteen hundred years, how has Islam benefited individuals, societies, and humanity?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: Most people are unaware of the incredible contribution that Islam has made to human civilization. We call our numerals Arabic numerals. Many of our stars have Arabic names because the great Muslim astronomers were the ones

that wrote the most advanced books on astronomy. When I went to Turkey I was so struck by how much of European civilization came from the influence of the Ottomans. John Locke, who wrote the treatise on toleration, was a student of Edward Pococke, at Oxford, who happened to be the foremost authority on Islam at the time. Locke was very interested in Islam. I think there's a clear indication that Locke was influenced by the Ottoman way of dealing with multiple religions. The first Edict of Toleration in the West was in Transylvania, which [had] a heterodox Christian ruler working under the Ottomans who decided on tolerating other Christian sects. The Ottomans never persecuted the Protestants, so Protestants would flee to Ottoman Turkey from Catholic countries where they were being persecuted. The Jews, when they were being persecuted in Spain, went to Turkey, and Bernard Lewis highlights that in his book on Islam and the Jews. One of the most ironic things to me is that St. Thomas Aquinas, who really becomes the chief spokesperson and greatest theologian of the Catholic Church, Augustine notwithstanding, he was heavily influenced by Muslim theologians and he has them in his bibliography. He was influenced by Averroes, by Avicenna, by Al-Farabi, by Al-Ghazali. And you can see things in the *Summa* that are directly lifted from Muslim theological treatises. The Catholic Church itself has a debt to Islamic theology. A lot of people don't know these things and it's unfortunate, but there are many Western scholars who do know these things. California historical textbooks, because of Muslim advocacy, have actually begun to change that. And there's pushback, obviously, from some of the more either secularist or fundamentalist Christians that don't like the fact that Islam could be presented in any good light.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You have fantastic epochs in the Islamic civilization. What went wrong?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: Well, that's the question that Bernard Lewis posed, "What went wrong?" In some ways, we could ask the same questions about the West. I find it ironic that the moral capital of our civilization is so low at a time when we're condemning Muslim civilization. ISIS [the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria], for instance, is a pure outgrowth of a war that even the Pope declared unjust, that was waged by our administration on the Iraqi government. Yet we don't take any responsibility for that. These are just "crazy Muslims" that arose out of a completely insane situation where a repressive regime was removed. But I would say that more things have gone right in the Muslim culture. You're living in Cairo, so you know the family is far more intact in the Muslim World than it is in the West. We are now witnessing the disintegration of the family in the West. One of the things that really strikes me—I was just in Turkey, and people just look normal. And when I come back to my country, I feel like I'm in a freak show. What I realized recently was I think a lot of

it has to do with the fact that in the Muslim World children still grow up with two parents and the mother is actually home so they get all the attention they need when they're young and they don't need to do all these attention-grabbing antics when they get older. Whereas in the West so many people don't get that attention when they're young so they spend the rest of their life looking. "Look at me, I have to tattoo my whole body to get people to look at me because I didn't get the gaze of the significant other when I was a child so now I need the gaze of the insignificant others as an adult." So I think a lot of what we're seeing in the West, to me, is profoundly troubling, and in the Muslim World there are a lot of things that are actually positive so I'm not totally convinced that this whole question, "What went wrong?" is even a valid question. What's happening in the Muslim World, the media's magnifying glass has focused on one area that is definitely dysfunctional and having really severe crises, but there are many other areas of the Muslim World that are actually functioning quite well.

CAIRO REVIEW: *For example?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: Every year I spend a month in Turkey and I feel so much safer, it's one of the cleanest countries I've been to, it has all of the modern amenities that I find in my own country, and it has really nice people. Istanbul is rated almost every year as the number one spot to visit on the planet for tourists because of its beauty, because they have incredible cuisine, they have amazing history. Malaysia is an amazing country. Multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious. The Malay Muslims live with the Chinese, live with the Orang Asli, the aboriginal peoples. And then Africa, Morocco, with all the problems that it has, is another country that I love to visit. There's a lot of problems but it's not one of the Arab countries that imploded. A lot of the Arab countries have real problems. Some of them are economic. Some of them have to do with the fact that dictatorship and oppression have been part and parcel of those countries for a long time. Oppression is a horrible thing to live under. Unfortunately, if you've ever read Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, those cycles are difficult to break.

CAIRO REVIEW: *This is what I'm getting at.*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: I think in some ways they are failed states, to lesser and greater degrees. Civilizations, like people, have ages. They have youth, they have middle age, and old age, and in many ways these are decrepit societies perhaps waiting for a reincarnation to be reborn because societies do get renovated. They are renewed. We're a relatively new civilization and yet we're, I think, looking pretty world-weary of late. But the American civilization has been a very dynamic civilization because it's a relatively new civilization. Europe is, I think, having a lot of troubles. The whole planet, in some ways, is going through this. There's a whole set of philosophical problems: the

collapse of traditional societies, the collapse of traditional worldviews, the introduction of Western philosophical ideas, the Enlightenment, secularity. These have been introduced in the Muslim World that emerged in very different environments than they did in the Western world. The Western world had a gross reaction against religion because of a lot of the repressive tendencies of religion. In the Muslim World, knowledge was not the domain of religion itself. There was no priesthood to keep knowledge limited to a select group of people. For that reason, Muslims did not have this crisis of religion as a repressive force as it did in the West. Secularity, which is a reaction to that, laicism, which is the extreme reaction, did not occur to the Muslims. That's why the imposition of secularity on them has been very traumatic for these societies because they are deeply religious societies. They're still theocentric societies. That's shifting. I agree that there are shifts happening in the youth because of the Western culture that is incredibly pervasive because of all the new technology. People are now exposed to things. Thirty years ago in Cairo they were watching *Bahibbak Lucy, I Love Lucy*, reruns, or something. Now they're streaming from YouTube whatever they want to watch from the West. If you've watched *The Square* it's very clear the incredible influences of these technologies even on the quote-unquote Arab Spring. These are complex questions.

CAIRO REVIEW: *If we look at countries with major Islamic heritages—Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia—many are very problematic places and societies today.*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: Historically, to use Saudi Arabia as an example, in Saudi Arabia two hundred years ago, a movement emerged which was a puritanical movement which was a radical departure, it was more of a protestant movement against a kind of Catholic Islam. It was more of a protest movement against a traditional Islam. People say Islam needs a reformation; this is what we're witnessing. People that say Islam needs a reformation don't know how bloody the Western Reformation was and how horrible it was and how it fragmented Western culture, and because of it, secularism arose as a treatment. William Cavanaugh would argue against that in *The Myth of Religious Violence*, but generally secularism came as this so-called arbiter between these religious conflicts. The truth is that secularism has a history that actually outdoes religion in its severity and barbarity. I mean, nobody has been as bloody as the secular ideologues, Stalin and Hitler.

CAIRO REVIEW: *In these countries with Islamic heritage, why have things deteriorated so much?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: If you want to get to core reasons, one of them is that there was a collapse of the school systems in the Muslim World. Ibn Khaldun already in the fourteenth century is arguing that there was an ossification that had penetrated these

school systems to where they were no longer thinking creatively but rather just simply rote memorization. There are many places outside of Western civilization where that is the norm, where you just regurgitate information and parrot it back to the teacher. So that is one aspect of this idea of what they call *taqlid* in the Islamic tradition, which is blind imitation. Toynbee argues that civilizations rise or fall based on how they respond to challenges and the response has to come from what he called a creative minority. Historically, the Muslims had these creative minorities and they were able to deal with their challenges, but these creative minorities diminished until they became just individuals that weren't able to really address the crises that were confronting them. In the West we still have a lot of creative thinkers. One of the things that really strikes me about the West that I don't see in the Muslim World is that [when] I go to the bookstores in the spring and in the fall when they release the new books, I'm always amazed by the amount of serious literature and study. In the Muslim World, crises come and go and there are no books that analyze them. Most of what's published in the Arab World, the best stuff is just critical editions of books that were written a thousand years ago.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Why have these Islamic societies fallen into such states of decay?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: A couple of things. One is *taqlid*, and the ossification of the creative process in the traditional school systems. Another aspect is, if you're familiar with Eckstein's Congruence Theory. Eckstein said that whatever the ruling model of a society is, it's only successful to the degree with which the model is replicated in the other social institutions of the society. If you have a patriarchal society, or you have an authoritarian society, like a dictator, then you need teachers that behave like dictators. You need parents that behave like dictators. One of the things that strikes a lot of my Muslim friends as odd when they come to America is the idea of asking children what they want for dinner. They just think that that's really a weird thing to do because you just give children food. But part of asking the child is enfranchisement. It begins early and you enculturate them into the idea that they are a sovereign citizen of the household and they participate in decisions and choices. That type of enculturation of democracy that happens organically in our culture, it's so far from happening in the Muslim World. That's why if you get rid of the dictator but the models that enable the dictator to be successful are still replicated in all of your social institutions, you've changed nothing. You're only going to wait for the next dictator to come and act it out.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How did this happen?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: Cultures decline and fall. The decline and fall of Islam was the rise of Europe. Don't forget that Europe rose with the introduction of all the Islamic sciences that came into it with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the fall

of Granada in 1492. This is the transformation of the West. This is when all these great works were translated into Latin. The translation movement was amazing. It stimulated Europe and they took it and they've been going for five hundred years now. But the truth is the Muslims were going for a thousand years before that. People forget, when you look in terms of the long-term vision of it, what happened in the Muslim World will happen here, it's only a matter of time. The Romans had their time. Civilizations have their time. They decline and fall. Does that mean that Islam declines and falls? No, this is where the conflation of Islam with the so-called Islamic civilization is a fallacy. For instance, I'm here in California and we've started a Muslim liberal arts college that is filled with people that were born in the United States of America. This might be the seed. It might be, I'm not saying it is, but Islam has historically moved to different places. It left the Arab World a long time ago and it moved to different places. The Turks had it and they declined and they fell. They're trying to have their own renaissance in a way and it might happen because they have a lot of really interesting thinkers and they're very sharp and they have a very dynamic culture.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You mentioned The Colonizer and the Colonized. Is that part of what's at play?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: It's part of it. I think Muslims have a profound chip on their shoulder. I call it the "post-colonial traumatic stress syndrome." The trauma of being colonized, especially when you were as great as the Muslim civilization was. They live in the ruins of greatness. If you're in Cairo, it's very hard to ignore the Mamluk majesty. It's very hard to ignore the incredible past that they had; even the pyramids and the Pharaonic history. They live in the ruins of greatness. And, when they were colonized, beginning with the Napoleonic invasion, and then with the coming of the English and Lord Cromer, I think they really grappled with the collapse. Unfortunately, they identified the crisis with a lack of know-how. Most of the Muslims really believed that the reason that we were colonized was because the West got ahead of us. Hence, they direct all of their young people to study things like engineering and medicine because if we could just get the know-how and learn how they do these magical things, we'll once again restore our greatness. The problem with that is that the real foundation of any civilization is morality. That's where the real crisis is in a lot of the Muslim World, public morality. I think in some ways the private morality and generally sexual morality and things like that, family, those things are more stable in the Muslim World. I'm not naïve of all the hanky-panky that goes on everywhere, but generally you find that. Partly it's because of the segregation that occurs and the opportunities are not as available.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You're saying that this corrosion is not because of Islam, but because there's not enough Islam?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: That's my thesis. Western people think that religion is a scaffolding that we built our civilization with and now that it's built we can get rid of the scaffolding. I think there's a very strong argument that it is the civilization, and if you get rid of it you're left with buildings that are devoid of meaning. I think that's what a lot of Western people are struggling with. The Muslims don't have that crisis. Their crisis is that buildings are derelict but they still have meaning in them. And they don't have the wherewithal to renovate. Renovation is a beautiful word, because in the Islamic tradition people are called to renovate, to renew.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Are Islam and democracy compatible?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: There are a lot of people in the West that are asking, "Are democracy and corporatism compatible?" Democracy is a very fragile form of government and there are strong arguments now in the West that we've lost our democracy. That we don't really have that much say, that we're more kind of happy farm animals. They take care of us and we provide income tax dollars and consume their corporate products. Democracy is a contested term and if you mean by that, can Muslims vote and participate in the government, I think Turkey is an example of where Muslims clearly have worked within democratic institutions successfully. Malaysia is another example. It's different; it's not Western democracy. One of the things about the West is that we love to create others in our own image. When we were Christians we went around proselytizing Christianity, trying to form people into a Christian version of ourselves. Hence Amazonians singing Latin psalms. But, now that we've abandoned Christianity and we're liberal democrats and consumers, the idea is to go and proselytize liberalism and consumerism. Part of our egocentricity and ethnocentricity is that we want to create the world in our own image. For instance, the Gulf states, like the Emirates, or Qatar, or Kuwait, for example, are places where the people being ruled are actually quite content with their rulers, by and large. Al-Nahyan has a very, very high rating amongst their people. It's not a democratic environment, but it's a type of benevolence, a benevolent paternalism, that works for them—setting aside labor problems of people coming from very impoverished areas. I'm not convinced that democracy has to be this universal way of governing ourselves. I would be perfectly content to live in a constitutional monarchy. I'd be perfectly content to live in a place like the Emirates. I could live in the United Arab Emirates and not have a problem with it. I spent four years in the Emirates so I'm speaking from real experience. I think we have to be very careful in trying to recreate the world in our own image. I think other places have to determine what's right for them and if that's democratic,

then fine. I'm not an Islamist by any stretch of the word, but when an Islamist government was elected in Algeria, they were overthrown. One of the French commentators said sometimes we have to subvert democracy in order to save democracy. And this is the odd thing about it. If you give Muslims an election, very often they will actually vote in the Islamists because they actually believe that they represent God and that we should follow God and if they are going to apply Islamic law then we should vote for them. There's a lot of Muslims that believe that.

CAIRO REVIEW: *My definition of democracy would be more the values than institutions, like the right to individual liberty, the culture of tolerance, the culture of community decision-making rather than top-down decision-making, treatment of minorities, treatment of women.*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: I think all the things you said, I think people would be shocked at how progressive Islam is in a really proper understanding of it.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Can you explain that?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: For instance, women's rights. One of the things that only recently they are acknowledging is the fact that women that work at home actually are contributing to the GDP. This is very recent. In the Islamic tradition, the jurists of Islam, thirteen hundred years ago, argued, and this is actually considered canon law in Islam, that women are entitled to be paid for their domestic service in their homes. They can actually charge their husbands for their domestic service if they choose. It's a choice for them. That was understood, that they don't have to serve a husband. That's only very recently even an idea in the West. A lot of divorce in our country is over domestic chores, because you have two-income families and then the husband comes home and expects the wife to do the laundry and make the dinner. That stuff was dealt with centuries ago in the Muslim World. I think, in terms of minorities, in some ways the West has surpassed the Muslim World. There is full enfranchisement. There's a lot to be desired undeniably, and there's still a lot of racism in our culture, but I think Europe and America and Canada have done amazing things in that area. Unprecedented. It's quite sad that there's so much racial tension in our country because for the first time America is a society that was really beginning to overcome some of this. There's a lot of historical baggage. In the Muslim World, minorities were always protected but they were seen definitely as subjects and second-class citizens, but they were protected. I think there is a reading of Islam, and that's certainly the one that my teacher, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Bayyah, has—he argues recently [that] the whole concept of *jizya* is only one among different possibilities. So the idea of a poll tax for non-Muslim minorities is one. The other model is what they call the Constitution of

Medina, where the Prophet fully enfranchised the Jewish tribes and that was the first model. It was replaced by the *jizya* model. He argues that it was never abrogated and I think there's a solid argument for that. He does feel that that's the most appropriate way, that minorities should be fully enfranchised.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Would you argue that Islam has a space for these democratic values?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: I think they are certainly compatible with Islam. I think there are definitely areas—for instance, pornography, violence—when we argue that freedom also means the freedom to corrupt people, this is where you're going to get into some entanglements amongst the Muslims. In the West, even though these are recent ideas, is the idea that the pornographer has the right to be a purveyor of smut in the society and that's his individual right. The Muslims would say that if harm overrides benefit, if the social harm is greater than the social benefit of something, then in Islamic law it's prohibited. And, certainly with pornography, the evidence of the social harm is immense. I've read a lot in this area. Oddly enough, Muslim civilizations tended to be a lot more tolerant of what until recently was called sexual deviancies. Muslim cultures had a greater tolerance of these things, even though they are prohibited. The actual cultures tended to be tolerant. One of the interesting things that has always struck me as odd is [that] nobody has ever looked at the Muslim transvestites. They call them *mukhannathoon*; we find them in India, in the Arab World, West Africa. They go to the weddings and they are men that behave like women. Muslims have always recognized that there is a spectrum of behavior amongst peoples and I think they've been a lot more tolerant to human foibles and idiosyncrasies than a lot of Western cultures, which demand a type of conformity. But puritanism tries to stamp that out and a lot of what we're seeing today is the rise of this puritanical Islam that is very repressive and makes it very difficult for people that are not in that.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is that legitimate? Is it Islam?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: Arguably there are elements that are Islam. Undeniably. But the way that it is practiced and the cruelty with which it is practiced are very alien to Islam and to the Muslims. This Graeme Wood argument [in the *Atlantic* magazine], that he made using Bernard Haykel and a few other people, that what ISIS is practicing is Islam, I think that argument is a very fallacious argument for anybody that knows the Islamic tradition.

CAIRO REVIEW: *The Arab Spring gave so much hope to the young generation. Part of the failure is that the Islamist movements have not been successful. How do you read that? Why hasn't the Islamic movement brought about a just society?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: First of all, I think it's akin to the Spring of Nations which happened in 1848 with the revolutions in Europe that were quickly squelched by the authoritarian regimes. But, over time, that gave rise to major changes that happened with World War I. That might be what it will take, a horrible World War III, and then from those ashes will emerge more equitable societies. I would hate to see that but I think it's very possible. The Hapsburgs, the Hohenzollern, the Romanovs, they all collapsed but they should have reformed in 1848 when people rose up against these ossified, petrified regimes, but they didn't. The same is true with the Ottomans, with Abdul Majid who made incredible reforms with the Tanzimat and then Sultan Abdul Hamid, for whatever reasons, suspended the constitution. I mean, he had his justifications for doing it but it was suspended, the parliament was shut down. So, those reforms were not fulfilled and then comes the Young Turks and the overthrow of the Ottoman caliphate. I think these things eventually are going to play out. I don't know how brutal it's going to be but people can't take tyranny, and they rise up. Aristotle, in his book of politics, has a section on revolutions, and I think his descriptions of why revolutions occur are as valid today as they were when he articulated them two thousand five hundred years ago. It's very clear that when you have diseased societies, the disease has to come to a head, like the boil that brings all the pus out of the body. So I think this was just the beginning, it's a kind of bloodletting and if they don't make the reforms that are necessary, it's going to happen again. This happened back in the 1950s. People forget because they don't read history, all this happened in the Arab World in the 50s. They had these great revolutions, Gamal Abdel Nasser came, everything was going to be different. It was going to be a great society. And that spread like wildfire. They overthrew the government in Iraq, the king. They tried to overthrow the monarchy in Morocco several times. It's not like this hasn't happened before. And it was squelched and those revolutionaries became the very same thing that they had overthrown. King Farouk was much better than Gamal Abdel Nasser. Egypt was better off during Farouk's rule.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Where is Islam in all this?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: I think Islam is just enlisted as an impressed sailor on this mutinous ship. That's how I view it.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is there a role for Islam in governance? Does the world need another caliphate?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: No. Well, let me qualify that. I would want that the rulers of the Muslim World, especially if you have very large populations of Muslims, that they recognize the authority of Islam in the state, especially for those things that directly affect people. The single most important aspect of the sharia after personal

law of marriage and things like that are the commercial laws. If you look at all Islamic books on Islamic law, the vast majority of them relate to commercial law. And those commercial laws, if they were implemented today, we would have far more just societies, because much of it is the prohibition of these commercial transactions that exploit people. So, I think there is definitely a role for commercial law. In terms of the penal codes of Islam, most of them are at the discretion of the judge. The punishments of Islam, these ideas of cutting off the hand and stoning the adulterer and crucifying, what ISIS is doing, they say that in eight hundred years of Ottoman rule, they never stoned anybody. These were not applied because, like the Jewish tradition, to actually apply them would take basically a confession. It's almost impossible to determine. For instance, for fornication, you have to have four witnesses that actually see penetration, basically legal fiction. It's not going to happen. Pregnancy can be explained away if they do. According to the Shafi'i *madhab*, repenting from the sin actually removes the *hadd*, punishment. So a person can actually be forgiven if they sincerely repent from the sin. So even the penal codes would not be a problem in most modern applications of them.

CAIRO REVIEW: *So ISIS has declared a caliphate.*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: It's bogus. It doesn't mean anything.

CAIRO REVIEW: *They've taken territory.*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: No, no, it's completely bogus. First of all, the caliphate has to be agreed upon by Muslims and that's in the most authoritative text, in Al-Bukhari, which all Sunni Muslims accept. In Al-Bukhari, Omar Ibn Al-Khattab, the second caliph, says, "If anyone claims to be caliph, do not accept his caliphate until all the Muslims agree on it." That's right in the text. I could declare California as the land of the caliph and I'm the caliph, come and take *bay'ah* with me. It's bogus, it doesn't mean anything.

CAIRO REVIEW: *But a lot of stuff is happening there. They're creating a lot of chaos.*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: You know what? A lot of stuff is happening with drug dealers just south of the [American] border. They're cutting off heads. They've killed thirty thousand people. A lot of them were beheaded. They have a drug caliphate there. Why doesn't anybody talk about that? Americans don't know a lot about that. Every once in a while they read about people disappearing in Juárez or something like that. There's bad things happening all over the planet.

CAIRO REVIEW: *True, but huge numbers of Muslims are being adversely affected by ISIS.*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: Yes, it's horrible. Also, huge numbers of Muslims were being adversely affected by Shia militia which gave rise to ISIS. They were a response to these Shia militia that were totally out of control that were tyrannizing the Sunni villages. Initially, if you read the most accurate reporting on this, initially, a lot of these villages welcomed ISIS in. In fact, in *The Week* they have an article about this, that initially Iraqis wanted ISIS because they were bringing some semblance of order back to an anarchistic situation. Then ISIS revealed themselves to be the demons that they are and now people are turning against them. We created that vacuum. The United States of America, my country. We created that vacuum. Even Bush the First did not take out Saddam because, like Kissinger, he knew what political vacuums bring. They bring chaos and anarchy. Bush Senior wouldn't go in. They could have gone in and finished it but they didn't want to create that vacuum because they thought it was too volatile, especially in the region. But these neoconservatives were planning on taking out Saddam and Iraq in the 90s and writing about it. They got into power and they fulfilled their wish. They created and wreaked havoc.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What does the world do with ISIS now? Should the United States intervene?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: I'm a libertarian when it comes to that. I think America has done enough intervention.

CAIRO REVIEW: *We can't have a humanitarian intervention?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: I don't think we're capable of it.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Who's going to stop ISIS then?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: I think the Muslims have to deal with it. I think the Arab states do. It's embarrassing. They have armies. I think they should be intervening. I think they should send their own troops in there. But they would demand that they have more just governments and they treated their soldiers better. Because they're worried that they'll go in there and they'll join the opposition. That's a fact. But they're the ones who should be doing it. I don't think it should be left to the Turks. The Turks will probably have to get involved because it's threatening their borders and as the terrorism increases. And then they have the Kurdish problem as well. No, I think this whole idea of America being the global policeman, it's over. We're almost bankrupt, if we're not already bankrupt. We've got trillions of dollars in debt. We can't afford these budgets anymore. Americans are living in a fantasy world. They really are. Look at the debt that China holds on us. If you want a security threat to this country, it's the trillions that are in Chinese coffers. They're buying up all the

real estate in California because they have all these dollars and they're just dumping it on real estate because it's a hedge against inflation. So, I think we need to take care of our country.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How would you explain Muslim extremist violence?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: It can't be summed up in some short sound byte, unfortunately. It comes from a profound misreading of the Islamic tradition. Revelation is very dangerous. Historically, the Catholics developed a system to ensure that common people did not read the Bible on their own. Protestantism said no, common people should read the Bible on their own. This led to horrible religious wars and the fragmentation of Christianity, which led to the rise of secularism to be an arbiter so that people who were interpreting the Bible on their own were demilitarized. You could have your own church on the corner of the street, but don't get violent about it. Well, in the Muslim World, this is what has happened. You have people reading primary sources, the Quran and Hadith, without the requisite tools to read those sources, and they are very dangerous without those tools. I'll give you one example. In the Islamic tradition, the Prophet, may God's peace and blessings be upon him, prohibited burning people. He said only God can punish with fire. That's in Sahih Al-Bukhari, which is considered an absolutely sound hadith. In fact, the full hadith says, "Burn this person and that person as a punishment for them burning some other people," but then he came back and said, "No, don't do that," because he was given a revelation not to burn and he said, "I told you to burn, but don't burn, because only God can punish with fire." That hadith stands but there are other traditions that say, for instance, that Ali burnt people for apostasy in Palestine. That hadith is also sound. But the narrator of that hadith, whose name is Ikrimah, was in a group that was against Ali. So even though the hadith has soundness, it has a problem. So ISIS takes that hadith and burns this Jordanian [captured air force pilot], claiming that they have an authoritative source to do this. They don't. It's just ignorance. And then to top that, there's no application of *lex talionis* in war. That's agreed upon by Muslim scholars. Even their application of *lex talionis* was not correct because in war there's no *qisaas*, there's no killing people for killing people because war is war; the point is to stop the cycles of violence. It's a gross ignorance. Look at them, they're all kids. There's no old people there who have studied. I mean, I'm almost 60, this tradition takes years to learn. I don't even feel that I'm qualified or adept and I've been studying it seriously for many, many years. Historically, you have what are called *shuyukh*, which literally means "old men," like senators, from *senatus*, which is Latin for old. There's a reason why you can't be a senator until you are 30; you're hoping some wisdom will kick in.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Where are the scholars?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: I've been to so many conferences condemning this stuff. The media ignores us. There are books written on this.

CAIRO REVIEW: *But are Muslim populations listening to these scholars?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: A lot of the Muslim populations, particularly in the Arab World, they've been poisoned against the scholars, largely from the Islamists. It's a competing narrative, because most of the scholars are against political Islam. So the Islamists have painted the scholars as lackeys and basically supporters of tyranny and as these traditionalists that just want to calm everybody down. Unfortunately, there is a war going on, a war of ideas, and the traditionalists have been losing it.

CAIRO REVIEW: *After 9/11, the idea of a clash of civilizations took hold and this became a narrative in the West. What did you make of that at the time?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: Duncan MacDonald said that the three great civilizations on this planet are the Sinic, the Islamic, and the Christian. Until they find a way of living together harmoniously, we're always going to be faced with the threat of these civilizations clashing. He wrote that in 1906, I think. We've been clashing for a long time. I think partly there are forces working on the world that don't mind those clashes because they make a lot of money out of them. We have a huge armaments industry, the military-industrial complex that Eisenhower warned this country about. I think they need bogeymen to scare people into having half their taxes going to military budgets. I'm as cynical as believing that they really don't mind. I think they have some socio-pathic tendencies that human suffering doesn't seem to bother them a whole lot.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What about on the Islam side?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: The Arabs are a very proud people. Palestinians have been humiliated for so long that they feel the one thing they can do, "We can kill ourselves and we're not afraid of dying and you Jews have to build walls." I think there are issues that relate to the psychology of the people themselves. Osama Bin Laden said we've been living in humiliation for eighty years. I think humiliation has a lot to do with the violent reactions. In the African American community, I learned this from personal experience. They have something called stepping on toes. It's an insult to step on toes. You will sometimes get a violent reaction if you do it, even inadvertently, because it was a way of dissing somebody. There's a lot of stepping on toes going on around the planet and people get violent. Even the pope said if somebody makes fun of his mother, he would get violent with them. Do you remember that quote? That's an Argentinian speaking, not an Italian. I think a lot of it is about that. It's just honor.

It's not really a word that we use anymore. We forget that we used to have dueling. Dueling was outlawed in the 1840s. These were before libel suits, we demanded satisfaction. We had a vice president who killed a [former] secretary of the treasury in a duel. That's pretty amazing. It was over honor. People take these things very seriously even if we don't anymore.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What about your concern about Islamophobia in the West?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: Phobia is an irrational fear. In some ways there's a valid and legitimate concern about terrorism because we've seen a lot of examples of Muslims behaving badly. However, we do forget that one out every four people is Muslim and these terrorists represent an incredibly insignificant number of people in relation to the overall numbers of Muslims. The Ku Klux Klan, which was clearly a terrorist organization in the United States at one point, had about three to five million members. I would argue there's not anywhere near that number of terrorists in the Muslim World. You're dealing with tens of thousands, maybe. Even ISIS, they haven't reached huge numbers. I think people have to keep things in perspective. I'm concerned with a rightwing element in this country that has a very clear agenda. Partly, there are elements that are very pro-Israel and Zionist, and are worried about Muslims having a greater voice in relation to Middle Eastern politics and the support of Israel because America has a really unconditional love affair with Israel since Truman. That's a concern and it's a legitimate concern from the Jewish community. But there are certain rightwing elements within that community that have used 9/11 as an opportunity to really paint the Muslims as this fifth column in the United States and to create a lot of fear about that. And they have allied with fundamentalist Christians that see Islam as a kind of competing corporation for consumers of their religious goods.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What does that mean for American Muslims?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: I think it endangers us. It's interesting that ISIS has issued fatwas against scholars who have spoken against them publicly. I guess that came from the *khutbas* against them, which some of us have given. Then I've got these rightwing people saying that I'm a stealth jihadist. There have been several books where they've put that in there. I think it threatens me personally; I don't feel like I did before. It's a serious concern with me. I think a lot of our mosques feel it now. A lot of Muslims feel that their mosques are no longer these safe havens. Which is really sad because, again, America is one of the few places that really was beginning to become an exemplar for a multireligious, multicultural civilization. That's very sad for me.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Why have you spoken out publicly against ISIS?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: I gave a *khutba* that went viral, called “The Crisis of ISIS.” It was seen all over the Middle East. It was translated into Arabic. It was tweeted by even some of the heads of state. I guess they didn’t like that too much. I drew blood first.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What was your message?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: That they have nothing to do with Islam.

CAIRO REVIEW: *We have ISIS saying that they represent Islam and we have you saying they have nothing to do with Islam.*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: There are insane Christians that say they represent Christianity. Did Rabbi Kahane represent Judaism? Baruch Goldstein, who killed all those people in the *masjid*: did he represent Judaism? There are a lot of people who claim to represent something. They don’t represent anybody but themselves.

CAIRO REVIEW: *But the image of Islam...*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: Has been tainted greatly. Partly the media is to be blamed. The great antichristic media. They have been so egregiously derelict in their duty in the way that they’ve portrayed Islam.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Talk about that a little more. What have the media done wrong, and what could they have done?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: One, they have to educate people about what’s happening in the Middle East, and why these things are happening. For instance, Mark Twain visited Palestine a hundred years ago and wrote about it. Just read his memoirs. Palestine was not like it is today. So what changed? Somebody like Gertrude Bell lived in Iraq as an English woman and went into the governor’s office without any protocol. What changed? The idea that this [ISIS] somehow represents Muslims and Islam is insane. We live in this temporal idolatry of now and there’s no historical context given to these things. Nobody ever gets an idea of what’s going on. Muslims and Jews weren’t always fighting. It’s a lie. It’s a historical lie, but how many times have I heard that canard reiterated: “Oh, it’s always been like this.” It’s not true. It wasn’t always like that. I recognize that we’re dealing with a largely inattentive, relatively uneducated, and highly distracted population. So, it is hard to get in-depth. If you go to Great Britain for instance and look at the BBC coverage of some of these issues, it’s just a lot more nuanced. That’s a fact. Even *Haaretz*, even the Israeli media, is more nuanced. We just have a cartoon worldview here that really bothers me.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is there a role in changing this imbalance for the Islamic scholars?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: Definitely. That's not the main reason that we're doing what we're doing, but part of the reason is to educate Muslims here that can play that role. That's definitely one of the aims of Zaytuna College. Yes, I do think we need educated spokespeople.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Tell me a little more about Zaytuna College and the reasons why you founded the institution.*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: I come out of a liberal arts tradition. My father was a humanities professor. When I went and studied overseas, it really struck me how similar traditional Islamic education was to what we call the liberal arts. I was really flabbergasted by the emphasis on literature, the emphasis on logic, the emphasis on rhetoric, grammar. I think the liberal arts has disappeared from the Muslim World to a large degree. I was fortunate to study with some truly great scholars, but the West African school is one of the few places where it's still there. There is some in Turkey as well. There is some at Al-Azhar, but it's lost. Part of it is to revive that tradition but also with contextualizing it in the modern world. Today in ethics class we're grappling with nominalism, and essentialism, and philosophical debates about ethics, command-theory ethics versus deontological, consequential ethics. Grappling with these things and where does Islam fit into all of this? Getting them to think about these things. Today I introduced to them their thesis they have to write and I told them they could write on any ethical problem. For or against, I don't care. If you want to write for gay marriage in the Islamic tradition, like Scott Kugle is arguing for, and you want to put forward that argument, and it's well written, I won't agree with you but you can write on that. So, it is trying to get them to think creatively and deeply about problems that we're facing as modern people with a religion that is fourteen hundred years old.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You were born Mark Hanson. How did you become Sheikh Hamza Yusuf?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: I come from a family of seekers. There's a metaphysical bookstore in San Francisco, Fields Bookstore, which was opened in 1931, and that was my uncle who opened that. He had books on Sufism and Islam there back in the 30s. My grandmother left the south with that uncle, her brother, because they were interested in Buddhism in the 1920s and they didn't like the racism in the south so they actually moved to San Francisco which at that time was considered one of the most open-minded places. My mother was a seeker. My father was definitely a seeker, more in philosophy. Plato and Aristotle were his focus in his seeking, he really came out of that tradition. All my brothers and sisters were like that, too. The real catalyst

was a car accident when I was 17, which was a head-on collision. That forced me to confront mortality in a way that I hadn't done before that. Everybody will confront mortality at a certain point in their life but sometimes it takes much longer than others. It happened to me very early on.

CAIRO REVIEW: *So it's really an American story?*

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF: Yeah, I thought that if I ever wrote an autobiography, I thought of calling it "American in Mecca." Or "Renegado." The Europeans who fled to the Muslim World and became Muslim—they called them *renegados*.