Correspondence

The War in Iraq

To the Editors:

I enjoyed reading John Nagl's excellent review ("Ending the Neverending War," Azure 35, Winter 2009) of three books that tell the story of the debacle and re-birth of American strategy in the Iraq war. It is a cautionary tale for any number of nations in the twenty-first century, Israel included. Nagl mentions that the U.S. Army was thoroughly unprepared for counterinsurgency warfare in 2003, but since the reasons for that lapse fell outside the purview of the books he was reviewing, he doesn't state why. Simply put, the United States military has a love affair with technology and, during the decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, developed concepts that substituted technological prowess for strategic relevance. The future American way of war, according to certain defense intellectuals, was summed up in the phrase "Rapid Decisive Operations," otherwise known as "shock and awe." Using sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms, American forces would be able to find and distinguish all relevant targets on the battlefield and then, using precision-guided munitions, destroy them. Wars would be quick and relatively bloodless.

What the proponents of this approach failed to realize is that military operations are neither rapid nor decisive unless they lead to a more enduring peace. In this regard, the United States was guilty of trying to replace strategy with tactical and operational concepts that had marginal relevance to the kinds of wars that the nation would face after 9/11. We were guilty of becoming the Germans of the twenty-first century—a nation that used brilliant tactical and operational concepts but lost two world wars on account of strategic incompetence. What the proponents of Rapid Decisive Operations failed to do was to understand the true nature of war, not just in the post-Cold War era, but in any era.

In Iraq, the United States military learned that we cannot kill our way to victory in a counterinsurgency conflict. As the executive officer to General David Petraeus, the commanding general of the Multi-National Force—Iraq, during the "Surge" of 2007 and 2008, I witnessed firsthand how the Coalition and its Iraqi partners were able to separate the reconcilable elements of the Sunni insurgency and Shi'ite

militias from the irreconcilable elements that had to be killed or captured. Hundreds of thousands of armed men were brought in to support the Iraqi government and, as security took hold, Iraqi politicians were slowly able to forge a new way forward. Success in Iraq is not certain, but there is now at least a chance for progress in a war that was all but lost at the end of 2006. The key was not reinforcements, or tactical and operational brilliance, but the adoption of a strategy that focused on the Iraqi people as the decisive element and placed its well-being and protection at the top of a long list of priorities for American and Iraqi security forces.

The lessons for Israel today are clear, if unpalatable. The root causes of Palestinian terrorism will not be solved by periodic incursions into Gaza or the West Bank. The targeting of terrorist operatives will in the best case bring a temporary reprieve to the citizens of Israel, and in the worst case simply create more support for the terrorists among the Palestinian people. In the end, the only successful strategy is one that places the Palestinian people first and seeks to separate and support the reconcilable elements of that population against the extremists who seek Israel's destruction. Moving down that strategic path will be a long and hard journey, but in the end, it will be a journey worth undertaking.

Peter R. Mansoor
Ohio State University

Islam and the West

To the Editors:

What does Roger Scruton ("Islam and the West: Lines of Demarcation," Azure 35, Winter 2009) say are the main contrasts between Islam and the West? He neatly sums them up as subjection vs. citizenship, religious conformity vs. nationality, *shari'ah* (religious) law vs. secular law, Islam vs. the Judeo-Christian tradition, solemnity vs. irony, dogmatism vs. self-criticism, submission vs. representation, and grim abstinence vs. the joyful drinking of alcohol. Despite what he says about the essential differences between Christianity and Islam, I cannot help thinking that he is contrasting what is really a secular view of the way that the world should be with a religious approach. After all, many Christians and other believers also think that their religion should determine the parameters of the state in exactly the same way that many Muslims today call for theocracy. I am sure I am not alone in finding Scruton's grand statements

about a particular faith and its defining principles inaccurate in defining that faith. Although theologians often try to reduce their religion to a few basic ideas and truths, if it is possible to differ on such issues then issues of difference exist, and the attempt to extinguish them by insisting on defining principles will be a vacuous one.

One of the interesting features of Scruton's account is that he takes the way many Muslims see their own position toward the secular world—as the only serious opposition to the materialism of the state—at face value. We are told that, in contrast to other religions, Muslims do not differentiate between the state and religion, and insist on the latter's informing the former, as though all other religions fail to take a serious attitude toward the state and reserve their injunctions for the private sphere. Only Islam, Scruton claims, really wants to embody its faith in public life; thus, only Islam has a comprehensive view of how faith should impact on politics and, indeed, daily life. But even to say this shows it to be false. All faiths have views on the nature of public as well as private life, although they often have internal disagreements on the subject. And here is the problem with Scruton's argument: So does Islam. Different Islamic groups also argue and debate about what form of government and what political structure is appropriate for them. There are a wide variety of states that call themselves Islamic, but few of them are regarded as Islamic by other Muslims. There is just as much debate and argument in the Islamic world as there is everywhere else—and always has been.

We do have a tendency to define ourselves in terms of what we are not, and this comes across quite well in Scruton's argument, in which the West is regarded in a very positive light, as a site of decent values and critical thought, while Islam, in its traditional form, is portrayed as quite the reverse. Any traditional form of thought would do here, though, and the same negative features Scruton finds in Islam can be discovered in many varieties of Christianity. We need to make a firm distinction between a religion and the culture with which it may be associated. The sort of irony that Scruton sees as native to Christianity is, in fact, only an aspect of some of the cultures that have adopted Christianity. In the southern United States, where I live, there is nothing ironical about the views of the Baptist Church.

Many of the major architects of classical liberal thought were opposed to civil rights for Roman Catholics, on the grounds that they took their orders from Rome and so owed no basic allegiance to the state. The modern

version of this doubt is directed toward Muslims, with the idea that they take their orders from an imam, or some other religious figure, and have little regard for civil institutions. This is certainly correct to a degree, in the same way that some Jewish sects take their voting instructions from the rabbis heading their communities, and church members do the same from their ministers. Muslims in the West are now undergoing the difficult but familiar process of coming to terms with the culture of their new country while trying to hold on to some of their distinctive cultural values. It is, of course, very difficult to get this balance right, and some go too far in the direction of assimilation, while others turn away from modernity and try to return to the spiritual certainties of the past. There is no neat and tidy resolution of this dilemma, as many other religious and ethnic communities have discovered, and seeking to damn an entire religion and its followers as if they constituted a uniformly hostile bloc does not help us reach one.

Oliver Leaman
University of Kentucky

Roger Scruton Responds:

My article set out what I regard as the important distinguishing features of Western civilization, in the world as it now is, and to make some suggestions as to why we should regard those features in a favorable light. Each of these features, I suggested, marks a point of contrast, and possibly of conflict, with the traditional Islamic vision of society. And each has played a vital part in creating the modern world. It is of course true that the nature of the state, law, and political obligation are as much debated by Muslims as they are by us in the secular West. It is also true that, in the past, Christian communities have been far more fierce than they are today in bending the state to their purpose, often refusing to recognize the validity of secular jurisdiction. Nevertheless, nothing in what Oliver Leaman says implies that I was not right to identify the distinguishing features of our civilization as I do, or to imply that it is precisely these features that seem to be targeted by Islamists. Not all Muslims are Islamists, thank heavens. But we still need to defend ourselves from those who are, and the first move in this defense is to know *what* we are, and why we have a right to *be* what we are.

Leaman implies that I am "seeking to damn an entire religion" in what I say. However, in seeking to defend Western secular society from Islamism, I am not condemning Islam. In many respects Western secular society seems to me to be inferior to traditional Islamic society: certainly in its

sexual excesses; its pursuit of pleasure, excitement, and fun; and its lack of day-to-day piety. If there were a way to overcome those defects while holding on to free citizenship and secular law, I would subscribe to it. Maybe Muslims can point the way.

As for irony, and the part that it has played in Christian thought and culture, there is clearly room here for debate. But the irony that we discern in Hafiz and Rumi, and also in the *Thousand and One Nights*, is no longer to be discerned in those who speak publicly for Islam. There are no doubt forms of Christianity as humorless as the Islam preached today in our European cities. But on the whole, and give or take a few striking exceptions, Christians are taught to look on the world of human imperfections with something like the spirit that Jesus exemplified when asked to condemn the woman taken in adultery. That spirit is integral to true toleration, which is the ability to live peacefully side by side with those of whom we disapprove. Islamists, I feel, are rather short on this particular virtue.

On Forgiveness

To the Editors:

Yotam Benziman concludes ("Forgiveness and Remembrance of Things Past," Azure 35, Winter 2009) that an unrepented offense cannot be forgiven, but that there is a means by which men can (and do) achieve unilateral forgiveness. First, it is important to establish that forgiveness is voluntary. Unilateral forgiveness, which occurs when the offender is unrepentant, is even more so. No one can enjoin upon another such a superhuman duty. Forgiving an unrepented offense is an act of will, not a result of spontaneous warmth.

One aspect of committing an offense against someone is that the wronged person's point of view is set aside. He did not wish to be injured, insulted, or cast out, but to the offender, these wishes did not matter. The wronged person's will, her very concept of self, was violated. People who experience a break-in of their homes, for example, frequently report a greater experience of fear than the event itself warrants. The burglar is not likely to return, and yet their fear persists. This is because a house is constructed, and willed, to be a shelter that permits the resident to *choose* who may (and may not) enter. When this will has been set aside, and entrance forced, the resident's sense of safety and of self is set at naught. It is the same with any offense, great or small. A portion of the injury is a sense of loss: I have been defined as someone whose wishes do not matter.

I have been defined as a shareholder whose hopes did not matter, as a child whose safety did not matter, as a friend whose feelings did not matter, as a lover whose exclusivity did not matter. In the moment of the offense, I was made smaller than I am. I was made *nothing*.

Repentance, then, consists of the offender's construction of a narrative in which the offended's viewpoint *did* matter. In cases of accidental offense, nothing else is needed; the accidental offender says, with surprise, that he did not intend to set the victim's rights, viewpoint, or self at naught. "It was an accident" does not remove the harm done, of course, but it does restore the self that was robbed. The pain caused by the injury cannot be changed through this admission, but the dimunition of the wronged person's self can.

In cases of deliberate offense, the offender must offer a narrative that re-tells the offense from the victim's point of view. Benziman's scenario of the married couple who work through forgiveness after adultery illustrates this well. The couple will re-tell the story from every vantage point, and the victim will insist, again and again, on relating his point of view, which the offender must accept and validate. The harm has been done, but the victim's rights to his point of view can be restored. Forgiveness tracks closely with this restoration, and the closer the offender's narrative draws to the victim's, the greater and freer the forgiveness.

In this light, Desmond Tutu's narrative of forgiveness can be better comprehended. Faced with unrepentant offenders, he constructs a narrative in which he and his people are not what the offenders considered them to be. The offense itself consisted of calling them lesser human beings. The economic and personal wrongs they suffered cannot be undone, but Tutu reaches for a theory in which they are not lesser creatures, but are part of a higher whole. When he insists on a commonality of mankind, he likely does not intend to share in the guilt so much as to construct a narrative in which he and his people have equal, or perhaps greater, value than those who wronged them. From the divine height of *ubantu* consciousness, he can then extend forgiveness like a scepter to the lesser beings, the offenders. He wishes to be filled with "the compassion of God, looking on and weeping."

And this is how unilateral forgiveness is achieved. The victim conceives of himself as being on a higher plane and thus restores to himself what was taken away. If the offender will not offer a narrative that restores the victim's rights, the victim can offer a narrative that reduces the *offender's*

rights. The offender has not asked for forgiveness and, indeed, may not desire it. But the victim forces it on him, and creates a story in which they are equals, all part of *ubantu*—the kingdom of God, or the timeline of history—or some other sufficiently grand, higher plane. "There, but for the grace of God, go I" is an assertion of being that the offender has set aside, and of equality that the offender did not permit. The offense is still borne by the victim, and its scars are woven into a story, but it is one the offender did not wish to have told. Unilateral forgiveness thus becomes a benign revenge.

Ruth Johnston
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Yotam Benziman Responds:

Ruth Johnston's letter raises some important points regarding the restitution of a wronged person's rights or self-esteem. On some occasions these can be closely connected either to revenge or to forgiveness. But revenge and forgiveness are at odds. Johnston's suggestion that forgiveness can be a kind of revenge, or that it can be "forced on the offender," therefore includes what seems to be a contradiction in terms. I also disagree with her interpretation of Desmond Tutu's notion of forgiveness. Far from seeing the offenders as "lesser beings," Tutu insists that we are all equal *qua* human beings and that "what dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me."

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