Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1

Good afternoon, everyone.

00:00:02 Speaker 1

My name is Rahal Isman.

00:00:04 Speaker 1

I'm a professor of contemporary Islamic studies and a fellow of St.

00:00:07 Speaker 1

Anthony's College.

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Today we are very lucky to have Professor Faisal Devji with us to talk about his latest book.

00:00:19 Speaker 1

waning crescent, the rise and fall of global Islam.

00:00:24 Speaker 1

I must say usually in Trinity we don't get many people and I was a little bit concerned but it is Professor Faisal Devji so you can clearly see people are interested and they're here to hear about his latest book and congratulations on your latest book.

00:00:40 Speaker 1

So let me introduce Professor Devji.

00:00:44 Speaker 1

professor of global and imperial history and a friend of Balliol College, University of Oxford.

00:00:50 Speaker 1

He was formerly the director of the Asian Studies Center at St.

00:00:56 Speaker 1

Anthony's College.

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So as my colleagues would say, welcome back, although you've abandoned us, but we will never forget you.

00:01:04 Speaker 1

He's the author of a number of books, including The Terrorist in Search,

00:01:11 Speaker 1

of humanity, militant Islam and global politics, the impossible Indian Gandhi and the temptation of violence and Muslim Zion Pakistan as a political idea.

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His work focuses on the intellectual history and political thought of modern South Asia with particular attention to violence and non-violence, Islam as a global political category and efforts to think beyond the nation state in

00:01:40 Speaker 1

the post-colonial world.

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So for anyone who would like to buy his book, you can purchase it at a discounted price.

00:01:49 Speaker 1

It's very good, by the way.

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And we will distribute the flyer with details on how to do so.

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we'll do that later as well as we go.

00:01:59 Speaker 1

Without further delay, Professor Gadji will speak for 40 minutes, and then we'll perhaps ask a few questions, and then we'll get the audience to ask questions as well.

00:02:12 Speaker 1

Thank you.

00:02:13 Speaker 2

Well, thanks very much, Rehan.

00:02:19 Speaker 2

It really is a pleasure to be here.

00:02:21 Speaker 2

I'm normally on that side of this lectern, so it's very nice to be on this side.

00:02:31 Speaker 2

So obviously I'm not going to go through the argument of the entire book.

00:02:37 Speaker 2

What I thought I'd do is focus on three or four portions of it.

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And I've deliberately chosen the most controversial ones as being the ones most likely to keep you awake during my presentation, which has no audiovisual component apart from myself.

00:02:54 Speaker 2

So let me begin then by recalling

00:02:58 Speaker 2

that Wilfred Cantell Smith already as early as 1958 had written an essay, an important essay, on how the term Islam came to be reimagined and reinvented in the 19th century.

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Of course, it might have been reimagined and reinvented in times past as well, but he was particularly concerned about how Islam as a term

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came to be used in extraordinarily more frequent ways from the 19th century.

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That is to say, in the period of European colonization of much of the Muslim world.

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And there is a connection between the increasing use of Islam and the making of European empires.

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He didn't really draw that connection himself in any detailed way.

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What he noted is that

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Islam in the 19th century came to be seen by Muslims as well as by non-Muslims, as a joint product in that sense, as a subject, as a protagonist in and of history, as a subject, as an agent.

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It now could do things.

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It could want you to do things.

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It could say things.

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And he left his argument to that.

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So the end of his argument is the beginning of mine.

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So what I wanted to do in this book is to, as it were, recite or analyze or tell the biography of Islam as this new kind of subject, an agent, a protagonist in history.

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And this way of thinking about Islam should be familiar to us all.

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It continues in several ways to define the way in which both Muslims and non-Muslims think about it.

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Though I argue at the end of the book that perhaps its end has arrived.

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Thus my subtitle, The Rise and Fall.

00:05:02 Speaker 2

Both the title and the subtitle were forced upon me by the press, I have to say.

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But I had wanted to call the book The End of Islam, and they thought that that might be a good

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And of course, I said to them, but the word end can be used in more than one sense.

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It can be a goal, you have an end in sight, or it could be a completion.

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And I want to use both those senses.

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I know people won't get it, so you have to change it.

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Now, I want you to use the word end in part because when Islam becomes a subject of this kind, it becomes mortal at the same time.

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that it is seen as emerging in history but therefore also as potentially declining in that same history.

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Its emergence historically is linked to the possibility of its death.

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Its birth is linked to the possibility of its death and Muslim reformers of all kinds from the 19th century were dedicated to preventing its possible decline.

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They already saw a decline happening but they wanted to stall it.

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Now the interesting thing about these ideas of Muslim subjecthood, and therefore mortality, is that they tend to be deprived of any theological carapace.

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So for instance, perhaps for the first time, Islam's ending could be understood in a completely non-apocalyptic way.

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It declines as it arises.

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It can arise out of historical circumstances, and it can decline in the same manner.

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So on the one hand, then, Islam is made into a subject by being made mortal, as all subjects are.

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But on the other hand, and this is what Catholic Smith focuses on, it becomes a subject in a sociological way rather than in a theological one.

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So he, for instance, points out in his essay that suddenly from the 19th century, you can say things like-- you can have a title such as heresy in Islam.

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secularism in Islam.

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And these are still titles that are common sensical.

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But what Cantle Smith pointed out is that when you can think about Islam in this way, what you're doing is actually imagining it in sociological terms, in terms of demography, in terms of institutions, social and other, in terms of rituals, in terms of beliefs, et cetera.

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So what disappears from Islam

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as a global subject, because its reach and remit is global, is precisely the theological dimension.

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So the revival of Islam, as it comes to be known, I want to argue, is actually a paradoxical thing, because it is twinned with the disappearance of them, or the divinition of the theological element in Muslim life and thought.

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And in other words, you don't have to think about

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the category secularism at all to dwell on this possibility.

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Now, Islam, I argue, becomes a subject of this kind precisely with the divinition of Muslim authorities, whether secular or religious, whether profane or sacred, especially in areas under imperial rule.

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It therefore allows Muslims of all kinds to speak in the name of Islam as a subject.

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And what I do in the book is look at basically 3 groupings broadly defined within which Islam is understood or subjectivized in the way I have described it.

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They are the so-called Muslim modernists who actually invent this way of thinking about Islam.

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They are the people who come to be called Islamists.

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a bit later in the 20th century.

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And then a kind of a blip, if you will, in this history, but an important one, the 21st century militants with whom I more or less in the book.

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So I'm looking at these three groups of movements, not everyone, not all Muslims, not all Muslim groups of movements.

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And they tend to, or the thinkers from these groups of movements tend to

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think of Islam as a subject in three kinds of ways.

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Initially as a civilization, later on especially with the Islamists, and after the Bolshevik revolution as an ideology, a systemic, systematic thing.

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And then finally with these militant figures of the 21st century as an identity.

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In a way you can locate these ways of thinking

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within the colonial and early post-colonial periods, civilizational Islam, though it continues.

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Then after the Bolshevik Revolution and certainly in the Cold War, ideological Islam, and then in the neoliberal world after the Cold War, Islamist identity in the late 20th, early 21st century.

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Now, these are entirely schematic ways of dividing up these categories, and I don't mean for them to be watertight.

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But I thought that it's important to actually match up these movements and these categories with more general historical developments in the world, since Islam is conceived of and exists as a global subject, as I argue in this book.

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Global not necessarily in the sense that it is apparent everywhere.

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but rather that the perspectives manifested by the thinkers I deal with are necessarily global, that they place their activities and their visions within a global context.

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So what I want to do today then is to look at some of the implications of Islam's emergence as a subject of this kind, and I want to look at

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these implications through controversies about the status of Muhammad, the place of God, and the agency of ordinary Muslims.

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So let me begin with the role or the place of Muhammad.

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So it's a familiar story that again in the 19th century,

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you suddenly have developing among Muslim thinkers in many different parts of the world a kind of set of objections to the use of terms like Muhammadanism, which had been a common way of describing Islam.

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So it's Islam that replaces Muhammadanism in this period, though colonial states

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continue to use it until quite late into the 20th century.

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I don't think this set of concerns about Muhammadism and the rise of Islam to replace it are due only to efforts by Muslims to correct and orient this stereotype.

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After all, these very Muslims have themselves

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in the recent past been very comfortable with using not just terms like Muhammadan and Muhammadanism, but of course Muhammadiyya, Muhammadi, et cetera, terms in Muslim languages that didn't necessarily bear much relationship with these European terms.

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So in a place I work on, India, for instance, you have the preeminent modernist institution

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which becomes a university, the Muhammadan Anglo Oriental College.

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It's created, built, funded by Muslims, and it's called the Muhammadan Anglo Oriental College.

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But by the time you get to the end of the 19th century, suddenly this is no longer looking like an acceptable usage of the term.

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And I think what it tells us is not just how Islam comes to replace all other kinds of words,

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that might name what it is that Muslims do or how they identify, but also that the displacement of Muhammadanism really indicates the emergence of a set of deep anxieties about the role of prophecy and of the prophet.

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Clearly, some Muslims thought that Muhammadanism was too much like words like Christianity,

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a religion apparently named after its founding figure, that Muhammad is not the founding figure of Islam.

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That Islam is a word that is not linked to a person.

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It becomes precisely a system later on, as I said earlier, an ideological system.

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Nizam is the term most often used.

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And in displacing Muhammad in this way very deliberately,

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his status becomes ambiguous.

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He becomes vulnerable in a new kind of way, as, if you will, a representative of Islam as the real subject of Muslim history.

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And once he becomes vulnerable in this way, he needs to be defended and protected in new ways as well.

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And it's from this new and ambiguous status that

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equally novel ways of contesting alleged insults to Muhammad emerge.

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Not accidentally, they emerge in their modern form in colonial India.

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So I want to say something about two riots in Bombay, those of 1851 and 1874 that I believe set the precedent and the model for all subsequent controversies over insults to the prophet.

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The language that is produced during these riots ends up becoming globalized, certainly with the Rushdie Affair in 1989.

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So in 1851 and then in 1874, you have an interesting situation.

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Bombay, of course, is an entirely colonial city.

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It didn't exist before the British.

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And it was and remains

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great center of finance and capital and commerce.

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It has no traditional leadership, either religious or profane.

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Elites were always capitalist elites.

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As a colonial city, the site of colonial and international capital, it also becomes a place where a new public sphere, a new colonial public sphere is put into place.

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And this means that controversies and debates move along quite different circuits than they did elsewhere or in earlier times.

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So for instance, in North India, with its tradition of Muslim rulership and Muslim societies, with an aristocracy and Sufis and Ulama and all the people we think of when we think of Muslim societies,

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You might have a situation at the same time as these rites in Bombay in which theologians and others write and publish in the modern press polemical treatises having to do with defending Muhammad or attacking him between Christian missionaries and Muslim clerics or Hindu revivalists and Muslim ones.

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And these are controversies that

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remain theological in character.

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They refer to scriptures.

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They are bought and sold or circulated among religious specialists.

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In Bombay, this changes.

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And it changes in Bombay first and it changes for the world eventually.

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So what happens in 1851 and 1874 is you have the publication of stories about Muhammad, which are deemed to be insulting and offensive.

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But they're not part of any theological debate or polemical relationship.

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They appear in ordinary newspapers and magazines, which are meant to instruct and entertain a general anonymous public.

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They appear in Gujarati, in the language that happens to be one of my languages, and they are published in newspapers and magazines owned by Zoroastrians, Parsis.

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So this is not a Hindu-Muslim issue we are talking about, which is the classical way in which in South Asia you think about communal or interreligious violence.

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Now, Parsis were a very important community in Bombay, then even more important than they are today.

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And they were linked to business and capital in all kinds of ways.

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So they represented, if you will, or at least the elites represented

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a new economic reality.

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The Muslims who complained about these stories tended to be working class people, mostly North Indian or Arab boatmen, we are told, from the Gulf, and Sidis, people of African descent.

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So these are people at the lowest rate of society.

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They don't know Gujarat or read it.

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but they object in one case to an image and printed in the newspaper of Muhammad apparently and in the other to a story about his relations with his wives.

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There are riots and Muslim elites along with Parsi and other elites have to contain them.

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And in these events and in the process of containment, a new language emerges.

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in which Muslim insults to the prophet and to Muslim honor comes to be stabilized and eventually globalized.

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So as you may gather from what I said about the Muslims who were offended and who rioted over these insults, their concerns can easily be seen and have been seen as being concerns linked to capitalism

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to labor and capital, to relations between elites and non-elites.

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But of course, the debates don't take those relations into account.

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And it's the debates that get universalized.

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The class relations that form the basis of these riots remain just unique to Bombay.

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So what is said?

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On the one hand, because of the nature of the insults

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new public sphere, generic magazine and newspaper articles, a lack of any theological disputation or argument, there is no religious language as such of any recognizable sort deployed.

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It's always the everyday language of insult which the Muslim elites who are called upon to represent the Islamic cause

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end up borrowing from the Indian Penal Code, put into place in 1860, authored by Lord Macaulay.

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The Indian Penal Code is, if you will, the first secular document of Indian constitutionalism.

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It is inspired by the work of Jeremy Bentham and therefore the utilitarians.

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And what it does is it removes blasphemy as a legal category, though it remains one in British law.

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So what Macaulay does

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is he replaces blasphemy with offenses against the sentiments of any class of people in a list of crimes which include libel defamation and all the rest.

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So what ends up being called blasphemy by outsiders is when you look at the Indian Penal Code and indeed at these controversies, thought about almost entirely in terms of property and identification.

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Is it defamation?

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Is it libel?

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Is the profit the property of Muslims that needs to be defended from illicit circulation?

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Is it their honor that is being hurt?

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Is it their identity that is being offended against?

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And Muslims defending the profit at this point make copious and fulsome use of these categories.

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Hurt sentiments

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A direct quotation from the Indian Penal Code comes to be one of the most important of these terms.

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It remains with us.

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It reappeared with the Rushdie affair.

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And subsequently, our feelings are hurt.

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Our sentiments are hurt.

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Now, the important thing to note about this set of events is, A, as I've said, they include almost no theological category.

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They don't include debates by clerics and other religious figures.

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They're ordinary people.

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It is ordinary people who can make claims in the name of Islam now with the decline of kings and priests and such.

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And furthermore, that the terminology in use is one that is, if you will, entirely part of a new capitalist society.

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The debates are framed

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by the argument between free trade and protectionism, as they are today.

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Free speech, after all, is a version of free trade.

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Should people be free to say whatever they want?

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Should the economy be open in this way?

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Or should we have a kind of form of protectionism to protect people and their sentiments?

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These are the terms in which insults to the profit

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are argued then, for the first time, but even today.

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We tend not to see this today, of course, because the theological language overlays all of these events, including the Rushdie Affair.

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But if you were to look more closely, even at the Rushdie Affair, you see exactly these kinds of terms and arguments reappearing from 19th century India.

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The theological elements, where do they come from?

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Well, they come in part from Christianity.

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So the term blasphemy is taken from Christianity, even though Islam of course has a history of these kinds of things.

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But the Arabic terms are hardly ever used, if at all.

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Apostasy, similarly.

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You will recall that Rushdie was accused of both.

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But those terms don't appear.

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They don't appear in that Khomeini issued.

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They don't appear in the Muslim denunciations, as they didn't in 1851 and in 1874.

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So what I find fascinating is the displacement of the language of theology.

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just as the prophet himself has been displaced and replaced by Islam as the real subject of Muslim history and Islam that is historical and sociological conception.

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But in our own day, you have some changes.

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So if I might fast forward to the recent now jailed Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan,

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Like his predecessors, Imran Khan had tried to institute a new law against blasphemy to protect Muslims.

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They are more than adequately protected, if you want to use that term in Pakistan, where protection is the same as the lack of protection because, of course, alleged insults against the Prophet are deployed

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in that country to target other Muslims routinely.

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So it's an interesting paradox.

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His predecessors had also tried to think about ways in which to deploy the history of Christianity and Christian uses of blasphemy and Christian laws against blasphemy to protect Muslims.

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This again goes back to colonial India where

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it is colonial law that is evoked to protect Muslim sentiments.

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With Nawaz Sharif, Imran Khan's predecessor, you had the effort to try to invoke an Irish law that protected Catholics.

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Of course, that Irish law was promptly abolished, just as under Tony Blair, the English blasphemy law was abolished.

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So what

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Muslim protests have done is actually fast-track the secularization of Christianity in Europe rather than the reverse, which is what they are meant to have done.

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So what does Imran Khan do?

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He does something really quite intriguing.

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He seems to realize that you can no longer really use the borrowed investments of Christian theology to give religious meaning to these Muslim controversies.

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He invokes and says the Holocaust.

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He does this not only at the General Assembly of the United Nations, he does this also on Pakistani television in Urdu.

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So he's not just speaking to a foreign audience.

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And what he says, he writes letters to Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, and he says, just as it is proper to ban Holocaust denial, because it offends the sentiments of Jews,

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He got this wrong, of course.

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It's not about offending sentiments.

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But you see he's drawing from Macaulay's Indian penal code.

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So too, Muslim sentiments must be protected.

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So he makes this strange relationship.

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It is almost as if he has come to understand that the theological language drawn from Christianity is no longer adequate for this purpose.

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And you need, if you will, a more secular version of offensive speech.

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to give force to this Muslim demand.

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It doesn't work, of course, but the change is telling.

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Now, I want to end this bit of my talk by arguing that the sheer banality of Muslim argument, of Muslim claims of insult, stand in contradiction to the passion

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and occasional violence that they are seen to produce.

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So when you look at the Muslim claims, whether from 1851 and 1874 or from 1989 or subsequently, they tend to be utterly banal.

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The Prophet is like our relative.

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We feel really bad.

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You shouldn't say horrible things about him.

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You don't understand our dedication to him, none of which have any theological

00:30:02 Speaker 2

support.

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As I said, they barely use the Arabic terms for apostasy or blasphemy or anything like that.

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So how does one explain this strange, what appears to be a contradiction where you have undeniable emotion, passion, and sometimes violence on the one hand, and on the other hand, a completely

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everyday routine banal argument which draws from the Indian Penal Code.

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I would like to suggest that the passion and the violence act also as a substitute to the absent theological language that haunts

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this set of debates, but it's not to be found in them at all.

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And these controversies of the prophet, let me repeat, are simply one illustration of the way in which Islam's replacement of theological figures like Muhammad actually has very curious and sometimes paradoxical

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So what we take to be the manifestation of a deep and profound religious impulse might end up being just the opposite.

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That it is the absence of the deep and profound religious or theological, I should say, impulse, the absence of a theological set of arguments that actually results in this sort of controversy.

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So let me turn now to God as another figure who is curiously replaced by Islam, who becomes a representative of Islam seen as this subject of history, the only true subject of Muslim history.

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Islam that wants things, that does things, that have ideals, that has spirit, but notice that it's never personified.

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It's always as a kind of abstract system.

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It's an abstract agent that Islam is always imagined as.

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It's not institutionalized.

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It's not like a church or a corporation, and it's not personified either.

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It remains abstract throughout, whether as a civilization or as an ideology, or even, as we should see, as an identity linked to law.

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So what we see

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in the early 20th century, perhaps beginning of the early 20th century.

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It's just as we saw in the 19th century, the criticism of Muhammadanism as a term and its replacement by Islam.

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What you see from the early 20th century is the proliferation of idolatry in a lot of Muslim debate.

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Suddenly idolatry is back, but it's no longer the idols as conceived of in traditional times, actual objects.

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Rather, idolatry now comes to name abstract subjects just like Islam, but not Islam.

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So nationalism, communism, monarchy, all kinds of abstract subjects are understood as idolaters, especially by Islamists, because they apparently take the place of God.

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But notice

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that the opposite of the idol here is not actually God, it's Islam, after whom, if you will, the idol is modeled.

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Islam too is an abstract subject, as I just said, and so is nationalism.

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So nationalism stands against Islam.

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Monarchy stands against Islam.

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Communism stands against Islam, not because they are opposed to each other so much, but precisely because they are so similar to each other.

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They are all abstract subjects.

00:34:16 Speaker 2

So the return of idolatry to Muslim political thought in this new way signals, if you will, the emotion or displacement of God himself in these debates.

00:34:29 Speaker 2

Because as I just pointed out, it is Islam that is the rival of the idol in any of its manifestations here.

00:34:39 Speaker 2

God really doesn't come into the picture except

00:34:42 Speaker 2

insofar as he needs to be removed from it.

00:34:47 Speaker 2

So let me say something about what I knew.

00:34:51 Speaker 2

So many of these Islamist thinkers-- and let me begin here with Maghudvi, probably the Ur, the founding figure of Islamism, again in South Asia, India, and then later Pakistan.

00:35:07 Speaker 2

But he's followed by others, including in Khomeini.

00:35:14 Speaker 2

makes a wonderfully interesting argument about God, which you would imagine has to do with bringing God back in to Muslim life and Muslim politics, except it does the opposite.

00:35:32 Speaker 2

So what does he say?

00:35:35 Speaker 2

He talks about God in terms of sovereignty.

00:35:37 Speaker 2

He writes about God in terms of sovereignty.

00:35:40 Speaker 2

And when writing about sovereignty, he quotes Thomas Hobbes and Jean Bodin, among others.

00:35:46 Speaker 2

And he says, sovereignty, Western notions of sovereignty, are so unitary and absolute that they can only be theological in nature.

00:35:57 Speaker 2

Only God can be sovereign, according to Mr.

00:36:01 Speaker 2

Hobbes and Monsieur Bodin.

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Why is this?

00:36:07 Speaker 2

Because the idea of sovereignty in European thought is so absolutist and unitary.

00:36:14 Speaker 2

It presumes a power so great that no human being or assembly of human beings can ever possess it.

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So his argument is in one sense similar to the now very familiar argument of Carl Schmitt, but also opposed to him.

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So whereas Schmitt says,

00:36:34 Speaker 2

that sovereignty is indeed a theological category, and it has been translated into secular life.

00:36:42 Speaker 2

What Modudi says is that sovereignty, and I don't think Modudi knew Schmidt, even though they were contemporaries, sovereignty is indeed a theological category, but this is why it cannot be translated into human life, into human societies and politics.

00:37:02 Speaker 2

Because

00:37:03 Speaker 2

any effort by human beings, no matter how powerful, to manifest in the body sovereignty can only fall short of its theory.

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That no one can really be or exercise power as absolutely and in such a unit form as Hobbes or Bodhana theorized.

00:37:27 Speaker 2

And therefore, it is the inability to fulfill or to manifest sovereignty

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that brings violence to the world.

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So curious and interesting interpretation of sovereignty.

00:37:39 Speaker 2

So it's precisely because human beings cannot exercise sovereignty.

00:37:44 Speaker 2

They fall short of it that they can become tyrants and dictators and violence enters the world.

00:37:52 Speaker 2

So the thing to do is to recognize that sovereignty can only belong to God.

00:37:56 Speaker 2

It can only be exercised by God, which is the same thing as saying it is expelled along with God.

00:38:03 Speaker 2

God really plays no role in the Islamist system, or he plays a highly institutionalized role, which I will describe when coming to talk about Khomeini.

00:38:15 Speaker 2

So what does Modudi do?

00:38:17 Speaker 2

He exercised such influence on the making of the Pakistani constitution.

00:38:22 Speaker 2

It has had three iterations, but in all three, sovereignty is forsaken.

00:38:30 Speaker 2

I know of no other country which does this.

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Normally you think of post-colonial countries reclaiming sovereignty.

00:38:34 Speaker 2

What Pakistan does is disclaim it.

00:38:37 Speaker 2

What it says in its constitution is that sovereignty belongs to God.

00:38:42 Speaker 2

Then the problem is how is it delegated, if at all, to the people or the government of Pakistan.

00:38:47 Speaker 2

That is the problem to deal with.

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But it doesn't belong to those people or that state.

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It belongs to God.

00:38:55 Speaker 2

What Maududi says is that it is

00:39:00 Speaker 2

religious authorities, clerics, Islamists such as himself, he's not a cleric, who will exercise authority over the sacred law from outside the purview of the state.

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It is not the state that is going to do this because the state must be prevented at all costs from exercising sovereignty.

00:39:21 Speaker 2

The whole point of Modu's theory is to prevent the state from exercising power of this kind

00:39:29 Speaker 2

Not that it has no power, but it cannot accept sovereign power without becoming an idol, because it simulates God's sovereignty.

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So a really, in my view, a very interesting set of propositions here.

00:39:43 Speaker 2

How do you do without sovereignty rather than how do you reclaim it?

00:39:49 Speaker 2

It comes out of Modudi's own past history, where he had been an Indian nationalist and written a kind of idolatory biology from Gandhi.

00:40:00 Speaker 2

Also an anarchist thinker, right?

00:40:02 Speaker 2

So like Gandhi, Modudi wants to think about society governing itself.

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No state should have power over you because of course they were suspicious of the modern state in general, which they saw the colonial state as being simply an instance of.

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But you don't want ordinary people to just do whatever they want to do either.

00:40:26 Speaker 2

So you have to have the carapace of sacred law, but it is to be authorized and administered by people outside the state so the state doesn't own Islam.

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So it's a complicated system.

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It never really comes to pass, even though Pakistan has parallel legal systems.

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It has a Sharia system and it has a colonial system based on English law.

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But one of its implications

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in my view, is that by displacing or abandoning or abolishing sovereignty and expelling it along with God himself in this manner, what Muldudi makes possible is its spectral return in its purest form, the military coup in Pakistan.

00:41:18 Speaker 2

In a way, you refuse to vest sovereignty anyway.

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It's not in parliament, it's not in the presidency, it's not anywhere.

00:41:25 Speaker 2

Well, it'll come back to bite you, and it comes back with the army in its purest form, most unalloyed form.

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So if that's where the Islamist debate about sovereignty and the state goes in Pakistan, let me give you another example, which is the world's second Islamic republic.

00:41:48 Speaker 2

The first is Pakistan, the second is Iran after its revolution.

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Now, Khomeini, unlike Modudi, is a cleric, and he's trained in these traditional sciences in a way that Modudi was not, though they had some admiration for each other.

00:42:06 Speaker 2

And Modudi was initially very pleased with the Iranian.

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He died shortly afterwards, but he was pleased when it happened.

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Modudi dies in Buffalo, New York, by the way, where he had been sent for medical care.

00:42:22 Speaker 2

a little note just to remind all of us that things are never as clear-cut as we think they are in terms of people's positions and where they actually happen to be.

00:42:34 Speaker 2

So what does Khomeini do?

00:42:35 Speaker 2

In his central text, ,, he turns Islam into a system, precisely an Islam, but like a machine in which the roles of the prophet and the imams become functions.

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So anyone can actually perform them.

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So he's not having any of this trouble with people claiming to succeed the prophet or embody God sovereignty or anything like that.

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He creates the system.

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It's a machine, almost it works like a machine.

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It has function elements within it and anyone can play those roles.

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So in some sense, he seems to have befanged this problem, or laid it to rest of sovereignty, of God's sovereignty.

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But on the other hand, after the revolution, that text, of course, is a pre-revolutionary text.

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The problem rises up again in a new way, in which the now late supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, who was at that time leading the

00:43:50 Speaker 2

Friday prayers in Tehran, basically in his sermon delivers Maududi's theory and says that God is sovereign and the Sharia can never be adjusted or dispensed with in any way.

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And Khomeini publicly rebukes him and says this is not the case.

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In fact, you can do all kinds of things with the Sharia.

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And it's that move that I find really very interesting.

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So what does he do?

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Again, let's think about Schmitt here.

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So for Schmitt, the moment of sovereignty is the moment of the suspension of the law.

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And generally, this kind of suspension has to do with the law that is suspended is a welfarist law in general.

00:44:49 Speaker 2

for civilian life, for the flourishing of ordinary human beings.

00:44:56 Speaker 2

And it is suspended so that a more draconian emergency law, which might be temporary, is brought into play.

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So he always thinks of sovereignty in terms of emergency.

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Khomeini does the opposite.

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What he wants to do is to suspend the Sharia on occasion

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precisely to introduce a welfarist provision in law, not an emergency.

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It's not draconian, it's the reverse of draconian.

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So how does Khomeini manage to, as it were, claim sovereignty while Muldudi wasn't able to?

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Muldudi tries to have a society govern itself from outside the state through the law, but he doesn't have a theory where you can suspend it.

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Khomeini comes from the same premise.

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On the one hand, he functionalizes the role of the prophet and God and the imams.

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And on the other hand, after the revolution, he basically is more and more audacious in making claims for Iran's revolutionary sovereignty, which doesn't necessarily make claims in God's name.

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It makes claims in the name of human freedom even.

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And it does so in a classical way.

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So I think in his political testament, Khomeini will go so far as to say that the people of Iran in the time of the revolution were better than the Muslims in the time of the prophet and in the time of Ali and Hussein.

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They were better than the people of Najaf.

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They were better than the people of Medina.

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The revolution was greater than all of these early Islamic events.

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Why?

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Precisely because whereas the Muslims of early days had the Prophet and the Imams before them, they could consult them, nevertheless they betrayed them.

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Whereas the Iranians of the revolution had no visible authority, had no access to divine authority, they believed out of faith.

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They believed in the unseen.

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The act was much greater.

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So on the one hand, what you see happening here is, it might seem unusual.

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He's privileging the Iranian Revolution and its religiosity over the religiosity and the transformation of the early days of Islam.

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On the other hand, of course, he says in that same text, we should not act in such a way as to hasten the return of the imam, of the occult of Abish imam.

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And that, of course, is a way of maintaining a realm of human freedom.

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Because it's only with the return of the imam that you can have a fully theocratic society in place.

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Without his return, you can't have it.

00:48:02 Speaker 2

The philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, I returned again to India, had made precisely this argument that

00:48:11 Speaker 2

basically suggesting that you could think about secularism not in terms of spatial division between the public and the private, as in the West, but in terms of temporal division.

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So for Sunnism, he thought the finality of prophethood meant that human beings were cut off from continuing divine authority and revelation, and therefore they were free until the end of time.

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For Shi'ism, it was the reverse.

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It was the disappearance of the imam that left human beings free until his return.

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So it was a temporal gap that made, if you will-- he didn't use the word secularism, but we might-- a division or a form of, let's say, human liberty possible, outside the remit of God's law.

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And in a way, Khomeini does just this.

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he's happy to suspend various provisions of the Sharia.

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And he says as much in this later text.

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He says, we can suspend any of the pillars of Islam, all the required pieties, the Hajj, which of course he does, prayers, fasting, all of it can be suspended in the interests of the Iranian people.

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Because we live in a period of human freedom, if you will.

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He doesn't use those terms.

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So in both these cases, what I want to suggest is that the theorization of divine sovereignty is premised upon the absence of God, or of the Imam, and the ability to actually think about human flourishing in his absence, in his relative absence, because of course the law never quite goes away.

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does it differently than Khomeini.

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I'll leave you to figure out which one is better, if either.

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But that was the import of this illustration.

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Now, let me end with the way in which the figure of the Muslim, the ordinary Muslim believer, is displaced by that of Islam as the true subject of history.

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So with Khomeini and Modudi, of course, I was talking about sovereignty at an institutional scale.

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But with these militants of the 21st century, in a post-ideological world, the post-Cold War world, where the old Islamist verities are no longer as important, certainly not important for them,

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sovereignty comes to be thought of in individual terms as befits a neoliberal context.

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It's suddenly the individual who's vested with all of these kinds of potentialities and responsibilities.

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They don't necessarily have to think about constitutions and states and revolutions and all of these things.

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So think, for instance, about al-Qaeda's mode of operation, standard

00:51:29 Speaker 2

mode of operation.

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What you have is the iconic, one iconic figure, the suicide bomber, whom we only know after his death because of the release of some kind of martyrdom videotape in which he is often, I'm thinking of the London bombers, for instance, in which he's often depicted, it's mostly a he, regretting these acts that he's felt compelled to perform

00:52:00 Speaker 2

but he's willing to offer himself of his sacrifice for the cause.

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Now, what you have therefore is a rhetoric of mirroring in one sense, because when you think about the arguments

00:52:30 Speaker 2

that these suicide bombers and other such archaic figures who were not bombers made, they tend to disclaim any responsibility, not simply for legalistic reasons.

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So this is the way the argument goes.

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We kill your women, children, civilians because you kill ours.

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We do X because you do Y.

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It's a logic of mirror, of reflection.

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And in that logic you have

00:52:59 Speaker 2

as I said, a disclaiming of responsibility, but not so as to avoid arrest.

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That's ridiculous.

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If you're making this kind of claim, disclaiming responsibility is meaningless.

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So they're not speaking to law enforcement or anything like that.

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What they are doing is basically refusing any ontological grounding for themselves.

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There is no claim made in their own name.

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There's not even that much reference to Sharia.

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Occasionally, of course, you have illustrative ones.

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But what there is this.

00:53:36 Speaker 2

We're like you in some ways, but we are just doing what you are doing.

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This is the mirror held up to your own actions.

00:53:43 Speaker 2

The only point at which the Al-Qaeda militant claims responsibilities is the moment of murder and death.

00:53:54 Speaker 2

his own death as much as the death of his victims.

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So it is suicidal and it is sacrificial.

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And it is filled with these notes of regret.

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I wish I didn't have to do this, but you know the argument.

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So here you have rehearsed a kind of anxiety about responsibility, which is at the same time an anxiety about individual sovereignty.

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Who is this person

00:54:22 Speaker 2

is this person responsible?

00:54:24 Speaker 2

How can this person do what he does?

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He can only do so by canceling himself out in the same moment.

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It's a transitional moment, this display of sovereign action, which may or may not be understood as being against Sharia provisions.

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And of course, there's a lot of criticism from

00:54:49 Speaker 2

Muslim authorities that suicide is haram and all of this kind of stuff.

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And killing civilians and non-combatants is impermissible and all the rest.

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So that is the background of some of this.

00:55:03 Speaker 2

So it's a sacrificial element that really gives meaning to this form of violence.

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It's not necessary.

00:55:12 Speaker 2

You don't have to sacrifice yourself in order to kill someone, but it's the sacrificial element that gives it all its persuasive

00:55:19 Speaker 2

It's the suicidal moment that does it.

00:55:23 Speaker 2

And that moment is a moment of the disclaiming of responsibility, not only by saying you're only doing what you're doing, but by literally disappearing from the scene of your own crime.

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Think by contrast to the iconic figure of ISIS.

00:55:41 Speaker 2

Suicide bombers continue operating, but not as much, and they are no longer iconic figures.

00:55:51 Speaker 2

Neither is there the same kind of effort to disclaim responsibility.

00:56:02 Speaker 2

This kind of form of mirroring that I described for Al Qaeda militants.

00:56:06 Speaker 2

What do you have?

00:56:07 Speaker 2

What you have instead is the making of a virtual subject in these spectacles that I filmed.

00:56:16 Speaker 2

in which the militant is invariably portrayed and enjoying himself.

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Totally different rhetorical form than the Al-Qaeda one, where it's gloomy, sad, I wish I didn't have to do this, I'm going to sacrifice.

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These guys, the ISIS ones, are running amok, destroying monuments.

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Interesting, the idol has returned to the object.

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It's no longer the

00:56:44 Speaker 2

Idolatry as an Islamist model, which is an abstract agent.

00:56:47 Speaker 2

It's become petrol, whatever it is.

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It shows you the decline of the Islamist way of thinking about, in this case, idolatry.

00:56:56 Speaker 2

So you have a new rhetoric and a new logic, which is one of virtuality and of pleasure, not of sacrifice.

00:57:06 Speaker 2

But this is another way in which

00:57:09 Speaker 2

if you will, the sovereignty of the subject of the individual is exorcised.

00:57:16 Speaker 2

Because when you look at the outpourings and the texts that come out of ISIS, what you see is that unlike with al-Qaeda, where it's the West, the so-called far enemy that is the enemy, the real enemy, with ISIS it's the opposite.

00:57:34 Speaker 2

The West is a place where you might draw recruits,

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and where your acts can be publicized, but your real enemy is inside, is internal.

00:57:44 Speaker 2

It's not Al-Qaeda's near enemy, the Gulf monarchies, whatever, it is actually the Shia.

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But not only the Shia in their own right, the Shia insofar as they represent individuality or subjecthood with internal life, with an inner life.

00:58:02 Speaker 2

It is precisely the inner life that is suspect, it's deeply suspect, it's unseen,

00:58:08 Speaker 2

It is not transparent.

00:58:10 Speaker 2

It may harbor forms of sovereign authority, and therefore it must be destroyed.

00:58:17 Speaker 2

So you have these ISIS figures, like Adnani al-Shami, keep saying the Rafiq, the Shia are our enemies, but he says they could be we too.

00:58:29 Speaker 2

Our soldiers too could be Shia in that particular way.

00:58:34 Speaker 2

So she stands in for something more than itself.

00:58:37 Speaker 2

It's more general.

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It actually stands in, I would argue, for a full subject with an inner life.

00:58:46 Speaker 2

And it's that inner life that needs to be destroyed because it harbors idolatry precisely, the sovereignty of the individual.

00:58:58 Speaker 2

What emerges with its destruction is

00:59:05 Speaker 2

only the legal person.

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You have these extraordinary and brutal videos of militants smilingly destroying and killing, as if to show that there's no connection between their emotions and their acts.

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And there's no display of any inner life, like sacrifice, regret, all these things that are there, iconic figures.

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And all you have, therefore-- and I've come to an end, sorry-- is the flattening out of the subject so that it becomes nothing more than the legal person.

00:59:51 Speaker 2

Now, we are all legal persons, and we become conscious of being so at certain points, when we're signing a contract,

00:59:58 Speaker 2

When we are pulled over to be given a traffic ticket, suddenly we are legal persons.

01:00:04 Speaker 2

But we don't live as legal persons.

01:00:06 Speaker 2

Here you have, I think, the effort to reduce personhood altogether.

01:00:14 Speaker 2

So all you have is the instrument of the law, the instrument, if you will, of Islam as the only true subject of history.

01:00:22 Speaker 2

So that's my final example.

01:00:23 Speaker 2

I realize I've gone on too long because I only have notes.

01:00:27 Speaker 2

And I just want to end by saying thank you again, but also that what I do with the conclusion of the movement is show that new Muslim movements and mobilizations are no longer like any of this stuff.

01:00:40 Speaker 2

That Islam has ceased to be in many, if not most of them, a subject of the kind I've described, whether it's the so-called Arab Spring protests, whether it is the many protests in Iran from the Green Movement to the Mahsa Amini protests to the more recent ones,

01:00:56 Speaker 2

whether it is the protest over the citizenship law in India, whether it's the fall of the Bangladeshi government.

01:01:03 Speaker 2

You can think of any number of, including the current wars, by the way, in Palestine and in Lebanon and in Iran, where the language of Islam seems to have, if not disappeared, been severely attenuated, including in the Islamic Republic itself.

01:01:25 Speaker 2

So I feel that we have come to the end of this particular story, though I could be wrong.