Islam in the contemporary world:
Western image and Muslim ideology

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The issue of Western perceptions of Islam, and concerns about Islamic ideology vis-à-vis the relation of Muslims to the West, constitute topics of ongoing concern both for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. They have come to the fore in a dramatic sense this century with the terrorist attacks in America on September 11, 2001, and the recent bombings in London, together with many events of global significance in between.

For the purpose of this seminar I want to do two things. First, I shall undertake a critical review of some key dimensions of Western perceptions of Islam. Second, I shall outline the broad range of ideological options that have arisen in the modern era in order to highlight shifts of focus and emphasis that have occurred over the last century. I shall end with the question of the present moment: where is Islam heading?

I

The Western perception of Islam is dominated by misrepresentation and distorted image, which derive largely from misunderstanding and ignorance. I contend that 'ignorance' may be manifest in at least three modalities or kinds, namely innocent, blind and culpable. On the one hand there is *innocent* ignorance, or ignorance

simpliciter, namely the situation of a naïve 'not-knowing', yielding the direct and unequivocal 'don't know' response when a question of knowledge or perception is posed. However, this form of ignorance may provide opportunity for correction through the provision of information and the processes of education. It implies no intentional prejudice on the part of the one who is innocently ignorant.

On the other hand, *blind* ignorance is something else again. It is ignorance born of an intellectual incapability, or cognitive barrier, that effectively prevents any 'seeing' or 'knowing' other than what has been dictated by the worldview perspectives held. It yields a 'can't know – it's beyond our ken' response. Knowledge, and an image, of the other are so utterly proscribed by the worldview of the knower that no alternative perspective or image is admissible. Here the notion of applying a corrective simply through information is inadequate. Any educational process, if attempted, will require sustained and careful execution to effect any real change. Even if change is unwelcome or resisted, the premise of this mode of ignorance is basically cognitive inertia, which in principle can be overcome. Indeed it is this modality of ignorance that yields to the great changes in social ordering and cultural life as happened, for instance, in the momentous changes brought about in the USA by the civil rights movement in the twentieth century.

However, there is yet another kind of ignorance that goes beyond even that occasioned by the blinding effect of a limited perspective and an intransigently closed mind. This third kind is *culpable* ignorance, that is, an active ignoring: the deliberate refusal to know, the avoidance of the challenge to cognitive change, the reinforcement of a prejudicial perspective by deliberately ignoring the issue at hand. This is ignorance born of an active dismissal of alternative possibilities, the out-of-hand rejection of options presented for alternate ways of thinking, understanding and interpreting. This modality goes hand-in-glove with the attitude and mindset that harbours most forms of fundamentalism. It produces an intentional 'won't know' or 'not wanting to know' response. It is resistant to any information contrary to its own; it is inimical to educational process; it treats cognitive change as effectively, if not actually, treasonable.

As with all conflicts the first casualty, it is said, is truth. How much of the media portrayal and the deluge of analytical articles, for and against either side in the so-called 'war on terrorism' – with the unspoken, but generally universally assumed, understanding that it is 'Islamic terrorism' that is in the frame – is the product of propaganda, the machination of so-called political 'spin-doctors', or just the uncritical reflection of stereotypical image and biased (mis)perception? Image distortion derived from ignorance, of whatever kind, continues to impact upon the world in ways that now make the issues I am seeking to address even more urgent.

What, then, could be identified as predominant Western perceptions of Islam? Or perhaps, better, what is the predominant perception, at least so far as that can be detected, in the 'Western' mind? Of course, the way the question is put, and the way it is usually answered, is a gross oversimplification of a complex issue. But, for the sake of discussion and argument, the simple approach is not without foundation and validity. For the answer, arguably and sad to say, is a negative one. It is best summed up by the word 'threat'. We may see this negative reaction both through media image and report, and, more particularly, how people in the West may be observed reacting to such image and reportage. Indeed it can seem that nearly all news concerning Islam that is reported in our papers or covered on television concerns aggressive Muslim action of one sort or another.

The media image of Islam that is portrayed is all too often a threatening one, and in the uncritical Western imagination the particular and dramatic activities of some specific Muslims is generalized: thus the religion, Islam, is perceived as itself a threat. There are undoubtedly many elements that contribute to the image or, perhaps better, the *process* of imaging, Islam and thereby to the construct of the Islam of imagination. What I propose at this juncture is to reflect upon the question of what constitutes the imaging process as such: what are the factors that shape and influence the Western perceptions of Islam? This is the issue of *image analysis* – where does the Western image derive from? What critical factors are at play? By way of a foray into the subject the following outline of a programme of analysis seems to me to be appropriate.

1. The picture of Islam portrayed in the West is first and foremost an imaginative construct shaped by media images; in other words, Western perceptions are *media-shaped*. It goes without saying that the primary, and for many the only, exposure to Islam is via television news-coverage, newspaper reportage, and cinematic presentation. All too often, however, these media project images of Islam that are little more than stereotypes. Nonetheless it is the stereotypical image that powerfully influences the formation of imagination, both for the individual and also in respect of the collective or common communal perception. Of course, the predominance of visual image, in a video age, hardly needs to be stressed. But, as well, the impact of the printed word, whether in newspaper, news-journal, popular book or tract, contributes significantly to the image-making effect of the media. However, all this really doesn't tell us much. What gives form and content to the image shaping so conveyed? What constitutes the image held in the imagination? Given the incontrovertible pervasiveness of the media in the process of image-formation – and even allowing for the recognition that there is more than a grain of truth in the adage that 'the medium is the message' – what gives the image its substance? This brings me to the second item.

2. Perceptions of Islam are shaped by the *forces of political domination*. This is the two-edged sword of the predominance of political material as the source and focus of much media coverage, and the filtering effect of editorial choice and decision-making by those who control the media. Whether intentional or not, the selection of material, the way it is presented – the casting of the news – will reflect at least prior assumptions and agendas of a broadly political nature. Arguably all editing, all redaction, is a political act in the sense of not being undertaken in a cognitive vacuum but rather being guided, at least, by consideration of desired effects or the dictates of sub-text message, propaganda, and the like. Despite the profession of objective neutrality of a reporter, and the supposed neutral objectivity of the camera – which 'never lies' – the outcome, in terms of presented image, necessarily yields to the language of the report and the angle of the camera-shot (the more graphic, stark, or dramatic, the more likely it will be aired or printed). This undoubtedly implies, even in a broad sense of the term, that there is a dimension of political domination in the image product, which is then projected through the media. But what does this all mean? We can begin to construct an answer by turning to the third critical item.

3. For the most part the image of Islam projected via the media lacks an authentic framework for interpretation. The portrayed image of Islam is often *contextually-loose*: it is lacking in context, or is 'loose' in the sense of only a simplistic – often assumed and thus likely false or misleading – contextual reference being given. So, that which feeds the collective imagination, which in turn holds, embellishes, and draws upon the image for a variety of purposes, lacks appropriate contextual reference points. Certainly, for the most part at least, it would be true to say that both the projection and reception of the image of Islam is conducted with a bare minimum, if any, of attention paid to proper contextual factors. Of course good investigative journalists and reputable news reporters will defend their locating of reportage in context.

I am not saying that good contextualising of the image does not happen at all. Only that the predominant image of Islam in the West does not, in fact, come with an appropriate or authentic hermeneutical guide. Thus, for example, Islam is too frequently and falsely perceived as a monolithic entity; as an avaricious self-aggrandizing religious culture; as non self-critical or reflective; as archaic, time-locked, and Middle Eastern. So the *image* of Islam, for the most part at least, is in reality contextually loose – it is not rooted in sound contextual appreciation and understanding – so far as the Western *imagination* is concerned. This results in …

4. A *religiously-skewed* image of Islam. Here I refer simply to the fact that Islam is not perceived as religion as such, or in a balanced way. That is to say, it is not, as it should be, presented as being a spiritual path, inherently holistic in its outlook and application. Rather the idea of religion that is attached to the term 'Islam' is itself skewed or conceptually twisted. It is off-centre, unbalanced so as to reinforce negative, even false, representations of Islam. For instance, the politico-juristic elements of Islam are over-stressed in comparison with the theological and pietistic dimensions; the pragmatics of Islamic programs predominates over an awareness of Muslim ethical sensibilities and reflections. And the underlying and deeper *raison d'être* for any given Islamic action is thereby lost to view. The religious depth is trivialized: the picture remaining is two-dimensional. And so we are brought to the fifth component of my critical analysis.

5. The image of Islam is that of an *ideologically-oppositional* 'religious other'. Islam is portrayed as the *de facto* oppositional religion to Christianity, and *vice versa*; and further, Muslims are portrayed as de facto oppositional, religiously and politically, to Jews, and *vice versa*. In the context of a wider and general Western perspective, Islam is the presumed ideological rival, *par excellence*, to the West. Inherent in the image is the product of the process I have analysed so far. Islam is no friendly rival as in a competing sports-team. Rather this rival is so completely 'other' that the prospect of confrontation is couched in dramatic terms and fearful expectation. Thus Islam is portrayed as the Great Threat, the ultimate opponent (so Samuel Huntingdon, *et. al.*) in a climatic and apocalyptic clash of civilizations; the historical antithesis to the West's thesis. Religious extremists of variant Christian types will transmute the antithesis to an antichrist image. Islam is then portrayed, ideologically, as the great contemporary satanic opponent to an idealised Judeo-Christian West. And, ironically, the *vice versa* holds: to many in the Islamic world it is the West that is the demonic opposition, with America itself identified as the Great Satan. But such ideological oppositions are little more than mirror images of extremely fundamentalist and exclusivist religious postures.

6. So it is that Islam gets presented in terms of a *sociologically misrepresented* image. Islam is deemed to be, in a variety of ways, sociologically 'out of control'. It will produce a Saddam Hussein, who for a long time no one seemed able to curb; an Osama bin Laden, with his network of terrorists evoking massive retaliatory and expurgatory action, and who no-one seems able to pin down. It will produce a plethora of countries where political volatility and/or communal violence seem commonplace. On the one hand, Islam appears to produce much rhetoric concerning peaceful co-existence and membership in the world community, yet on the other will foment virulent policies of opposition to the West and to Zionism and, in some cases, to Christianity or at least to Christian churches and related organizations. Such active opposition may be directed against Israel and may even produce a negative response to Judaism, Quranic injunctions to the contrary notwithstanding. It certainly has produced an overriding and alarmingly growing negative response to Jews as such. This confused representation will reflect on Islam as having an aura of inner conflict and lack of concerted direction for its own good, politically speaking.

To be sure there *is* great social and political, and even ideological, variety throughout the world of Islam, and much diversity in localized political expression and difference in the way specific issues and agendas occupy the energies of Muslims. This diversity does not mean Islam is a threat by virtue of being, in some vague sense, out of control as a sociological entity. Indeed the countervailing impetus to unity within the worldwide Islamic community, which acts as an internal check and corrective upon some of the more volatile elements, is not to be misread as suggesting the possibility that Islam may yet become the monolith it is feared to be already. Rather, it suggests that the dialectic implied in the tension between the ideal of an overarching unity of the Islamic community, and the variegated reality of it in practice only reflects the fact of Islam being an authentic and complex religio-political entity. So our attention now turns to the second task of this seminar presentation, the issue of ideological options that have arisen in the modern era.

II

Islam is found across some four dozen nations where Muslims form the majority of the populace, and throughout many other lands where Muslims are in the minority. Ideologically speaking, the Islamic nations and countries constitute one vast notional socio-geographic and religious entity – *dar al-Islam* – to which minority Muslim communities elsewhere are associated to form a single overarching religious community, the *ummah.* But in contrast to the ideal and ideology of the one world-wide Islamic community, there have in fact been – and indeed are today – many Muslim 'worlds', or particular major communities and cultures. The diversity of these Muslim worlds reflects varieties of contemporary political orientation and regional geography. Against the *notional* unity of the Islamic community (*ummah*), under girded by a religious ideology of unity (*tawhid*), there is the concrete reality of a multiplicity of *national* Islamic entities and identities. So an internal pluralist reality co-exists in tension with the ideology of a global communal unity. This tension between the reality of socio-political diversity and the ideals of religious unity is an inherent problematic within the world of Islam. One Muslim commentator has noted that:

whereas in the early centuries of development of social institutions in Islam, Islam started from a clean slate, as it were, and had to carve out *ab initio* a social fabric ... now, when Muslims have to face a situation of fundamental rethinking and reconstruction, their acute problem is precisely to determine how far to render the slate clean again and on what principles and by what methods, in order to create a new set of institutions.[1]

An ethic of radical, even revolutionary, change and disruption as being valid, even needful, has predominated throughout the history of Islam. But such change was intended to effect a return to the pristine forms of the original Islamic institutional structure and religious life, not to engender further novel development of the religion. This leads to a deep inherent tension between conservative tendencies (the maintenance of the received tradition of religion) and radical tendencies (the return to the roots of religion). Each can engender change, yet each can resist further novelty: it all depends on context and circumstance. The conservative may call for revitalisation of institutions and the revival of religious sensibilities and in the process labelled a 'fundamentalist'. But this could apply equally to the radical who critiques the socio-political status quo and advocates revolutionary change in order to regain true values and the realignment of the institutional expression of Islam.

It has been in response to the exigencies of the modern world, and the struggle to find identity and a place within it, or in distinction from it, that contemporary Islamic ideology needs to be understood. A range of Islamic ideological responses, or options, have arisen. These include, at one end of the spectrum, the call of the radical Islamist for total Islamisation, that is, that Islamic law (*Shari'a*) should govern every part of life. At the other end of the spectrum Muslim modernists have advocated the abandonment of early Islamic politico-religious ideals in favour of the privatisation of religion. This is the model of Western secularism and, of course, it is anathema to the dedicated Islamist. But between modernist reform at one end, and Islamist revivalism at the other, there are many variant positions on the spectrum of

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[1]   Fazlur Rahman *Islam*, 214

ideological option that may be – and often are – taken.[2] Ideological options which have predominated the Islamic world during the modern era may be summarily identified as Traditionalism, Modernism, Pragmatic Secularism, and Islamism.

(i)   *Traditionalism*

Traditionalism refers to an ideology of affirming the received traditions of belief and practice such that "change should not and does not affect the traditions of the past. Change is to be rejected."[3] This would seem to yield an entrenched conservatism, or an outlook which holds to past methods and perspectives come what may. Westernisation is viewed as a "temptation ... to be resisted". Traditionalism is the conserving ideology, the perspective that seeks to maintain the religious tradition as such, which eschews change for change's sake, but which may employ coping mechanisms, not to effect change, but rather to uphold the tradition through changing circumstance. Variants within this category include, on the one hand, a 'rejectionist' hard-line view (no allowance for change whatever) and, on the other, an 'adaptationist' stance which makes some concession, at least in respect of process, on the basis that, as a cultural entity, Islam has "always been able to cope with change and has built into its structures ways of dealing with change."[4] Thus, whilst its sources (*Qur'an* and *Sunna*) remain unchanged, novel situations could be managed by way of the institutionalised legal systems pertinent to the particular local Islamic community.

(ii)   *Modernism*

Modernism has its genesis in the 19th century when the spirit of European optimism, liberality and progressivism impacted pervasively upon both European and colonial

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[2] For example, Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices, Vol 2*, 28ff delineates three major groupings or categories of Muslim response to the modern age: Traditionalist; Revivalist (sometimes referred to as 'Fundamentalist'); and Modernist. William Shepard ("Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19 (1987)) classifies the variant responses as Islamic secularism, modernism, Islamism, traditionalism, and neo-traditionalism.

[3] Shepard, *op.cit.,* 29

[4] *ibid*.

life, hence the colonised Islamic countries, and indeed any Islamic country that had a close relation to the West. Modernists extract values and principles from the authority sources and traditions and argue for, and allow, modification of practice in accordance with contemporary need. Indeed they would argue that this is in fact how the different traditions have arisen through time and what keeps a religion vibrant and relevant. Thus Islamic modernists emerged with an ideology that attempted a defence of contemporary civilisation in terms of traditional Islam, striving to adopt whatever was perceived to be beneficial, yet retaining the framework of the *Shari'a* and the religious life. Islamic modernists have generally attempted

> to establish a continuity between their Islamic heritage and modern change. On the one hand, they identified with premodern revivalist movements and called for the purification of internal deficiencies and deviations. On the other, they borrowed and assimilated new ideas and values from the West.[5]

Modernists attempt to adapt Islam to changing conditions and circumstances. To that extent they are the champions of the view that religion is a living thing; change and adaptation are a natural component of living entities of whatever type. In short, Islamic modernism, or modernist reform, identifies a reinterpreted Islam as the basis for both political and religious life. It draws on an inherent capacity within Islam for flexibility of application and interpretation. A high idealistic valuation of Islam becomes the ideological *leitmotif* driving political engagement. It promises much but it would seem, at least in the present day, it has difficulty in successfully engaging with the broad realities of contemporary Islamic life. Modernism, as a term of description, can mean different things to different people in different circumstances.

(iii) *Pragmatic Secularism*

Pragmatic Secularism views Islam in the modern world as a purely religious phenomenon, without political dimension or force. Radical social reorganisation occurs without recourse to religious jurisdiction as was the case, for example, in communist Albania. Turkey pursued a vigorous secularising process of separating

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[5] *ibid.,* 140

religion from politics throughout much of the twentieth century: as well as replacing the Arabic script with the Latin alphabet, Turkey's "suppression of Islamic legal and educational institutions and the outlawing of mystical Sufi groups were other steps in the removal of religion from the apparatus of the state."[6] In countries that are officially secular so far as their political constitution is concerned, Islam can find itself confronted with the challenge of adjusting to, or contending with, variants of nationalism, capitalism or socialism. As a result, further pragmatic variants include "religious secularism" (as in Indonesia's multi-faith system); and "Muslim secularism" (as in Egypt's constitutional placing of religion, specifically Islam, as having a role in, but not being the basis of, political life).[7]

(iv) *Islamism*

Islamism is the relatively recent contemporary development referring to the position of contending for the full application of Qur'anic principles and values and the dismissal of all else. Islamism, or Islamic revivalism, accepts change, albeit in a controlled fashion. It uses the religious authoritative sources of Islam (*Qur'an* and *Sunna*) to legitimise change. Ibrahim Karawan states that Islamism

> refers to the movements and ideologies that claim Islam, as they interpret it, as the basis for restructuring contemporary states and societies according to an idealised image of Islam's founding period... Hence, Islamists talk of the need to return to Islamic roots and a 'golden age'....[8]

The singular defining characteristic of Islamism is the concern to gain political power: religion is not confined to the realm of the private and personal, but is necessarily in the public domain and so carries with it an active concern for the political life of the society. Therefore obtaining the controlling interest in politics is

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[6] Rippin, *op.cit.*, 36

[7] *ibid.*

[8] Ibrahim A. Karawan, *The Islamist Impasse*, 7

critical for Islamists "if they are to reshape society, politics, the economy and culture in accordance with what they deem to be God's ultimate will."[9]

Muslim revivalist movements are often also characterised by their concern for the perceived socio-moral decline of Muslims and, when this applies, they advocate an intentional return to the origins of the religion and the shedding of all accretions of legal and mystic traditions. They tend also to reject the predeterministic outlook of popularist Islam and the dominant theology of the day, and in some circumstances they are inclined to effect, or at least attempt, revivalist reform through armed force. The Islamic revivalist will use the authority sources of past tradition to legitimate present day change in the sense of an active promotion of change from an unsatisfactory state of affairs to that of an ideal "what should be". Thus the goal of establishing an Islamic state is viewed as a necessary precursor to achieving an Islamic society, *per se*.

A set of five themes that demonstrate the nature of *Islamism* have been identified by one Muslim scholar, Makmud Faksh.[10] The first is the *fusion of religion and politics*, which is the expression of the holistic view of Islam as "both an ideology and a system of life".[11] The second is the notion of *Divine Sovereignty* or Rule (*Hakimiyya*) which expresses the cardinal principle that political order is subservient to the rules of *Shari'a*: human rulers and political leaders are merely God's representatives and are to be judged according to the fidelity and integrity of their representation. The third theme is that of *Islamic authenticity* being asserted over against *jahiliyya*, the state of deep spiritual ignorance. The new *jahiliyya* against which Islam is pitted is the seduction of Western culture and values viewed as inherently antithetical to Islamic culture and values. Islamic *universalism* (as in the *ummah*) over against nationalist particularism (*qawmiyya*) constitutes the fourth theme. Any and all forms of nationalism, including pan-Arab nationalism, are to be rejected. The fifth and final theme, one which redounds throughout much revivalist and fundamentalist literature and rhetoric, is that of *jihad*. The dynamic and comprehensive interpretation of this

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[9] *ibid.*

[10] Mahmud A, Faksh, *The Future of Islam in the Middle East: Fundamentalism in Egypt, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia.*

[11] *ibid.,* 5

core religious motif, whose root meaning has to do with the constant struggle for belief over unbelief, the right and the good over against error and evil, gives a sharp edge to revivalist ideologies.

Islamists may also be viewed as falling into two broad categories, viz militant and political. The former combine "ideological purity and deep contempt for political compromise with a keen sense of urgency for direct Islamic action." They tend "to act as dedicated fighters against states which they see as embodying contemporary 'ignorance' – *jahiliyya*."[12] Militant Islamists will pursue destructive and destabilising strategies in the interests of waging a war of attrition against the State. As the current socio-political order is, by definition as it were, totally rejected by a militant perspective, such Islamists continue the struggle for as long as it takes: surrender is unthinkable, compromise anathema – anything less than the achievement of the goal is tantamount to apostasy. However, it is the nature of this phenomenon that militant groups are highly competitive, fractious and exclusivist. As a movement, militant Islamism is highly fissiparous.[13]

The American scholar of Islam, John Esposito, has summarised the ideological framework of Islamism as follows.[14] Islamism holds that Islam is a total and comprehensive way of life; Muslim societies have failed due to their departure from the "straight path of Islam" and their following a Western secular path; the renewal of society requires a return to pure Islam and the advancement of an Islamic religio-political and social reformation or revolution. Furthermore, in pursuit of this, Western-inspired civil codes must be replaced by Islamic law, which is the only acceptable blueprint for Muslim society. However, although Westernisation of society is condemned, modernisation as such is not. That is to say, science and technology are accepted, but they are to be subordinated to Islamic belief and values. Finally, the process of Islamisation requires organizations or associations of dedicated and trained Muslims.

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[12] Karawan, *op.cit.*, 16

[13] Karawan, *passim*.

[14] John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path.*, 163

III

So where is Islam headed today? It is the ideology of Islamism that, without doubt, has the lead in today's Islam. Contemporary expressions emanating from the Wahhabi form of Sunni Islam in Saudi Arabia, or the neo-Deobandi madrassas of Pakistan, have given apologetic reference for the globalisation of terrorist extremism as in the al-Qaeda movement. In its myriad forms, Islamism expresses the most dramatic dimension of the international face of Islam. It involves piety, yet increased devotion doesn't just focus on religious observance but also on "the social, economic, and political application of Islamic values."[15] The critical factor is that it is Islam, and not a secular ideology, which shapes attitudes and directs actions. Islamism involves a high level conscientisation process and a deeply held intentionality. Further, there are many disquieting elements associated with the development process which act as catalysts for revival together with a wide range and number of attempts to make Islam politically relevant. Religion is cast in the role of the critic of government. But there is no overall coordination to the phenomenon of Islamic revivalism. Rather it is marked by a high level of idiosyncretism and local flavour: "the form that revival takes and the effect that it produces vary according to circumstance and place."[16] And, of course, that revivalism within Islam attracts a perception of militancy is a function of the way in which it has "has captured most attention in the West and generated negative, undifferentiated images."[17]

It must, of course, be stressed that the vast majority of Muslim people are moderate in their outlook in that reform would be seen as something that occurs through the gradual transformation of Muslim society rather than being effected through violent revolution, which in reality is a minority perspective, even though it is the one that hits the headlines.

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[15] *ibid.,* 37
[16] *ibid.,* 38
[17] *ibid.*