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**THE RELIGIOUS
RIGHT AND THE
TALIBANIZATION
OF AMERICA**

Masood Ashraf Raja



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For my mother, Zainularab Raja

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Introduction

The question that would be asked of me, especially by those who will pose the question without having read this book, is this: Are you suggesting that the American conservatives are terrorists like the Taliban? I will not answer that question here, for this book, read in its entirety, is the answer to this and so many other questions. There will be other questions and the display of dramatic outrage that defines a certain segment of American right. My purpose is to speak the truth and to talk about difficult subjects and I have, to the best of my ability, tried to be fair. There are no apologies, though: I am, unapologetically, a progressive and liberal scholar and find no reason to apologize for my political and social leanings. But in fairness to my readers, I must first provide a brief genealogy of my own thought and practices, and, most importantly, my reasons for writing this book.

I came to the USA in 1996 after having served in the Pakistan army as an officer for 10 years. So, the self that I brought to America was a different self as structured and defined by the limitations and possibilities of my own culture and, certainly, also informed by military training and service. I attended a small Baptist university¹ where I encountered the best of American conservatism, especially in terms of a humanistic education. I know, through experience, that not all Christians are fundamentalists just as all Muslims are not terrorists. In fact, I would say that the majority of Christians in America are decent, humane, and caring people. Thus, the Christian right that I invoke in this book, in my view, is a vociferous minority that claims to speak for most American Christians.

I came to a Baptist university in 1996 and chose to study literature simply because it allowed me to explore the possibilities of my personal development in a field of study that I had always been interested in. In the process of my education, I also made a choice to keep my mental horizons open. As a result, over the years, I have retained the best of my own culture—Pakistan—and merged it with the best of my host culture—the USA. The personal identity that comes out of this process, though not perfect, is more tolerant, compassionate, and accepting of differences. That a humanistic education played a crucial role in this experience is undeniable and that America helped me craft this cosmopolitan, compassionate, and tolerant identity is also a fact.

In my years in America, I have also learned that what we become in life is a combination of individual effort and myriads of enabling conditions and that much of what we accomplish depends upon so many things outside of ourselves. Think of it this way: If you are successful in your life, you can look back and exactly trace the roles of your parents, teachers, and mentors in giving you the necessary guidance and care to get to where you are right now. It is, therefore, necessary to acknowledge that for all positive things to happen, certain necessary preconditions must exist and that human will is also defined outside of ourselves, for someone must teach us what it means to be responsible, commiserative, and self-reliant.

In this spirit, then, it pains me to see actions, slogans, and practices in the USA that are coterminous with the destructive practices of groups such as the Taliban and since so much of what I have accomplished has been made possible with the kindness and the compassion of my American friends, I find it imperative to write this book to point out certain dangers to the kind of America I have experienced and the kind of America that must sustain itself not only for my American friends but also for the rest of humanity.

This book, therefore, is written out of love and I have no qualms in accepting that deep down I even love those whose views and actions I disagree with and whose way of life and worldview I will criticize without a single iota of foreboding. Such a critique is essential, necessary, and noble.

Since one part of the book also deals with my native country, I confess that this part is also imbued with a deep and lasting love of my land and its people. I come from the Potohar region of Pakistan and can trace my own ancestry to the same village for at least 600 years. I am, therefore, as Pakistani as one can be and have never felt the need to prove my love and care for my people and my land to anyone.