

News Watch Article: DI911

A POST 9/11 LOOK AT ISLAM

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Is the Islamic faith a violent religion? Are all Muslims radical militants ready to wage *jihad* (holy war) against the West? Just what is Islam, and who are the Muslims? These are only a few of a multitude of questions culled from the vortex of the tragic events of 9/11. Since that infamous day, how have Muslims answered these questions? What have the secular media and the various Christian groups been saying as well?

Muslim Responses. Immediately following the events of September 11, Muslims worldwide condemned the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as both evil and contrary to the true teachings of Islam. Throughout North America major Muslim organizations, such as the Islamic Society of North America, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the American Muslim Council, the Muslim Student Association, and others all joined together in their denunciations of the attacks. Typical of these excoriations are the words of Nehad Awad, Executive Director of the Council on American Islamic Relations. Concerning the Muslim terrorists who perpetrated the attacks, he asserted, "These people do not belong to our community here. The only thing they took from us was the name of our faith. They stole it from us....And they borrowed viciously our Islamic names and they did evil." Repeated statements affirmed that Islam is a religion of peace, not of violence and destruction. Muslim imams and scholars reiterated this view in speeches, interviews, articles, and on Web sites, often citing the Qur'an (Koran) to support their statements. For example, the Al-Islam Web site states, "Islam is a religion of tolerance and peace. In our sacred book, the Noble Qur'an, we are taught the value of innocent life in these words: 'Whosoever kills a human being for other than manslaughter or mischief in the land, it shall be as if he has killed all humankind, and whosoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he has saved the life of all humankind' (5:32)."

In an article entitled "Does Religion Promote Violence?" in *Islamic Horizons* (the most widely read Islamic journal in the United States), Dr. Muzammil H. Siddiqi repeats this affirmation: "Islam does not allow or sanctify the killing [of] any innocent person regardless of his or her religion. According to the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad...life is sacrosanct." He continues by affirming that just as biblical texts can be "easily manipulated and distorted," so, too, passages from the Qur'an are often "misquoted and taken out of context" in order to prove Islam promotes violence.

In the days following September 11, meanwhile, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) claimed to have received reports of more than 350 attacks against Arab Americans around the country, ranging from verbal harassment to physical assaults. President Bush immediately denounced these attacks, as did other government, civic, and religious leaders.

An unforeseen corollary of the terrorism of September 11 and of the subsequent anger directed at American Muslims is that they have ignited a surge of interest in Islam. In the aftermath of all of these events, Americans stepped forward to defend their Muslim neighbors, becoming increasingly curious about Islam as well. Typifying this interest are the words of Suboh Suboh, a Palestinian graduate student at George Washington University: "It [the events of September 11] gave us the opportunity to speak about Islam, because there are so many people asking about Islam. It is not only that we go and talk about Islam to different people; they are coming to us after this incident and asking Muslims in general to know the nature of Islam."

Media Responses. Within a few days after the terrorist attacks, President Bush went to the Islamic Center of Washington, D.C., and strongly affirmed America's support for American Muslims, as well as for Muslims worldwide. Concerning the evidence suggesting that the terrorists were radical Muslims, the president asserted, "These acts of violence violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith....The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace."

Later that same evening the president addressed a joint session of Congress. In his speech he addressed the religious aspects of the terrorist attack of September 11, telling Muslims worldwide, "We respect your faith....Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah."

Yvonne Haddad, noted Islamicist from Georgetown University, believes President Bush's visit to the Islamic Center and his subsequent remarks were the sparks that ignited the current growing interest in Islam.¹ In the following months, the secular media continued in the same vein with numerous positive editorials, front-page stories, and television interviews — all asserting that Islam is a peaceful religion and that those who do violence in the name of Islam are a tiny radical fringe.

In the first few months following September 11, one could hardly miss the almost ubiquitous presence of features and stories about Islam in all forms of the media. With a few exceptions, almost all of the early coverage argued dogmatically that Islam was a peaceful faith. Only a fragmented minority of Muslims were violent, they asserted, akin to what Jim Jones and David Koresh might be to Christianity.

Magazines and journals as diverse as *Reader's Digest* and *National Geographic* had cover stories or feature articles about Islam. Likewise, all of the mainline news journals had articles and editorials assuring their readers that, at its core, Islam is a peaceful religion. *Time* magazine's Viewpoint editorial, entitled "The True, Peaceful Face of Islam," stated, "Islam did not impose itself by the sword. In a statement in which the Arabic is extremely emphatic, the Koran insists, 'There must be no coercion in matters of faith!' (2:256)" *U.S. News and World Report* also made this point in the cover article, "Unholy War: How Islamic Radicals Are Hijacking One of the World's Great Religions." In a *Newsweek* article entitled "A Peaceful Faith, A Fanatic Few," the story begins: "Islam: Even the sound of this lovely Arabic word, which means 'surrender,' conveys the promise of peace, justice and harmony that comes to those who do the will of God." With all of the positive affirmations concerning Islam, it is not surprising that by the end of the year *Newsweek* found that "68 percent believe terrorist attacks by followers of Islam are a perversion of the faith, not a reflection of its teachings."²

Christian and Competing Media Responses. Coinciding with the positive view of Islam prevalent in the months following the 9/11 attacks, many Christian churches warmly welcomed Muslim imams into their congregations to share about Islam. For example, Yahya Hendi of Georgetown University, who led the U.S. House of Representatives in prayer on November 15, stated that since September 11 he had spoken in more than 250 churches nationwide and reached more than 60 million Americans through his television appearances. Reflecting on this positive reception, he said that "many Americans have made the effort to understand the truth of Islam."

Since September 11 a number of Christian colleges and universities have similarly invited Islamic scholars as speakers or held joint Christian/Muslim conferences. One such conference was held recently at Valparaiso University. The conference's title was, "Peace and Reconciliation in Islam and Christianity," and the promotional materials stated that at the conference "Muslims and Christians will gather around one table to consider how we might *move forward together in faith*" (emphasis added).

From the beginning, however, there also have been opposing voices, dissenting from the increasingly popular perception that Islam is a religion that emphasizes peace and equal rights for all people. Some Christian churches and organizations have spoken out, showing the side of Islam that the news media have largely ignored. Bob and Gretchen Passantino, of Answers In Action, write that Christians must be honest and affirm that there are millions of moderate and peace-loving Muslims who were just as horrified by the terrorism of September 11 as anyone else. They add, however, that this is only one side of

the coin: "There are numerous passages in the Koran that contextually, historically, linguistically, and by literary criticism advocate physical violence against unbelievers, the spread of Islam by force, the blessings that accrue to those who participate in holy war, and the obligation Allah has to reward someone who loses his life in holy war by immediate elevation to paradise."³

Other Christian ministries have echoed this perception, showing that it is wrong to view Islam as a monolithic belief system with all Muslims concerned about equal rights and living in peace. Jim Bennett, of Intercede, a ministry that has worked with and among Muslims for many years, elaborates: "Although orthodox Islam idealizes peace, it has historically been the peace that follows when non-Islamic peoples agree to Islamic rule, accept exclusion from the political process and are prohibited from speaking of their faith to Muslims. While Muslim-dominated societies accept conversion from other faiths, conversion from Islam is forbidden with persecution or even death awaiting offenders." Bennett further explains that while the normal Islamic understanding of *jihad* (literally "struggle") relates to one's personal spiritual struggles, the secondary meaning (or the "lesser *jihad*") is understood to be taking up arms to fight those who oppose God (i.e., Islam). The Muslim world is divided into two realms: *Dar al-Islam* (House of Islam) and *Dar al-Harb* (House of War). For Muslims "the world is a battleground on which believers and unbelievers, the friends of God and the enemies of God or followers of Satan, wage war."⁴ As seen in the Qur'an, what we know of the life of Muhammad, and the Hadith (traditions of Muhammad), this warfare is not always metaphorical.

This is why millions of Muslims can rejoice at an event like the maelstrom of September 11 (such as Palestinians dancing in the streets with joy when they heard the news that Israel's evil ally had been struck). This is also why young children (from 5 to 15 years old) go to training camps to learn how they can become suicide bombers and die as martyrs (*shaheed*) for Allah.⁵

It is true that there are many passages in the Qur'an that speak of living peacefully, but there also are many others that can be (and are by millions of Muslims worldwide) understood to command violent opposition to any outside of the *Dar al-Islam*. Those who speak of the violent side of Islam cite a number of Qur'anic passages, such as: "The punishment of those who wage war against God and His Messenger, and strive with might and main for mischief through the land is: execution, or crucifixion, or cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land" (5:33).⁶

The secular media increasingly has been less sympathetic to, and more analytical of, Islam as well. For example, Salmon Rushdie (who once had a death warrant placed upon him by the Ayatollah Khomeini) answers the assertion that the terrorist attacks of September 11 had nothing to do with Islam: "If this isn't about Islam, why the worldwide Muslim demonstrations in support of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda? Why did those 10,000 men armed with swords and axes mass on the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier, answering some mullah's call to jihad?...This paranoid Islam...is presently the fastest growing version of Islam in the world."⁷

Numerous other journalists have recently been asking much more penetrating questions of the Muslim world, especially in relation to the incredible human rights violations found in most countries where Islam is in the majority. One example of this is seen in the International Religious Freedom Act released at the end of 2001. In an article entitled "Martyred," Kate O'Beirne writes: "This year [2001], as in the past, our Muslim-world partners in the coalition against terrorism were prominently featured among the most violent, most intolerable regimes in the world. Religious minorities are persecuted in over 20 states where Islam is the official or dominant religion. The million Christians who have fled the Muslim world in the past five years were hardly seeking sanctuary from the peaceful face of Islam."⁸

In the *Newsweek* cover article, "The Bible and the Qur'an," Kenneth Woodward succinctly summarizes one vital difference between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity: "Israeli commandos do not cite the Hebrew prophet Joshua as they go into battle, but Muslim insurgents can readily invoke the example of their Prophet, Muhammad, who was a military commander himself. And while the Crusaders may have fought with the cross on their shields, they did not — could not — cite words from Jesus to justify their slaughters."⁹

With the perspective of time, it is becoming increasingly clear that Islam is a complex religion embracing both peace and war, exclusivity and tolerance. While millions of Muslims continue to live in peace with those of other faiths, the militant Muslims look to a very real and historical precedent of force in the name of Allah. The non-Muslim world, Christian or not, is expanding its understanding of Islam, recognizing its militant as well as its peace-loving elements.

-- Joseph P. Gudel

NOTES

1. Aly Lakhanev and Jim Fisher-Thompson, "Scholar Describes Growing Interest in Islam," *The Washington File*, 22 February 2002; www.usinfo.state.gov/usa/islam.
2. Fareed Zakaria, "How to Save the Arab World," *Newsweek*, 24 December 2001, 28.
3. Bob and Gretchen Passantino, "Islam: Moderate and Peace-Loving or Radical and Violent?" *Answers In Action*, 2001, www.answers.org.
4. Jim Bennett, "An Appeal for a Realistic View of Islam," *Intercede*, March–April 2002, 1, 4.
5. Joyce M. Davis, "From Cradle to Grave: Those Who Will Die as Martyrs Are Recruited, Trained as Children," Knight Ridder Report in the *Fort Wayne News Sentinel*, 3 April 2002, sect. A. Also cf., Joyce M. Davis, "A Promise of Heaven: What Motivates Young Palestinians to Become Martyrs to a Cause?" *Fort Wayne News Sentinel*, 3 April 2002, sect. A.
6. Compare Sura 9:5, 29. Muslim scholars and apologists almost always cite the Qur'anic verse, "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (2:256) to prove that Islam is peaceful. If this is true, than why do even "moderate" Muslim nations (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan) have "religious" police who make certain that no one violates religious practices? Why, in Muslim nations ruled by Islamic law (*shar'iah*), is conversion from Islam punishable by death?
7. Salmon Rushdie, in James A. Beverley, "Is Islam a Religion of Peace?" *Christianity Today*, 7 January 2002, 34.
8. Kate O'Beirne, "Martyred," *National Review*, 3 December 2001, 38. A good article detailing the plight of women in Islamic countries is Lisa Beyer, "The Women of Islam," *Time*, 3 December 2001, 50–59. Also, cf. Paul Wiseman, "Seventeen Christians Massacred inside Church in Pakistan," *U.S.A. Today*, 29 October 2001, sect. A; Beverley, 40; "The Jihad Trail," The Christian Broadcasting Network, 2001 (video).
9. Kenneth L. Woodward, "In the Beginning There Were the Holy Books," *Newsweek*, 11 February 2002, 53.