

# ISLAM UNVEILED

DISTURBING QUESTIONS ABOUT  
THE WORLD'S FASTEST-GROWING FAITH

R O B E R T S P E N C E R

FOREWORD BY DAVID PRYCE-JONES

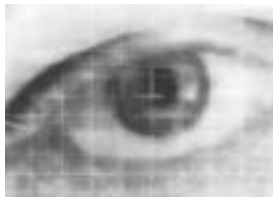


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## Foreword

MOST PEOPLE IN THE WEST KNOW VIRTUALLY nothing about Islam. A few may visit one or another Muslim country as tourists or perhaps on business, and find that the inhabitants, hospitable and vivacious, seem to be getting on with their lives like everybody else. The events of September 11 therefore appeared to come from nowhere. What was this holy war against the United States and the West, this jihad, declared by Osama bin Laden, and how was it possible that to the Arab and wider Muslim world he became an instant popular hero because he had organized the murder of several thousand innocent people in New York and Washington? Westerners in general, and perhaps Americans in particular, had little or no idea that there were Muslims out there who so hated them, and little or no idea either of the causes of that hate.

In a series of interviews and statements, bin Laden made it clear that in attacking the United States he saw himself as a Muslim doing God's work. And that is the reason why so many Muslims from Beirut and Baghdad to Indonesia cheered and danced in the streets at the news of September 11. Leaders and opinion makers including President George W. Bush, however, were quick to assert that bin Laden was a terrorist pure and simple, whose actions were a violation of Islam rather than a natural expression of it. Islam, these leaders maintained, is essentially a peaceful religion.

Apologetics of this kind served a useful purpose. At a time of tension and potential backlash, it was right to ensure that innocent Muslims were not held guilty by association. But in *Islam Unveiled*, Robert Spencer now argues that indeed bin Laden sincerely meant what he said, and that he and the millions of Muslims who admire him find sanction

in Islam. Far from being extremists or perverters of the faith, they interpret its tenets correctly.

From its inception, Islam has been a revealed religion with a text, the Qur'an, which is considered the Word of God and therefore sacrosanct. The Prophet Muhammad, founder of Islam, and then the caliphs who immediately succeeded him at a time of war and imperial expansion, were simultaneously head of state and religious leader. Down the centuries, and still today, in spite of exposure to nationalism and the formation of a variety of nation states, that combination has remained an ideal form of governance for many Muslims. Islam has never known the separation of church and state which has determined the political and social evolution of the West, leading as it does from absolutism to democracy, from obedience to civil rights and from blind faith to reason. Judaism and Christianity were also originally revealed religions. The Reformation and the Enlightenment were the most well-known manifestations of a long process of rational inquiry that gradually altered the general understanding of the relation between church and state, permitting the concessions and compromises toward those of other faiths upon which a civil society rests.

For many centuries, absolutism served Islam well enough, and there are great achievements to show for it, such as the science and architecture of the Muslim Middle Ages. Certain of their superiority, Muslims felt they had nothing to learn from the despised and barbarian West. By the time they realized that this was a mistake of historic proportions, it was too late to do anything about it. Stultified in their absolutism, altogether backward, Muslims and their lands were almost entirely overrun by one or another Western empire. This prolonged contact with the West has changed the landscape with such physical features as oil wells and airports and skyscrapers, but only a minority of individuals have adopted Western values and ways of thinking.

Through the twentieth century, Muslims struggled to regain control of their history from the Western empires. In the outcome they won their independence, but not their freedom. Absolutism remains the rule. Some Muslim countries have religious rulers, others have nationalist and secular rulers, but all (with the doubtful exception of Turkey) are despotisms, in which the rule of law is a matter to be negotiated. Everywhere the secret police and the military are an ominous presence. This is what inhibits the creative energies of Muslims and prevents them doing justice to themselves. Anyone who knows Muslim countries, however, will

also be aware that the rigidity of Islamic doctrine conflicts with the actual daily conduct of Muslims. The imam or mullah who comes beseeching for a bottle of whisky or a bribe is a familiar figure, and so is the rabid anti-Western Islamic extremist who asks how to get his son into an Ivy League university. Hypocrisy smoothes the rough surfaces of every society, and perhaps there is more to rejoice in that than to blame.

Ernest Renan, who founded the study of comparative religion more than a century ago, thought that Islam was the engine of this spiritual and temporal despotism, describing it as “the heaviest chains that ever shackled humanity.” Robert Spencer follows in that tradition. To him, the concept that the Qur’an is a perfect book leads to anti-intellectualism. Certainly there have been no Islamic Renans; and exegesis of the sacred text as practiced by Christians and Jews would be blasphemous. The result, as Spencer puts it, is that “bigotry, fanaticism and plain ignorance are rooted in some of the central tenets of Islam.” There is no scope for questioning the absolutism inherent in the faith and its accompanying Islamic society, or for reforming the injustices deriving from it.

One unequal relationship postulated by Islam is that between men and women, and another is between master and slave. Robert Spencer may sound polemical on these topics, but he is only reporting the reality. Women in Islam are victimized by the Sharia, or Islamic law, which privileges men in numerous social and legal instances, and in some countries they are further victimized by customs such as polygamy and female circumcision. As for slavery, it still survives in a few Arab countries including Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Mauritania.

A third unequal relationship goes back to the origins of Islam, when Muslims conquered other peoples, then put them to the sword, converted them or offered them the choice of becoming *dhimmi*, that is, second-class citizens suffering social and financial impositions that did not affect Muslims, but protected by the state in return. The assumption of Muslim superiority and *dhimmi* inferiority underlay the rightful ordering of the Islamic world. In the modern age, however, such an assumption evidently became absurd. Twin reactions have followed in the House of Islam: self-pity at finding itself in such backwardness, and hatred of those thought to be responsible for it. Inflamed by this mindset, Muslims all around the perimeter of the Islamic world are fighting their neighbors of other religions—Hindus in India, Communist and Buddhist Chinese, Jews, Christians in a score of countries, and pagan animists in

Africa. In this light, it is wishful thinking to bracket Islam and peace.

It is, or ought to be, an unarguable and universal truth that Muslims and their neighbors should meet on equal terms. Should Muslims instead follow the likes of bin Laden and other extremists, insisting on inequality and the enforcement of absolutism, they will have to be resisted, if need be militarily. Muslims themselves will have to find the way out of this dilemma of their own making. Elsewhere I have called for the Muslim equivalent of an Andrei Sakharov and a Solzhenitsyn, brave and challenging thinkers who showed their fellow Russians how to escape from the dead end of absolutism, to democratize and modernize.

Robert Spencer doesn't see much prospect of such an eventuality. He tends to believe that the West has so lost confidence in itself and its spiritual, cultural and political values that it is defenseless before violence—in which case absolutism will triumph and the Muslim fantasy of superiority will come true. In its own lively style, this book puts down a strong and significant marker to what lies ahead, as Islam and the rest of the world strive to come to terms.

—David Pryce-Jones



# What Does Islam Really Stand For?

BY NOW EVERYONE HAS HEARD THAT “Islam means peace.” Everyone up to and including the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Great Britain has been saying so ever since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Yet open the pages of Islam’s holy book, the Qur’an, and you find statements like this: *Slay the pagans wherever you find them.* Such commands inspire people like Amir Maawia Siddiqi, the Pakistani son of a small businessman, to take oaths like this: “I, Amir Maawia Siddiqi, son of Abdul Rahman Siddiqi, state in the presence of God that I will slaughter infidels my entire life. . . . May God give me strength in fulfilling this oath.”<sup>1</sup>

The dissonance between the prevailing conventional wisdom and the Qur’anic injunction to slay “pagans” calls for a deeper investigation into Islam’s commitment to peace, and it encapsulates a set of larger problems with the West’s perceptions of Islam.

Most Americans got their first taste of contemporary Islamic terrorism at the Munich Olympics of 1972, when Muslim terrorists murdered Israeli athletes. But at that time observers, both Western and Middle Eastern, assured us that this attack had nothing to do with true Islam, that it was simply another skirmish in the protracted war between Israel and Palestine. We have heard this line again since then. In 1979, Muslims stormed the U.S. embassy in Iran and took fifty-two hostages. Once more we were advised that this had nothing to do with Islam, but instead was an expression of the rage that Iranian citizens felt toward the American government for its support of the hated shah. When a Muslim suicide bomber blew up a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 and killed 241 Americans, news analysts again explained that this had nothing to do with Islam per se; it was another purely political matter.

Over and over, the counterpoint between violence and exculpation has been repeated: when Muslim terrorists threw the elderly, wheelchair-bound Leon Klinghoffer to his death off the hijacked cruise ship *Achille Lauro* in 1985; when militant Muslims first bombed the World Trade Center in 1993; when they killed nineteen American soldiers in the bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996; when they bombed the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998; when they bombed the USS *Cole* in 2000. Each time that Muslim terrorists struck, Americans hastened to assure themselves and the world: We know this is not real Islam; we know these terrorists are hijacking the religion of peace.

This chorus swelled after September 11. George W. Bush, Tony Blair and virtually every other Western leader insisted that their shadowy foe in this strange new war was not Islam, but terrorism, and that the relationship between the two was only coincidental.

Among the Western heads of state, only Italy's Silvio Berlusconi was out of step: "We must be aware of the superiority of our civilisation, a system that has guaranteed well-being, respect for human rights and—in contrast with Islamic countries—respect for religious and political rights, a system that has as its value understanding of diversity and tolerance."<sup>2</sup> But the West, apparently, was aware of no such thing, for Berlusconi's pronouncement set off an international furor. Guy Verhofstadt, Prime Minister of Belgium and president of the European Union, lit into Berlusconi for inciting reprisals from Muslims: "These remarks could, in a dangerous way, have consequences. I can hardly believe that the Italian prime minister made such statements. . . . Rather than bringing civilisations together, they could feed a feeling of humiliation."<sup>3</sup> Berlusconi then backed away from his remarks with the all-purpose dodge that they were "taken out of context."

Silvio Berlusconi gained an unlikely ally several months later in American evangelist and sometime presidential candidate Pat Robertson. On CNN's *Late Edition* Robertson said, "I have taken issue with our esteemed president in regard to his stand in saying Islam is a peaceful religion. It's just not. And the Koran makes it very clear, if you see an infidel, you are to kill him. That's what it says. Now that doesn't sound very peaceful to me."

This, too, elicited outrage. For example, the *Washington Post* wondered: "Is Mr. Robertson trying to start a pogrom? If so, he's headed in the right direction." A pogrom! There was exquisite irony in the choice



of terms. But the *Post* was more worried about violence from anti-Muslim Americans than from Muslims:

These sorts of words aren't innocent talk—particularly not when broadcast into millions of homes by a religious leader to whom many look for moral guidance. This country has seen several serious attacks against innocent Muslims, and those taken for Muslims, in recent months. That there have not been more is a testament both to the seriousness of law enforcement in responding to attacks and, more important, to the insistence of leaders across the political spectrum—starting with President Bush—that this country is at war neither with Islam nor with its Muslim citizens. Against that backdrop, the Robertson statement is astonishingly irresponsible.<sup>4</sup>

The responses to Berlusconi and Robertson both stressed the potency of ideas as inducements to action—in this case, Western action harmful to Muslims. But ideas have consequences within the Muslim world as well. What ideas in Islam lead so easily to terrorism? Why is the Islamic religion such a fertile breeding ground for violence?

The politically correct answer is that all religions, or at least the three great monotheistic faiths, have a murderous edge, perhaps tamed or muted for a time, but always there on the fringes. “There are Jews and Christians who justify violence with reference to their religion,” noted the *Post*.

That is historically true; but what the *Post* neglected to mention is that in this day, neither Judaism nor Christianity has any violent organization equaling the al-Qaeda network, or Hezbollah, or Islamic Jihad, or Hamas, or any of the myriad other Muslim terrorist groups. The occasional abortion clinic bomber or the Jewish Defense League is hauled out when needed to illustrate Christian and Jewish violence, but they are nothing compared with Osama bin Laden's organization.

Is the connection between these groups and Islam merely accidental? Does it result from political pressures in the Muslim world? If political conditions were different, might the world be afflicted with hundreds of thousands of Christian terrorists, instead of Muslim ones? Or is there something about Islam itself that gives rise to this sort of thing?

Few have cared, or dared, to deal with this question openly and honestly. The reasons for this curious silence are manifold and revealing. One Middle Eastern scholar was recently quoted in the *New York Times*

as observing that: “Between fear and political correctness, it’s not possible to say anything other than sugary nonsense about Islam.”<sup>5</sup> Political correctness is one thing, but fear? What are people like this professor—who declined to be identified—afraid of? Professional censure? Disapproval? Firing? No—these anxieties are the luxuries of academics in other fields. Scholars who dare to depart from “sugary nonsense” about Islam have more basic fears.

The experience of scholar Christoph Luxenberg indicates that such fears are not groundless. Luxenberg wrote a scholarly book suggesting that the Qur’an, the sacred book of Islam, has been mistranslated and misinterpreted by Muslims themselves. His work may be likened to that of the Christian deconstructionists of the Jesus Seminar, who challenge and occasionally attack traditional dogmas in trying to determine whether Jesus actually said and did what the New Testament reports. But there’s a crucial difference. According to the *New York Times*, “Christoph Luxenberg is a pseudonym, and his scholarly tome ‘The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran’ had trouble finding a publisher, although it is considered a major new work by several leading scholars in the field.” No scholar of the Jesus Seminar has ever felt a need to hide behind a pseudonym, or even had trouble getting his work published. In fact, in the publish-or-perish world of modern academia, it’s virtually inconceivable that any professor would even consider using a pseudonym.

Luxenberg may have been trying to avoid suffering the fate of another scholar, Suliman Bashear, who “argued that Islam developed as a religion gradually rather than emerging fully formed from the mouth of the Prophet.” For this his Muslim students in the University of Nablus in the West Bank threw him out of a second-story window.<sup>6</sup> Most notoriously, novelist Salman Rushdie was sentenced to death by Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini for portraying Muhammad and the early days of Islam in an unflattering light.

By contrast, Bertrand Russell did not have a bounty on his head after writing *Why I Am Not a Christian*. Episcopalian bishop John Shelby Spong gained notoriety for challenging virtually every traditional belief of Christianity, but has not been punished with defenestration. The famous atheist Madalyn Murray O’Hair was murdered, it is true, but this was for her money, not for her blasphemy. In fact, these people and others like them have won respect in some circles, being hailed for their intellectual courage and honesty. Some have even enjoyed a certain vogue.

Certainly they have sparked controversy, sometimes quite heated. But they haven't lived in fear for their lives.

Speaking freely about Islam clearly is more risky. But difficult questions must be asked—and answered—if the West is going to face the terrorist threat adequately. For if there are elements of Islam itself that engender violence, it is neither irresponsible nor hateful to say so. This is not in order to incite thugs to attack Muslims on the street, but to look squarely at what the West is really up against.

In that connection, the following chapters also look closely into the Islamic world's human rights record, its treatment of women, and some noteworthy elements of the moral code that Muslims take from the Qur'an and the example of Muhammad. I explore the question of why Islam was once a fertile soil for the flourishing of science and culture, but is no longer—and what this change entails for present-day relations between Islam and the West. Another historical question with important implications for our own age concerns the vaunted Islamic tolerance of religious minorities, which virtually all observers agree was considerably greater than that shown by the Christian societies of pre-modern Europe. Likewise, I look into the Crusades, that perennial focus of shame for the West, to evaluate whether the role they have been assigned in the contemporary debate—as evidence of the (once and future) rapacity and imperialism of the West—is actually justified.

In so doing, I do not mean to exonerate the modern, secular West any more than to indict Muslims in general or Islam as a whole. Indeed, there is a great deal to love in Islamic culture, literature and music. Islam is not a monolith, and the culture it has inspired has bestowed great beauty upon the world. But these facts should not preempt further analysis on a question of tremendous importance to the future of the West: whether Islam can be secularized, purged of its martial elements, and brought into a framework of cultural and religious pluralism.

I must emphasize here at the outset that my intention is in no way to focus hate upon Muslims. At a personal level, I have known quite a few Muslims whose personal charity puts me to shame. Any reasonable person understands that a criticism of Islam is not an attack on all those who adhere to that faith. If the seeds of terrorism are found to lie at the heart of Islam, that does not make every Muslim a terrorist, nor does it excuse any injustice toward Muslims. Today, Palestinians and other Muslims in fact suffer wrongs that cannot be justified. But in the chapters to

come—a step beyond wishful thinking—we will consider whether Islam itself in some way exacerbates the conflicts in which these wrongs occur.



## Is Islam a Religion of Peace?

“ISLAM IS PEACE.”

George W. Bush went to a mosque to say it late in 2001. The September 11 terrorist attacks, he averred, “violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith.” In his September 20 address to Congress, he elaborated: “The terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics—a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam.”<sup>1</sup>

The President’s counterpart in London, Prime Minister Tony Blair, concurred: September 11, he said flatly, “has nothing to do with Islam.”

In 1998, President Bill Clinton had made a similar pronouncement in a speech before the United Nations:

Many believe there is an inevitable clash between Western civilization and Western values, and Islamic civilizations and values. I believe this view is terribly wrong. False prophets may use and abuse any religion to justify whatever political objectives they have—even cold-blooded murder. Some may have the world believe that almighty God himself, the merciful, grants a license to kill. But that is not our understanding of Islam. . . . Americans respect and honor Islam.<sup>2</sup>

Of course Americans should respect and honor Muslims, like all people. But does Islam teach Muslims to return the courtesy? Is George Bush right in saying that the terror of September 11 represented only a “fringe form of Islamic extremism”?

Certain assumptions are so ingrained that it is difficult even to notice their presence. In the contemporary Western world, one such assumption is that all religions are fundamentally benign—in other words, essentially like Christianity. Westerners are fond of assuming that because

Islam is (like Christianity) a religion, it must be (like Christianity) peaceful at its heart. And just as Christianity has its belligerent fundamentalists who misunderstand and distort its message of peace, so does Islam.<sup>3</sup>

Western commentators these days are fond of pointing out that Muslims, like Christians, worship one God only, respect Jesus and Mary, and base their faith on a book considered to be the revealed Word of God, which contains stories of Adam and Abraham and Moses and David. One prominent scholar of Islam, Karen Armstrong, notes: “Constantly the Quran points out that Muhammad had not come to cancel the older religions, to contradict their prophets or to start a new faith. His message is the same as that of Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, or Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> Armstrong, indeed, even blames Christians for the misapprehension that Islam is not a peaceful religion:

Ever since the Crusades, the people of Western Christendom developed a stereotypical and distorted vision of Islam, which they regarded as the enemy of decent civilization. . . . It was, for example, during the Crusades, when it was Christians who had instigated a series of brutal holy wars against the Muslim world, that Islam was described by the learned scholar-monks of Europe as an inherently violent and intolerant faith, which had only been able to establish itself by the sword. The myth of the supposed fanatical intolerance of Islam has become one of the received ideas of the West.<sup>5</sup>

If Islam truly is peaceful, then of course President Bush is right: the terrorists who attacked America must be acting against the principles of their own religion. That was the assumption at CNN when, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the network posted this poll question on its website: “Should a religion be judged by the acts of its followers?”<sup>6</sup> For Westerners with Christian backgrounds—that is, most Westerners—it was a loaded question. With public opinion running high against Islam, the media was keeping up steady pressure on what it saw as unenlightened religious bigotry. If Christianity shouldn’t be judged by the sins of particular Christians, then Islam shouldn’t be judged by the sins of those Muslims who hijacked planes and rammed them into buildings full of innocent people.

It seems a reasonable enough caveat. But the reality is more complicated. Islam is indeed like Christianity in many ways, but in others it is as different as the sun is from the moon.

## Who Speaks for Islam?

It all depends on whom you ask.

To some Muslims, the terrorist attacks on America violated the fundamental tenets of Islam and the plain words of the Qur'an. To some, they didn't. This is not a matter of learned Muslims looking askance while the uneducated, inflamed by the self-serving propaganda of extremist leaders, cheer for the cameras in Palestine as they watch replays of the planes hitting their targets. In fact, it's the learned Muslims who are split on the issue of terrorism.

This, in large part, results from the nature of authority in Islam. The religion has no central authority beyond the Qur'an, the holy book that Muslims believe was given by the one almighty God, Allah, to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. There is no supreme Islamic teacher who can tell Muslims—and the world—what Islam is and what it isn't. This makes for a multiplicity of voices in Islam, all appealing to Qur'anic authority and claiming to speak for true Islam.

This multiplicity is not the same as the Protestant idea that the believer can read the Bible and work out the truth on his own. Just as Protestant groups in practice developed their own traditions for interpreting the Bible and applying its message to their lives, so individual Muslims are guided in their communities to a right understanding of their sacred book. In Sunni Islam, which comprises over 85 percent of Muslim believers worldwide, a certain teaching authority is invested in the *ulama*: the (often national) community of muftis, the teachers and scholars of the Qur'an and Sunnah, or Muslim traditions, whose *fatwas*, or legal rulings on matters open to question or dispute, are generally accepted by believers.<sup>7</sup>

But the muftis don't all agree about terrorism.

Some Muslim leaders have indeed condemned bin Laden's attacks outright. Saudi Arabia's Sheikh Saalih al-Lehaydaan, the head of the Islamic judiciary in a country that knows no law outside of Islam, declared: "Killing a person who has not committed a crime is one of the major sins and terrible crimes. . . . What happened in America is . . . undoubtedly a grave criminal act which Islam does not approve of and no one should applaud."<sup>8</sup>

Another prominent Saudi teacher of the faith, Sheikh Saalih as-Suhaymee, agreed. He observed in his fatwa that Muslims are forbidden

from “killing women, children, the elderly.” He addressed a popular Muslim claim when he went on to say that this prohibition still holds “despite the fact that the associates of these categories of people may be involved in fighting with the Muslims.” He thus concluded that the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, because they killed “none but innocent non-Muslims and Muslims, from all the various parts of the world, of different races,” were “not permissible.” In fact, “Islam does not allow [this kind of attack] in any form whatsoever.” He even claimed that “none of the scholars” who hold “the correct form of Islam, affirm the likes of these actions.”<sup>9</sup>

But this sheikh could establish no unanimity for his “correct form of Islam.” Some other Muslim leaders did agree with him—to a point. One was Sheikh Omar bin Bakri bin Muhammad, the judge of Great Britain’s Sharia, or Islamic law court, secretary general of the Islamic World League, and spokesman for the International Islamic Front for Europe, as well as founder of the radical international Muslim group al-Muhajiroun. On its website al-Muhajiroun posted a fatwa by Sheikh Omar, saying that, yes, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were “a crime and violation for the sanctity of Human beings [*sic*] which is prohibited in Islam.” They were a crime even though the “US Government and its Military forces are a legitimate target as far as Islam is concerned.” Muslims can legitimately attack American troops, Sheikh Omar explained, because the United States is “engaging in aggression and atrocities” against Muslims in Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan and Sudan—and because of American support for “the Pirate State of Israel and the dictator Leaders in the Muslim world.” Nevertheless, he tended to agree with the Saudi sheikh on the matter of noncombatants: “it is not a justification to attack American People because Islam forbid us to fight people because of their Nationality, Color, etc. . . . rather because of their aggression or occupation [*sic*].”

Yet this same imam, when asked what lessons Muslims could draw from the attacks on the United States, passed up the opportunity to instruct his coreligionists in how they could have responded to this “American aggression” without committing a crime in the eyes of Allah. Instead, all the lessons he drew were directed squarely at the Great Satan itself. The attacks, explained Sheikh Omar, were a consequence of “atrocities and the aggression committed by the US Government and its forces against the third World in general and the Muslim World.” Going beyond



even Osama bin Laden, this influential divine enumerated atrocities including not only American support of Israel, the occupation of Somalia and the bombing of Iraq and Sudan, but also the occupation of “Muslim land in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt and Turkey.”

He further condemned Western governments and media as “people who victimize Muslims and Islam.” The Western powers, explained the sheikh, are indifferent to “Muslim lives and blood.” He pointed out that the attacks showed that Muslims had the “determination to die for a just cause.” They “shake the arrogance of the Western Government and undermine their claims to be invulnerable country in the World [*sic*].”

The success of the attacks, Sheikh Omar concluded, showed that “there is no defense system could stand in the way of the determination of a person who wants to become a Martyr.”<sup>10</sup> His conception of a martyr, it should be noted, differs from the common Western idea, derived from Christianity. A Christian martyr is someone who is killed for his faith, without bringing his own death upon himself. The notion of a “martyr” as someone who kills others viewed as enemies of the faith, and in the process gets himself killed, is a distinctly Islamic construct.

Sheikh Omar’s pronouncements about the reasons for the attack aren’t too far removed from those voiced by icons of the left such as Noam Chomsky and Susan Sontag; though presumably they didn’t intend to inspire young men to dedicate themselves to destroying the Great Satan.

Meanwhile, Osama bin Laden’s favorite imams went even further. In the celebrated video in which bin Laden, for all intents and purposes, admitted complicity in the September 11 terrorism, he asked his guest: “What is the stand of the Mosques there [in Saudi Arabia]?” The sheikh who had come to pay homage to the terrorist mastermind replied, “Honestly, they are very positive.” One prominent Saudi sheikh, he said, “gave a good sermon in his class after the sunset prayers. . . . His position is really very encouraging.” Another, said the sheikh, “gave a beautiful fatwa, may Allah bless him.”<sup>11</sup>

On the thorniest question arising from the terrorist attacks, this second sheikh disagreed absolutely with those who condemned the attacks because they killed innocents: “This was jihad and those people were not innocent people [World Trade Center and Pentagon victims]. He swore to Allah.”<sup>12</sup>

## The Wahhabis

Those who defend Islam say that these pro–bin Laden Saudis are Wahhabis, and that this explains their hard line.

The Wahhabis are the notoriously strict Muslim sect that holds sway in Saudi Arabia and maintains a haughty sense of superiority over the rest of the Muslim world. Founded by the Sunni reformist Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abdul al-Wahhab (ca. 1700–1792), the Wahhabis purport to restore the purity of Islam by rejecting all innovations that occurred after the third Islamic century—that is, around the year 950. (Presumably Islamic practice before that date could be directly traced to the words and actions of the Prophet, but after that the connection to Muhammad becomes more tenuous.)

The most visible consequence of this reform is that Wahhabi mosques lack minarets, but the Wahhabis cut far deeper into the Islamic consciousness than that. Al-Wahhab rejected the widespread Sunni practice of venerating Muslim saints, calling it a species of *shirk*, the cardinal Muslim sin of worshipping created beings along with Allah. Based largely on this perception, he declared all non-Wahhabi Muslims to be unbelievers, and waged *jihad*, or holy war, against them. Wahhabi fortunes waxed and waned throughout the nineteenth century, but in 1932 the Wahhabi Sheikh Ibn Saud captured Riyadh and established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on Wahhabi principles.

Other Muslim groups, in turn, despise the Wahhabis and deny their claim to represent anything like true or pure Islam. One Muslim characterized the Wahhabis venomously as unprincipled opportunists:

While claiming to be adherents to “authentic” Sunnah [Muslim tradition], these deviants are quick to label anyone who opposes their beliefs . . . as “sufi,” [that is, akin to adherents of the mystical Sufi sect, elements of which Wahhabis and other Muslims consider heretical] while exploiting the Muslims’ love for Islam by overexaggerating the phrase “Qur’an and Sunnah” in their senseless rhetoric.<sup>13</sup>

Many Western scholars blame the Wahhabis almost exclusively for terrorism, while maintaining a sharp distinction between Islam in its Wahhabi form and the genuine article. Journalist Stephen Schwartz, for instance, calls Wahhabism “the main form of Islamic fundamentalism.” He asserts that “fundamentalism was always a tendency in Islam, as in

every other religion, but did not gain permanent influence until the 18th century and the rise of Wahhabism.” The Wahhabis, he says, prosper on Saudi oil money and an American military presence. If their funding were cut off, they would “dwindle to a feeble remnant,” and presumably terrorism would decline as well.<sup>14</sup>

Certainly Wahhabis have generously supported terrorists. The Saudi government’s affection for the Taliban is well documented. But the problem of Islamic terror is not simply the problem of the Wahhabis. There are disquieting signs that Muslim terror is much more broadly based. It is precisely the Wahhabis’ claim to represent pure Islam that has inspired Muslim groups from North Africa to Indonesia—and gives the Wahhabis and their spiritual kin resilience and staying power. As former education secretary William J. Bennett has said, Islam itself “is not without its deeply problematic aspects, particularly when it comes to relations with non-Muslims. The superiority of Islam to other religions, the idea that force is justified in defending and spreading the faith—these teachings have been given high visibility in Wahhabism, but they are authentic teachings.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Wahhabi Opponents, Terror Allies**

Ten days after the attacks, al-Muhajiroun held a press conference in Lahore, Pakistan. This group was founded by Britain’s Sheikh Omar bin Bakri bin Muhammad as an “Islamic Intellectual and a Political organization” that is “working to establish Islam in its totality wherever we are, through an Intellectual and a Political struggle.”<sup>16</sup> Sheikh Omar is no Wahhabi; in fact, he calls the Wahhabi king of Saudi Arabia “the pirate ruler of the pirate state of so-called Saudi-Arabia.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, his organization had no trouble declaring its sympathies for bin Laden.

At the Lahore press conference, al-Muhajiroun issued a declaration that said nothing at all about whether the September 11 terrorist attacks were legal or not. Instead, it simply took them as an occasion to declare world war:

1. The Shariah [Islamic law] verdict dictates that the life and wealth of anyone who attacks Muslims has no sanctity. [That is, those who are considered to have attacked Muslims can be killed at any time, with the murderer incurring no legal or moral penalty.]

2. We call upon the Muslims to side with their Muslim brothers in Afghanistan and engage in Jihad against USA and target their government and military installations.
3. We warn the West to be ready for a World War against Islam in which they will suffer not only militarily but also economically.

Although it distinguishes between soldiers and civilians (without reference to or apology for the killing of noncombatants on September 11), the document warns that Muslim warriors will make no distinction between “soldiers fighting against the Taliban or soldiers relaxing in the US,” for “this war is not a war against Terrorism but rather this is a war against Islam.” Accordingly, “This war will not be restricted to this region but rather this war will, unless the aggressors withdraw from the Muslim lands, encapsulate the entire world. No country will escape the effects of this war.”<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, Hassan Butt, a leader of al-Muhajiroun, told the BBC early in 2002 that British Muslims trained by the Taliban who had survived the American bombings would soon return to the sceptered isle—chastened not a whit. There they would “take military action” against “British military and government institutes, as well as British military and government individuals.”<sup>19</sup>

Ominous as all this is, even more so is the silence of so-called “moderate” Muslim clerics—that is, clerics who are about as far from Wahhabism as an imam can get. An alarming number of imams in the Western world simply said nothing about the September 11 attacks, or sent out a vague statement that could be interpreted favorably by both sides. Few have stood up and said in so many words that they condoned the terrorist acts, but few have condemned them either.

There have been, of course, notable exceptions. Sheikh Abdul Hadi Palazzi, the secretary general of the Italian Muslim Association, led the Italian Muslim leadership to condemn Palestinian suicide bombings in no uncertain terms: “In defense of a wicked regime [Yasir Arafat’s Palestinian Authority], innocent ignorant children are sent to be killed in criminal actions. . . . This regime even dares to declare that Islam approves of these criminal acts.”<sup>20</sup>

Yet a chorus of imams did not join Palazzi. The strange silence was noted within the Muslim community. For instance, the Egyptian Muslim journalist Mona Eltahawy declared in early 2002, “Moderate and

progressive Muslims must speak out. . . . It is no longer enough for the clerics to issue tired platitudes on how Islam means peace. . . . Where were they when Osama bin Laden and his coalition of terrorists vowed to target every American man, woman and child? We have to look inward and ask ourselves: What in Islam, what in the way it is practiced today, allowed bin Laden to promote his murderous message?<sup>21</sup>

Even some of those clerics who appeared with President Bush in the wake of the attacks had skeletons in their closets. The president of the American Muslim Council, Abdurahman Alamoudi, joined Bush at a prayer service for the victims; but not quite a year before September 11, 2001, he had said to a Muslim group, “Hear that, Bill Clinton! We are all supporters of Hamas. I wish they add that I am also a supporter of Hizballah [*sic*].”<sup>22</sup> According to news reports, Alamoudi wasn’t the only one who took that position:

Also invited to the prayer service attended by Alamoudi after the attacks was Muzzammil Siddiqi, the spiritual leader of the Islamic Society of Orange County. At that service, Siddiqi prayed: “keep our country strong for the sake of the good.” Only a year earlier, Siddiqi was an organizer of the rally where Alamoudi expressed support for HAMAS and Hezbollah. Then, Siddiqi said, “The United States of America is directly and indirectly responsible for the plight of the Palestinian people. If you remain on the side of injustice the wrath of God will come.”

Confronted with this, Siddiqi pleaded ignorance. Even though he had been one of the rally’s organizers, Siddiqi claimed that he “was not aware of all the speakers at the rally and doesn’t support the extremist viewpoints some expressed.” Evidently it isn’t extremist to invoke the wrath of God; it’s only extremist to be the agent of this wrath. Said Siddiqi, “I don’t support Hezbollah and HAMAS. I don’t support any terrorist groups. Terrorism is not what Islam teaches.”<sup>23</sup> Yet apparently what the terrorists teach is not so foreign to Islam as to bring Siddiqi or anyone else to want to keep these groups from appearing at the rally.

Another Muslim who prayed with Bush was Hamza Yusuf, a California-based imam:

On Sept. 20, FBI agents showed up at the house of Hamza Yusuf, a Muslim teacher and speaker in Northern California. They wanted to question him about a speech he had given two days before the Sept. 11 attacks,

in which he said that the U.S. “stands condemned” and that “this country has a great, great tribulation coming to it.”

“He’s not home,” his wife said. “He’s with the president.”

The agents thought she was joking, Yusuf said. But she wasn’t. That day Yusuf was at the White House, the only Muslim in a group of religious leaders invited to pray with President Bush, sing “God Bless America,” and endorse the president’s plans for military action.

To his credit, Hamza Yusuf says the attacks were sobering: “This has been a wake-up call for me as well, in that I feel in some ways there is a complicity, that we have allowed a discourse centered in anger.”<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, Muslim crowds worldwide were hardly condemning the attacks. Besides the now-infamous Palestinians dancing in the streets for CNN’s cameramen at the news that the World Trade Center towers had collapsed, demonstrators around the world chanted their approval. These people were not all Wahhabis or uneducated mobs. “Reporters from Arab shores,” according to Johns Hopkins University professor Fouad Ajami, “tell us of affluent men and women, some with years of education in American universities behind them, celebrating the cruel deed of Muhammad Atta and his hijackers.” A Libyan told the *New York Times*: “September 11 was the happiest day of my life.”<sup>25</sup>

As crowds chanted their approval of bin Laden’s terrorism, even imams who condemned the terrorist attacks declined opportunities to condemn also the imams who approved of the attacks—a fact with enormous significance for the Bush/Blair attempts to portray the terrorists as a fringe group within Islam. Soon after September 11, for example, Jake Tapper of the Internet magazine *Salon* tried to get the communications director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), an American Muslim named Ibrahim Hooper, to speak out against Osama bin Laden. Hooper ducked:

“We condemn terrorism, we condemn the attack on the buildings,” Hooper said. But why not condemn bin Laden by name, especially after President Bush has now stated that he was clearly responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks? “If Osama bin Laden was behind it, we condemn him by name,” Hooper said. But why the “if”—why qualify the response? Hooper said he resented the question. And what about prior acts of terror linked to bin Laden? Or that bin Laden has urged Muslims to kill Americans? Again,

Hooper demurred, saying only that he condemns acts of terror. Both groups [CAIR and the American Muslim Council] also refuse to outright condemn Islamic terrorist groups Hamas and Hezbollah.<sup>26</sup>

Why?

Perhaps a clue lies in the nature of the book that all Muslims regard as their supreme authority: the Qur'an.

### **The Centrality of the Qur'an**

When Nobel Prize winner V. S. Naipaul traveled into the lands of Islam in 1979, on a seven-month expedition he recorded in his book *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*, he had an encounter in Pakistan that concisely illustrated Muslim attitudes toward the Qur'an. When a Pakistani government official told a colleague that Naipaul wanted to see "Islam in action," the colleague responded, "He should read the Koran."<sup>27</sup>

The Qur'an is the highest authority in Islam, believed by Muslims to have been dictated by Allah and delivered to the Prophet Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel. The Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr of George Washington University explains: "The Quran constitutes the alpha and omega of the Islamic religion in the sense that all that is Islamic, whether it be its laws, its thought, its spiritual and ethical teachings and even its artistic manifestations, have their roots in the explicit or implicit teachings of the Sacred Text."<sup>28</sup>

The Qur'an's authority in the Muslim world far surpasses the authority the Bible has held in the West. An Islamic introduction to the study of the Qur'an calls the book a "protective haven and lasting gift of bliss, excellent argument and conclusive proof." Moreover, "it cures the heart's fear, and makes just determinations whenever there is doubt. It is lucid speech, and final word, not facetiousness; a lamp whose light never extinguishes . . . an ocean whose depths will never be fathomed. Its oratory stuns reason . . . it combines concise succinctness and inimitable expression."<sup>29</sup> Because it contains laws as well as dogmas, the Qur'an is the Muslim's fundamental guide to living. "More than representing the supreme embodiment of the sacred beliefs of Islam, its bible and its guiding light," says another Muslim scholar, "the Qur'an constitutes the Muslim's main reference not only for matters spiritual but also for the mundane requirements of day to day living."<sup>30</sup>

Muslims have a tremendous affection and reverence for the Qur'an as the speech of almighty God. In the words of the English Muslim convert Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, it is an "inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy."<sup>31</sup> Its poetic character is legendary. Some of the suras that Muhammad gave to his followers at Mecca early in his prophetic career are hypnotically powerful even in translation:

When the sun ceases to shine;  
 when the stars fall down and the mountains are blown away;  
 when camels big with young are left untended,  
     and the wild beasts are brought together;  
 when the seas are set alight and men's souls are reunited;  
 when the infant girl, buried alive, is asked for what crime she was  
     slain;<sup>32</sup>  
 when the records of men's deeds are laid open, and heaven is stripped  
     bare;  
 when Hell burns fiercely and Paradise is brought near:  
 then each soul shall know what it has done. (Sura 81:1-14)

Qur'anic rhythms are captivating even to the listener who does not understand Arabic; many a non-Muslim through the centuries has remarked on the singular appeal of the Qur'an chanted.

Muslims speak of the Qur'an's mesmerizing quality as proof of its divine origin, and they commit large portions of it to heart before they are able to understand what it says. According to the scholar John Esposito:

Today, crowds fill stadiums and auditoriums throughout the Islamic world for public Quran recitation contests. Chanting of the Quran is an art form. Reciters or chanters are held in an esteem comparable with that of opera stars in the West. Memorization of the entire Quran brings great prestige as well as merit. Recordings of the Quran are enjoyed for their aesthetic as well as their religious value.<sup>33</sup>

A Muslim will look to muftis and imams for guidance, but will also read the Qur'an on his own. Concerning the topic of how to treat non-Muslims, the sacred book will tell him: "Prophet, make war on the unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal rigorously with them. Hell shall be their home: an evil fate" (Sura 9:73).<sup>34</sup> Inside the House of Islam there may be peace, or at least the absence of war, but Islam declares perpet-



ual war between believers and unbelievers. “The true believers fight for the cause of God, but the infidels fight for the devil. Fight then against the friends of Satan” (Sura 4:76). The Muslim who doesn’t fight is hardly worthy of the name:

Those that stayed at home were glad that they were left behind by God’s apostle [Muhammad], for they had no wish to fight for the cause of God with their wealth and with their persons. They said to each other: “Do not go to war, the heat is fierce.” Say to them: “More fierce is the heat of Hell-fire!” Would that they understood! (Sura 9:81)

Muslims often maintain that Western commentators have distorted the concept of war in the Qur’an—the jihad. We’ll delve into this issue more deeply later, but it warrants some attention here. One Muslim commentator complains, “A great misconception prevails, particularly among the Christians, propagated by their zealous missionaries, with regard to the duty of jihad in Islam.” It doesn’t refer solely to the taking up of arms against the enemies of Islam, he says, defining it as “The use of or exerting of one’s utmost powers, efforts, endeavours or ability in contending with an object of disapprobation, and this is of three kinds, namely, a visible enemy, the devil and against one’s own self.”<sup>35</sup> Other Muslim divines distinguish the “greater jihad,” which involves the individual’s spiritual struggle, from the “lesser jihad,” which takes the struggle outward against enemies of the faith. Most Muslims will be concerned in their daily lives with the greater jihad—their own efforts to live out their faith. The term can also be applied to any action taken to defend or propagate the faith.

As for the “lesser jihad,” one manual of Islamic law defines it simply as “war against non-Muslims.”<sup>36</sup> It can be waged with the weapons of apologetics and debate, but an uncomfortable fact for Islamic moderates is that nothing says it cannot involve the force of arms. Though considered lower than the spiritual struggle, armed force is an integral element of jihad. When Sheikh Omar Bakri (whose muted applause for bin Laden’s terrorism we quoted above) called jihad “a sacred duty imposed by Allah on all young males in good health,” he did not mean simply that Allah wants all young males to study the Qur’an and struggle against sin: “The Koran,” Sheikh Omar explained, “lays down that the Muslim must be capable of bearing arms and should be ready for the Jihad.”<sup>37</sup>

There has always been a martial element in jihad. Toward the end of the seventh century, Hajjaj, the governor of Iraq, wrote after a battle:

“The Great God says in the Koran: ‘O true believers, when you encounter the unbelievers, strike off their heads.’ The above command of the Great God is a great command and must be respected and followed.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the military aspect of jihad is firmly rooted in the Qur’an itself. The verse that Hajjaj invoked, and others like it, leave little room for doubt:

When you meet the unbelievers in the battlefield, strike off their heads and, when you have laid them low, bind your captives firmly. (Sura 47:4)

Fight for the sake of God those that fight against you, but do not attack them first. God does not love the aggressors. Slay them wherever you find them. Drive them out of the places from which they drove you. Idolatry is worse than carnage. (Sura 2:190–191)\*

When the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy [i.e., the *jizya*, the special tax on non-Muslims], allow them to go their way. God is forgiving and merciful. (Sura 9:5)

The word translated as “idolaters” in the last passage, *al-Mushrikun*, is sometimes rendered as “pagans” or “polytheists.” Although some Muslims refrain from using *al-Mushrikun* to refer to those whom the Qur’an denotes as “People of the Book”—chiefly Jews and Christians (as well as Zoroastrians)—this word and this verse are commonly used in Muslim literature as a guide for dealing with any other group that supposedly worships created beings along with God. Strictly speaking this would not include Jews, yet the Qur’an seems to place them within it by asserting that “the Jews say Ezra is the son of God” (Sura 9:30)—a claim that corresponds to no known Jewish tradition. Christians, of course, are considered guilty of *shirk*—worshiping created beings—because of the doctrine of the Trinity. While Muslims insist that they respect Jesus, and indeed they do within the bounds of what the Qur’an says about him, the twelfth-century Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar sums up a prevalent Muslim view of Christianity when he calls it “a blasphemous disgrace.”<sup>39</sup>

The command to make war against Jews and Christians is clearer in other portions of the Qur’an, which tie this obligation to their supposed disbelief in what was revealed to them. “Fight against such of those

\*The first part of this passage is the foundation for the general Muslim view that jihad must be a defensive operation only, an idea we shall examine in detail in chapter ten.

to whom the Scriptures were given as believe neither in God nor the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Apostle have forbidden, and do not embrace the true Faith, until they pay tribute out of hand and are utterly subdued” (Sura 9:29). And similarly: “Muhammad is God’s Apostle. Those who follow him are ruthless to the unbelievers but merciful to one another” (Sura 48:29).

There are no mitigating verses prescribing mercy toward unbelievers. Therefore, when former pop star Cat Stevens—a convert to Islam who now goes by the name Yusuf Islam—appealed to terrorists for the release of American journalist Daniel Pearl, his words may not have resonated well with their intended audience. “Now the time has come to show the world the Mercy of Islam,” said the author of “Peace Train.”<sup>40</sup> But where is there any explicit Qur’anic warrant for extending mercy to unbelievers? Boxing legend Muhammad Ali’s appeal for Pearl’s release displayed a similar assumption: “I have not lost [Allah’s] hope in us to show compassion where none exists and to extend mercy in the most difficult of circumstances. We as Muslims must lead by example.”<sup>41</sup> Since Pearl wasn’t a fellow believer, however, his captors could have replied to these famous converts from Christianity simply by invoking Sura 48:29, according to which he was entitled to no compassion.<sup>42</sup>

Still, maybe all this isn’t as bad as it looks. Maybe Muslims, or at least a sizable number of them, read the Qur’an’s verses about killing unbelievers in some allegorical fashion. Perhaps something has happened in Islam analogous to the slow development within Christendom that brought us from the days when a figure no less august than St. Thomas Aquinas advocated the execution of heretics, to our present-day state of enlightened toleration. Perhaps Osama is out of the mainstream.

Secular commentators are confident that this is, or will be, the case. Islam, they explain, is “still in the Middle Ages.” After all, it has now been only 1400 years since the time of Muhammad, and 1400 years after Christ, goes the analogy, Christians were killing infidels (often fellow Christians of different sects) themselves. Islam is simply a religion that will eventually mature, as did Christianity, into a more tolerant, more expansive faith. Moreover, such observers say, it already has to some degree, and the moderates now show the true face of Islam. The benighted young men training in al-Qaeda camps to kill themselves and other people are simply clinging, out of fears and resentments of various kinds, to a more primitive and violent form of their religion.

Maybe. But this scenario has serious problems.

In the first place, why should the development of Islam mirror that of Christianity? Not only George Bush and Tony Blair, but Westerners in general misunderstand Islam on a massive scale because they persist, probably without realizing it, in viewing the religion of Muhammad in light of Christian categories and experience. The most prominent indication of this is the constant reference to Islamic “fundamentalists.” This has become the common label for those who take the above-quoted verses of the Qur’an literally enough to strap bombs to themselves and become human missiles.

The word, of course, has been imported from Christianity. In Christian parlance, a fundamentalist is someone who adheres to the core beliefs—the fundamentals—of the faith. A fundamentalist Christian holds to the traditional, literal understanding of elements of the faith such as the Virgin Birth and bodily Resurrection of Christ. Liberal Christians read the life of Jesus as metaphor and fable; fundamentalists read it as historical fact.

But if a Christian fundamentalist is someone who strictly maintains the traditional core teachings of the faith, by analogy a Muslim fundamentalist would simply be someone who upholds the Five Pillars of Islam. Inside and outside the *umma* (the worldwide community of Muslim believers), Muslims agree that these Pillars are the heart of their religion: the confession of faith, daily prayer, almsgiving, fasting during Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. In this sense, virtually all Muslims are fundamentalists.

To isolate Islamic terrorists as “Muslim fundamentalists” is absurd, then, because it suggests something that those who use the term would deny: that violence and terror are fundamentals of Islam.

## The Living Qur’an?

Muslims everywhere almost all view the Qur’an as literally and eternally true, including its exhortations to violence. There are liberal Muslims who read the Qur’an’s exhortations to battle as a call to wage spiritual warfare against sin and error, but they are difficult to find. Liberalism and modernism have not invaded the House of Islam in any significant measure or had any general influence on the way the average Muslim reads the Qur’an. At this time, the novelist Salman Rushdie is one of the very few Muslims in the world who are trying to bring Islam into the modern

world, calling his coreligionists to see the tenets of their faith as metaphor and parable rather than as simple, unalloyed, all-encompassing fact.

In addition to allegorical interpretation, the idea of progressive revelation is generally absent from Islam, whereas in Judaism and Christianity, it is commonly accepted. The Old Testament has numerous passages that no Jew or Christian would take as marching orders for today. No Christian or Jew is likely to sell his daughter into slavery (Exodus 21:7), for example, or put to death someone who works on the Sabbath (Exodus 35:2). But for the Muslim, all of the Qur'an's commands are valid for all time.

This fact is often overlooked when religionists of all persuasions start waging scripture wars. For instance, a Muslim spokesman who expressed outrage at Pat Robertson's remarks about Islam, Hussein Ibish of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, asserted: "I could come here . . . with quotes from the Talmud and quotes from the Bible and try to paint Judaism and Christianity, or any other religion, in this negative light too. I think that is . . . a really despicable and sick game."<sup>43</sup> It is true that Ibish wouldn't have difficulty finding violent statements in the Bible, such as to cause modern Jews and Christians to cringe. There is Psalm 137:9, speaking to the Babylonians who have subjugated the Israelites: "Happy shall be he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks!" Another Psalm vows: "Morning by morning I will destroy all the wicked in the land, cutting off all evildoers from the city of the LORD" (Psalm 101:8). After David performs heroically in battle, the Israelite women sing, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (I Samuel 18:7). The Book of Joshua is full of bloody, merciless battles waged at the command of God.

Even so, these are not really equivalents of the aggressive language in the Qur'an, for no modern Jew or Christian reads the stories and celebrations of Hebrew warriors as a guide for behavior in the present. Jews and Christians do consider the violent passages in the Psalms, the Book of Joshua and elsewhere to be part of God's Word, but not in the same sense that Muslims regard all of the Qur'an. Rather than a strict moral code for all time, these passages are a portion of the historical record of how God brought his people out of sin and gradually into the light. Virtually all Christians, including fundamentalists, would agree that they pertained to a particular time and set of circumstances, and reflected an incomplete stage of the divine revelation, which would eventually be

fulfilled—and superseded—by the New Testament gospel of love and reconciliation. Jews as well as Christians have developed highly refined methods of allegorical interpretation through which they view bellicose scriptural passages.

Islam, by contrast, generally rejects any idea of a historical progression in revelation, and allows little latitude for allegorical interpretation of the martial verses in the Qur'an. This is partly because Muslim beliefs about the authorship of the Qur'an differ from Christian beliefs about how the Bible came to be. As *Newsweek* religion expert Kenneth Woodward explains,

Like the Bible, the Qur'an asserts its own divine authority. But whereas Jews and Christians regard the biblical text as the words of divinely inspired human authors, Muslims regard the Qur'an, which means "The Recitation," as the eternal words of Allah himself. Thus, Muhammad is the conduit for God's words, not their composer.<sup>44</sup>

The Muslim scholar Ahmad Von Denffer summarizes the Muslim understanding of the holy book thus: "The Qur'an can be defined as follows: The speech of Allah, sent down upon the last Prophet Muhammad, through the Angel Gabriel, in its precise meaning and precise wording . . . inimitable and unique, protected by God from corruption."<sup>45</sup> Everywhere around the globe, all sects of Islam teach that the Qur'an is the perfect word of Allah, valid for all peoples and all times.

In fact, Muslim tradition goes even further, holding that the Qur'an is eternal and uncreated, and that it resided in heaven with Allah before he began to reveal it to Muhammad. Because it is considered to be Allah's actual speech in its "precise wording," traditionally minded Muslims even frown on translations of the Qur'an (although such translations nonetheless proliferate). Allah revealed the Qur'an in Arabic, and its Arabic language is part of its perfection: "We have revealed the Koran in the Arabic tongue so that you may grow in understanding" (Sura 12:2).

A book with this kind of pedigree and claim to literal perfection tends to resist any interpretation that diminishes the literal truthfulness of any of its statements.<sup>46</sup> Only a minority of Muslims favor such interpretations: "Modern deconstructionists, mainly European scholars, have boldly stated that the Qur'an should be treated as a historical document subject to modern notions of critical analysis as has the Bible in recent times."<sup>47</sup> It doesn't take much analytical acumen, however, to figure out

that the opinions of “deconstructionists” and “European scholars” carry little weight for most Muslims. After all, that is the kind of thinking that got Suliman Bashear thrown out of a second-story window.

Canadian Muslim journalist Irshad Manji draws the logical conclusion of mainstream Muslim reasoning:

It's time to question publicly whether Islam lends itself to fundamentalism [i.e., a literal reading of Qur'anic exhortations to violence] more easily than other world religions. Here's my case for why it might: We Muslims are routinely told that The Holy Koran is a book about which there is no doubt. By building upon the Torah and the Christian Bible, the Koran perfects their teachings. No need to interpret the final draft of G-d's manifesto. It is what it is, and that is that.<sup>48</sup>

For orthodox Muslims, everything in the Qur'an is valid unless it has been abrogated by another part of the same book. There are such passages, but the violent ones I have quoted are not among them.

There have been attempts throughout the history of Islam to temper the aggressive understanding of the Qur'an, often with hermeneutical ideas imported from Christianity and from classical Greek philosophy. The most notable of these efforts was the Mu'tazilite movement, which originated in the theological and philosophical ideas of Wasil bin 'Ata (699–749) and swept furiously through the House of Islam, becoming the state religion of the Abbasid Caliphate in the ninth century.<sup>49</sup>

Having imbibed pagan Greek philosophy, the Mu'tazilites (a name that means “Separated Ones” or “Those Who Have Withdrawn”) held that reason must play a role in the Muslim's encounter with God. Accordingly, Mu'tazilite divines were uncomfortable with literal readings of the Qur'an's anthropomorphisms. They even went so far as to declare that the book itself was *created*, a notion contrary to the orthodox Muslim idea of a miraculous book that resided eternally with Allah in heaven.

The debate over whether the sacred book was created or existed eternally had great practical implications. It allowed the Mu'tazilites to develop a method of Qur'anic interpretation that diverged further from the literal meaning of the text than most Muslim divines dared to venture. For instance, in reading Sura 14:27, “He leads the wrongdoers astray,” Mu'tazilite theologians contradicted the literal meaning with its predestinarian implications, maintaining that it was not reasonable that Allah would lead people astray and condemn them to hell.

Notwithstanding their respect for reason, however, the Mu'tazilites were no prototypes of modern, Western rationalists, and in power they were just as absolutist as many other Muslim regimes. Under the Abbasid caliph Abdullah al-Mamun (813–833) and his successors Muhammad al-Mu'tasim (833–842) and Harun al-Watiq (842–847), they initiated a full-fledged inquisition, the Mihna. During this fifteen-year period, the *qadis*, or judges of religious questions, throughout the caliphate were forced to swear that the Qur'an was created, not eternal. This oath was fiercely resisted by the common folk, who had never warmed to the intellectualism and apparent skepticism of Mu'tazilism, and by some scholars as well. No less a personage than Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Hanbal (780–855), one of Sunni Islam's "Four Great Imams," was imprisoned and scourged for refusing to affirm the Mu'tazilite doctrine.

Harun al-Watiq's successor, Ja'far al-Mutawakkil (847–861), ended the Mihna and turned the tables on the Mu'tazilites: the assertion that the Qur'an was created became a crime punishable by death. Although the Shi'ite Muslims of Iran adopted certain Mu'tazilite perspectives, with the end of the Mihna the movement largely lost its dynamism within the House of Islam in general. Over time, the less rationalistic views of anti-Mu'tazilites such as Ibn Hanbal and other revered Muslim scholars became entrenched within Sunni orthodoxy. Their chief concern was to uphold the literal and absolute truth of the words of the Qur'an.

The marginalizing and discrediting of the Mu'tazilites has cast a long shadow over "moderate Islam," for it stands as a historical precedent that literalists can use to dismiss any interpretation of the Qur'an that doesn't take all its words at face value. If today's moderates stray too far from a literal reading of the sacred book (including its ferocity toward unbelievers), they risk being accused of trying to revive a long-discredited way of thinking.

Some Muslims have tried in other ways to soften the harshness of certain Qur'anic verses. The Turkish Muslim apologist Adnan Oktar, who writes under the biblically inspired nom de plume Harun Yahya (Aaron John), doesn't take the bellicose pronouncements as a direct call to arms for today. Working within the bounds of a literal reading of the Qur'an, he has tried to construct an Islamic answer to violence and terrorism on the basis of this verse:



That was why We laid it down for the Israelites that whoever killed a human being, except as a punishment for murder or other villainy in the land, shall be looked upon as though he had killed all mankind; and that whoever saved a human life shall be regarded as though he had saved all mankind. (Sura 5:32)

Harun Yahya concludes, “This being the case, it is obvious what great sins are the murders, massacres and attacks, popularly known as ‘suicide attacks,’ committed by terrorists.”<sup>50</sup>

### **A Religious Duty to Wage War**

Alas, it isn't obvious to all. For one thing, Harun Yahya does not address the martial verses quoted earlier. (After all, what can he say about them?) And the verse he does quote includes a large exception: “punishment for murder or other villainy [or, corruption] in the land.” Bin Laden and his ilk charge America with these very crimes. Denouncing the infidel presence in the Islamic holy land and declaring that America has sown corruption in Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and elsewhere, they lay claim to Qur'anic *carte blanche* for their terrorist acts.

There is no Muslim version of “love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44) or “if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5:39). Instead, there is something more like the ethos that Jesus exhorts his followers to rise above, that of “love your neighbor and hate your enemy” (Matthew 5:43). The Qur'an instructs:

God does not forbid you to be kind and equitable to those who have neither made war on your religion nor driven you from your homes. But He forbids you to make friends with those who have fought against you on account of your religion and driven you from your homes or abetted others so to do. Those that make friends with them are wrongdoers. (Sura 60:9)

From the militant Muslim perspective, Americans have done just what the Qur'an specifies as ruling out the need for kindness. The Americans, bin Laden might say, have indeed made war on our religion and driven us from our homes. Therefore, as he has declared, he owes us no mercy, but actually has a religious duty to make war against us. Indeed, he would be a wrongdoer if he overlooked our alleged offenses.

And so, rather than join Harun Yahya in condemning suicide attacks, some Muslims celebrate them. In June 2001, Sheikh Ibrahim Mahdi exclaimed on Palestine's official TV station, "Blessings on whoever has put a belt of explosives on his body and plunged into the midst of the Jews."<sup>51</sup> On its website, al-Muhajiroun posted this perspective:

The name "suicide-operations" used by some is inaccurate, and in fact this name was chosen by the Jews to discourage people from such endeavours. How great is the difference between one who commits suicide . . . because of his unhappiness, lack of patience and [the] weakness or absence of [an imam—] and [who] has been threatened with Hell-Fire—and between the self-sacrificer who embarks on the operation out of strength of faith and conviction, and to bring victory to Islam, by sacrificing his life for the upliftment [*sic*] of Allah's word!<sup>52</sup>

According to the Qur'an, the "self-sacrificer" has much to look forward to: "He that leaves his dwelling to fight for God and His apostle and is then overtaken by death, shall be rewarded by God" (Sura 4:100). These rewards are well known: a heaven filled with the delights of the flesh, vividly described in many verses of the Qur'an: dark-eyed maidens, nonintoxicating liquors and so forth. The blessed

shall recline on jeweled couches face to face, and there shall wait on them immortal youths with bowls and ewers and a cup of purest wine (that will neither pain their heads nor take away their reason); with fruits of their own choice and flesh of fowls that they relish. And theirs shall be the dark-eyed houris, chaste as hidden pearls: a guerdon for their deeds. (Sura 56:15–24)

That these promises are real incentives for many Muslims today was underscored by a jarring incident witnessed by Jack Kelley of *USA Today*. At a school run by Hamas, he saw a youth of eleven years give a report to his class:

"I will make my body a bomb," said the boy, "that will blast the flesh of Zionists, the sons of pigs and monkeys. . . . I will tear their bodies into little pieces and will cause them more pain than they will ever know." His classmates shouted in response, "Allah Akhbar," [God is great] and his teacher shouted, "May the virgins give you pleasure."<sup>53</sup>

## The Parameters of Islamic Belief

Are these Muslims not deriving their conclusions straight from the Qur'an? Thus how can Harun Yahya insist that "Islam is by no means the source of this violence and that violence has no place in Islam"?<sup>54</sup>

In fact, it isn't all that easy to say that something—even terrorism—has no place in Islam, unless it's explicitly condemned in the Qur'an. The American Taliban soldier John Walker Lindh (no authority, to be sure, but certainly a zealous student, or *talib*, of the religion) put it this way to an Internet newsgroup in 1997: "If a person or a group of people believe in the unity of Allah and the day of judgement, believe in the prophethood of Muhammad, believe in the angels, if they keep up Salat [Friday prayers], pay Zakat [alms], fast in Ramadan, and perform the Hajj [the pilgrimage to the Muslim holy city of Mecca] if they're able to, they are Muslims." That's it, according to this budding Taliban fighter: "They can believe things completely contradictory to the Qur'an, or the words of any of the prophets and still be Muslim. They can commit any imaginable sin and still be Muslim, so long as they still fulfill the aforementioned items."<sup>55</sup>

This is overstated, but it expresses the common view in Islam that the elements enumerated by Lindh—the Five Pillars—are indeed the essentials. If someone observes those, it would be very difficult to read him out of Islam. "No group may be excluded from the community unless it itself formally renounces Islam," says a Muslim writing team, Mohamed Azad and Bibi Amina, coauthors of the incomparably titled *Islam Will Conquer All Other Religions and American Power Will Diminish*.<sup>56</sup> No group—not even a terrorist group. An important manual of Islamic law declares that to classify a Muslim as an unbeliever is itself an act of apostasy.<sup>57</sup> Although this law is often honored in the breach, it does indicate that unless they deny that Allah is God and Muhammad is his prophet, Muslim terrorists cannot easily be read out of Islam by anyone—not even by the President of the United States.

This law is recorded in *Reliance of the Traveller*, compiled by the fourteenth-century Muslim scholar Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri from numerous ancient and respected sources. It is no mere museum piece. Based largely on the legal rulings of some of the most highly regarded imams in Islamic history, it is updated in a new edition to deal with modern questions.

*Reliance of the Traveller* is a product of the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam. Comprising roughly 85 percent of all Muslims, Sunni Islam is divided into four "rites" (*madhhabs*), or schools of Islamic law and practice: Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanafi and Hanbali. Sunni Muslims understand their religious duties according to the guidance of the imams of their school. A Sunni may switch from one *madhhab* to another without jeopardizing his orthodoxy. Moreover, the four schools agree on about three-fourths of their rulings.<sup>58</sup> Noted Shafi'is in Muslim history include all the compilers of the six collections of traditions about Muhammad generally recognized as authentic: Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah, Abu Dawud and an-Nasai. These collections are second only to the Qur'an in importance for Muslims.

Thus, not without reason does Al-Azhar, the thousand-year-old Islamic university in Egypt, state that even today *Reliance of the Traveller* "conforms to the practice and faith of the orthodox Sunni Community."<sup>59</sup> I will return to it repeatedly for examples of Islamic law, not because it is the sole or even the principal Islamic legal manual, but because it is in many ways typical of such manuals and representative of widespread and long-established currents of thought in the *umma*.

### **What Would Muhammad Do?**

The example of the Prophet Muhammad is a supreme paradigm for Muslims. And as we shall later see more fully, Muhammad was a man of war. He led armies. He ordered his enemies killed. He never shrank from bloodshed. Notes Kenneth Woodward, "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."<sup>60</sup>

In one celebrated incident among the many in which Muhammad lashed out violently against his opponents, he took his revenge on two poets: Abu 'Afak, a man who was reputed to be over one hundred years old, and 'Asma bint Marwan, a woman. These poets were not just entertainers. Their verses ridiculing Muhammad and his new religion were, in his eyes, costing him prestige and followers. When Muhammad had had enough, he cried out, "Will no one rid me of this daughter of Marwan?"<sup>61</sup> One of his followers, 'Umayr ibn 'Adi, went to her house that night and found her sleeping next to her children. The youngest, a nursing babe,

was in her arms. But that didn't stop ʿUmayr from murdering her, a deed for which the Prophet commended him: "You have done a great service to Allah and His Messenger, ʿUmayr!" Abu ʿAfak was also killed in his sleep, in response to the Prophet's question, "Who will avenge me on this scoundrel?"<sup>62</sup>

Muhammad's example of intolerance has been often imitated. Most students of history know that Christendom's treatment of religious minorities was far from spotless, but fewer know that the celebrated Islamic tolerance of Christianity and Judaism was not as enlightened and expansive as it may seem. Modern-day terrorists are the sons and heirs of the Islamic warriors who overwhelmed the ancient Christian lands of the Middle East and North Africa by the force of arms, and who made it so humiliating and difficult for the Christians who survived the conquests to continue to live in their homelands that many gave up the struggle: they converted to Islam just to survive.

Christian and post-Christian citizens of Western republics, surrounded by material comforts and hearing constantly the mantra of "tolerance," may blanch to read about what life was like for their forefathers in the Faith who had the misfortune of falling under the heel of Islam. First, there was the onerous poll-tax levied on non-Muslims unless they converted to Islam.<sup>63</sup> In Muslim Spain, innumerable Christians and Jews converted in order to escape this crushing burden; but this meant a loss of revenue to the treasury. So Muslim officials sometimes closed off this escape route from a miserable existence by forbidding Christians and Jews to convert to Islam. Too many converts would destroy the tax base. Besides having to pay prohibitive taxes, Christians in the lands of St. Augustine, St. Athanasius and St. Ignatius of Antioch were forbidden to build new churches or repair old ones, forbidden to try to prevent the conversion of a child to Islam, forbidden to hold authority over a Muslim, forbidden to ring bells or perform other acts of worship that offended Muslim sensibilities, and made to wear distinctive clothing. The spiritual children of St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil the Great became a despised, inferior caste.

Most humiliating and outrageous of all was the Ottoman Empire's practice of *devshirme*: the Muslims' drawing of their most formidable warriors against Christianity from among Christians themselves.<sup>64</sup> Christian fathers were forced to appear in the town squares with their sons, the strongest and brightest of whom would be seized from their parents,

converted to Islam and trained up to be part of the empire's crack fighting force, the janissaries. In some areas this became an annual event.

Granted, in the days of the *devshirme*, most cultures condoned slavery, and most behaved in war the way Muslims did. The difference is the presence of the Qur'an, whose injunctions validate such behavior for all time. And the oppressed and enslaved peoples had no recourse; for according to a preeminent historian of the experience of religious minorities under Islam, "all litigation between a Muslim and a *dhimmi* [a non-Muslim, chiefly a Jew or a Christian] was under the jurisdiction of Islamic legislation, which did not recognize the validity of the oath of a *dhimmi* against that of a Muslim."<sup>65</sup> *Reliance of the Traveller* stipulates that "legal testimony is only acceptable from a witness who . . . is religious"—that is, Muslim—for, it further explains, "unbelief is the vilest form of corruption, as goes without saying."<sup>66</sup> By this a Christian's or Jew's testimony was, at the least, devalued.

Even in our own day, Christians in Sudan, Pakistan and other Muslim lands have lost their lives for blaspheming the prophet Muhammad, on the basis of accusations which they could not defend against. For instance, Pakistan's blasphemy law is, in effect, a declaration of open season against Christians: "Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad . . . shall be punished with death and shall be liable to a fine."<sup>67</sup> Ayub Masih, a Pakistani Christian, was arrested under this law in 1996 for allegedly making a reference to Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*—a charge he denied. He has been sentenced to death and repeatedly tortured.

### Theological Equivalence

When confronted with this kind of evidence, many Western commentators practice a theological version of "moral equivalence," analogous to the geopolitical form which held that the Soviet Union and the United States were essentially equally free and equally oppressive. "Christians," these commentators say, "have behaved the same way, and have used the Bible to justify violence. Islam is no different: people can use it to wage war or to wage peace."

This is a book about Islam, not about Christianity. Nevertheless,

since proponents of certain policies toward the Muslim world use this argument to support their case, it bears examining.

The main features of the case that Christian violence equals Muslim violence are well known. After Pat Robertson's statement about violence in Islam hit the headlines, the *National Catholic Reporter* ran a cartoon of a haloed Robertson clasping his palms together in the posture of prayer and piously asking, "Whoever heard of violence in the name of Christ?" Behind him loom the menacing figures of a Crusader brandishing a sword, the Grand Inquisitor, a Puritan holding a torch ready to burn a wretched accused witch at the stake, and a Ku Klux Klansman holding a noose and standing beside a burning cross.<sup>68</sup>

The humanist Samuel Bradley relates one notorious blot on Christian history:

It was for this country's God that Central America was savaged. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, the Pulitzer-prize winning history of human societies, Jared Diamond recounts the tale of Spanish conquistador Pizarro defeating an army of 80,000 belonging to Atahualpa with his 168 soldiers. I quote from a journal written that day: "If night had not come on, few out of the more than 40,000 (sic) Indian troops would have been left alive. Six or seven thousand Indians lay dead, and many more had their arms cut off or other wounds." I now quote from the same man's journal. "Truly, it was not accomplished by our own forces, for there were so few of us. It was by the grace of God, which is great."<sup>69</sup>

Bradley does not mention the appalling cruelty of the Inca practice of human sacrifice, which Pizarro's conquest halted. But our concern is that the conquistador justified his own brutality, according to Bradley, as being accomplished "by the grace of God."

This is fundamentally different from terrorists' use of the Qur'an for several key reasons. As we have seen, the Bible does contain martial verses—although in this account Pizarro quoted none of them. More important, his claim that he massacred by God's grace violates clear Christian principles that are held by Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox alike. His bloodlust does not accord with the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, or with the Just War principles of his own Roman Catholic Church. As Kenneth Woodward says in a different context, "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."<sup>70</sup>

Pizarro, like the rest of mankind according to Christian doctrine, was a sinner. His sinful status is obvious with reference to the clear teachings of Jesus Christ, whom he professed to follow, and who said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). This attitude is not ruled out in the Christian understanding of a just war. It is easy to see how Pizarro and the other conquistadors violated central tenets of Christianity.

*Mutatis mutandis*, did the Muslims who practiced the *devshirme* or turned the great Christian populations of the Middle East into despised *dhimmis* pervert the true principles of Islam? Is Osama bin Laden a sinner and thus no fit representative of Islam? Which teachings of Islam has he violated?

William J. Bennett sums up the difference: “To put the issue at its starkest, there is simply no equivalent in the Koran to the New Testament’s admonition to ‘turn the other cheek’; conversely, there is no equivalent in the New Testament to the Koranic injunction to ‘kill the disbelievers wherever [you] find them.’”<sup>71</sup> For Christians, the New Testament supersedes the Old and corrects its violent tendencies, as in Jesus’ celebrated admonition, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ [Leviticus 24:20]. But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil” (Matthew 5:38–39). Judaism itself, of course, cultivated a rich tradition in which the violence of the Old Testament was regarded as anything but a guide for believers’ daily behavior. But Muslims have no such tradition, and nothing akin to the New Testament corrective of the gospel of mercy.

Those who say that Islam is peace constantly invoke Qur’anic injunctions against killing innocents. But Osama insists that his victims were not innocents. The terrorists kill unbelievers in keeping with the commands of Allah’s book and the example of his Prophet. They plot to strike as hard as they can at the nation that, in their view, has humiliated and oppressed the House of Islam—and they do this because the Qur’an tells them to.

### **A Muslim’s Duty**

In slaying infidels, are the terrorists not acting as pious Muslims? They believe they are, and the letter of the Qur’an seems to back them up. The challenge, therefore, that confronts those Muslims who say they are



discredited fundamentalist fringe groups is to formulate a refutation of the terrorists' own justifications for their actions. To be effective, such a refutation would have to be an Islamic argument, based on clear Muslim principles.

But the bellicosity of the Qur'an and Muslim tradition makes this virtually impossible. As Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini put it:

Islam makes it incumbent on all adult males, provided they are not disabled or incapacitated, to prepare themselves for the conquest of [other] countries so that the writ of Islam is obeyed in every country in the world. . . . But those who study Islamic Holy War will understand why Islam wants to conquer the whole world. . . . Those who know nothing of Islam pretend that Islam counsels against war. Those [who say this] are witless. Islam says: Kill all the unbelievers just as they would kill you all! Does this mean that Muslims should sit back until they are devoured by [the unbelievers]? Islam says: Kill them [the non-Muslims], put them to the sword and scatter [their armies]. Does this mean sitting back until [non-Muslims] overcome us? Islam says: Kill in the service of Allah those who may want to kill you! Does this mean that we should surrender [to the enemy]? Islam says: Whatever good there is exists thanks to the sword and in the shadow of the sword! People cannot be made obedient except with the sword! The sword is the key to Paradise, which can be opened only for the Holy Warriors! There are hundreds of other [Qur'anic] psalms and Hadiths [sayings of the Prophet] urging Muslims to value war and to fight. Does all this mean that Islam is a religion that prevents men from waging war? I spit upon those foolish souls who make such a claim.<sup>72</sup>

Going even further are the terrorists of bin Laden's al-Qaeda. A terrorist manual found in a safe house in Manchester, England, declared that "Islamic governments have never and will never be established through peaceful solutions and cooperative councils. They are established as they [always] have been by pen and gun, by word and bullet, by tongue and teeth."<sup>73</sup> The manual doesn't explain at what point the pen, word and tongue give way to the gun, bullet and teeth; but if Islamic governments have "never been established through peaceful solutions," one may assume that the peaceful instruments give way fairly early in the struggle for Islam.

The Iranian writer Amir Taheri, author of *Holy Terror*, the landmark study of Islamic terrorism, remarks that "Khomeini's teachings are Islamic, but Islam is not limited to what Khomeini teaches."<sup>74</sup> Quite so.

But what kind of firewall exists between Khomeinism and “moderate” Islam? Imams who issue fatwas have followers. Those who have issued fatwas condoning or even praising the terrorist attacks are not preaching to empty mosques, for individual Muslims can easily see how their teachings reflect the Qur’an and the life of Muhammad. Thus, the Western view of peaceful Islam as having been “hijacked” by terrorists is simplistic and superficial—and the West’s current sanguinity toward Islam could turn out to be fatally unwise.

The fastest-growing religion in the world today, Islam now counts among its adherents one out of every five people on earth. President Bush thus has very good reasons to try to encourage a belief that the terrorists are but a tiny minority among these hundreds of millions of Muslims. He is prudent to emphasize the existence of moderate elements in Islam, and to play up the extent of their influence in the Muslim world. No European or American in his right mind wants Osama bin Laden’s vision of a war between the West and the entirety of Islam to become a reality.

But the number of terrorist sympathizers in Muslim countries is considerable. Middle East analyst Daniel Pipes estimates it as between 100 million and 150 million people.<sup>75</sup> This doesn’t mean that the remaining 850 to 900 million Muslims around the world are all peace-loving. Granted, people find it wearying to live in a state of constant conflict, and so they settle down to lead ordinary lives. But in Islam, ordinary life can always be disrupted by the call of religion. Radical Muslims have at times treated nonradicals as one large sleeper cell that can be activated by a summons to the full practice of their religion. This is illustrated by a chilling story from the Ottoman Empire of the late nineteenth century:

Then one night, my husband came home and told me that the padisha had sent word that we were to kill all the Christians in our village, and that we would have to kill our neighbours. I was very angry, and told him that I did not care who gave such orders, they were wrong. These neighbours had always been kind to us, and if he dared to kill them Allah would pay us out. I tried all I could to stop him, but he killed them—killed them with his own hand.<sup>76</sup>

In this light, the number of terrorists and their sympathizers is likely to grow beyond Pipes’ 100 to 150 million. In a very real sense this group is what the less militant majority considers to be the conscience of the *umma*. They are the people who actually dare to do what Allah

said to do, whatever the cost. The average Muslim can easily find enough in the Qur'an at least to discourage him from condemning them. He can read that the holy book instructs him to kill unbelievers, and conclude that Khomeini, bin Laden and the like are the true Muslims, just as they claim to be.

For all too many, being a serious Muslim means doing Allah's work by any means necessary. Of course, most Muslims will never be terrorists. The problem is that for all its schisms, sects and multiplicity of voices, Islam's violent elements are rooted in its central texts. It is unlikely that the voices of moderation will ultimately silence the militants, because the militants will always be able to make the case that they are standing for the true expression of the faith. Liberal Muslims have not established a viable alternative interpretation of the relevant verses in the Qur'an. "When liberal Muslims declare that Sept. 11 was an atrocity contrary to the Koran," observes Farrukh Dhondy, "the majority of Muslims around the world don't believe them. They accept the interpretation of fundamentalists, whom liberal Muslims have allowed to remain unchallenged."<sup>77</sup>

This is why the Bush/Blair cure for terrorism may end up being worse than ineffectual. The Islam that the West embraces in order to co-opt bin Laden today may be the Islam that assaults the West tomorrow. This is not idle fear-mongering. Taheri points out that "the Muslim world today is full of bigotry, fanaticism, hypocrisy and plain ignorance—all of which create a breeding ground for criminals like bin Laden."<sup>78</sup> Violent Islam has the enemy (us) and the scriptural justification (in the Qur'an) to keep pushing until they win—that is, until the West is Islamized. And moderate Islam is essentially powerless to stop it.