

Apocalyptic Islam and Bin Laden

Most Americans ask themselves, "How could someone do this? What madness?" The more prone to self-criticism and reflection then ask, "What have we done that might provoke such anger?" "Is this political, or religious?" The more comforting answer to the latter question - i.e., it's political and has semi-rational solutions - makes the former question all the more puzzling. Madness is not rational behavior.

We need to consider both questions - the motivations of Bin Laden and his following, and our contribution to his attitudes - in light not only of our behavior and attitudes, but also his. When we enter this "other" world, we move into realms we Western intellectuals have long discarded and which, when they reappear (as for example, in the various new religious movements in America), we trivialize as deeply irrational - the apocalyptic world view. Bin Laden sees himself as a central player in a cosmic battle that pits the warriors for truth against the agents of Satan and evil in this world. (For a good idea of what this vision consists of, see the web site named in honor of Abdullah Azzam, Bin Laden's (now dead) mentor and the founder of M.A.K., the predecessor to Al Qaeda, <http://www.azzam.com>, especially the apocalyptic reading of the present world situation by a respected Saudi theologian, Safar al Halawi (<http://www.azzam.com/html/dayofwrath.htm>)) For Bin Laden and many Muslims, the world was turned upside down by the victory of the West several centuries ago, and, for lack of leadership from corrupt caliphs and rapidly corrupting secular revolutionary regimes, Islam has lain humiliated for centuries before a triumphant and triumphalist Western Christendom. In the last 50 years, with the advent of Israel, that humiliation was brought to an unbearable intensity: conquered by a great power is one thing, conquered by a subject people is intolerable. For Islamist (fundamentalist) Muslims, the Nakbah (Catastrophe of 1948) was the Dajjal's (Antichrist's) forces at work. The West at a distance may have presented a threat, but Israel represented a desecrating cultural invasion. The Bin Laden's narrative is not a story of the tides of civilization, but relentlessly cosmic in scope and urgent in rhetoric. Now rages the battle between cosmic good (we warriors for Allah and evil (the West, especially its most Satanic forces, Israel . and the USA).

According to numerous apocalyptic pamphlets circulating in Palestinian and other Muslim circles, Israel, and especially Jerusalem is the center of the apocalyptic drama. Jerusalem's (pre-Zionist) significance in Islam derived primarily from its apocalyptic significance, site where, according to a popular eschatological hadith, the Kaabah will come from Mecca to Jerusalem in the Day of Judgment. In this world view, the West, with its secularism and materialism represents a cosmic enemy that must be destroyed, and Israel, with its control of the holy city of Jerusalem, the advance column. As the rest of the world succumbs to Western blandishments and corruption, Islam alone has resisted, at least that element of Islam that has renewed and purified itself in recent times in Islamism. The Islamists, who dream of inaugurating Sharia-observant theocracies, are one of the principle representatives of this renewal movement. The larger vision, championed by Bin Laden, however goes beyond this fundamentalist revivalism so familiar to historians of American culture, itself one of the most fertile soils for revival movements in the world. For Bin Laden this is no see-saw battle between two sides, this is the ultimate struggle.

For him, Sharia should rule the entire world, a project he believes that Muhammed commanded almost 1500 years ago. "Behold?" claims an early and oft-repeated Muslim text, "God sent me [the Prophet Muhammad] with a sword, just before the Hour [of Judgment], and placed my daily sustenance beneath the shadow of my spear, and humiliation and contempt upon those who oppose me." But as opposed to (what we can reconstruct so far) of Islamic history, this time the battle is not merely

conquest, but annihilation of the enemy. this is the apocalyptic world of "convert to the true faith or die."

These are the characteristics of the most virulent forms apocalyptic violence. As with the "first" Crusaders (1096-99), the enemy, demonized, has no human traits; if they refuse to convert they deserve mass slaughter. The massacre of Jews at home, of Muslims, Jews, and even of the strange Christians in the Levant, were all signs of the Lord's Day, the day of Vindication for his faithful crusaders. Similarly, the 5-10, 000 dead -for Bin Laden better it were 50,000 - are a down payment. This is the first real blow of Armageddon.

So why the Trade Center and the Pentagon? Why attack symbols when you risk, as the Japanese did, awaking the slumbering giant? Why the mad disregard for the realities of the situation? Because Bin Laden lives in a symbolic universe which he reads apocalyptically. Reflective apocalyptic violence, whether it comes from an individual like Buford Thomas or Timothy McVeigh, or the leader of a "new religious movement" like Shinohara and his Aum Shin Rikyo, views the current (socio-political) world as great tectonic plates in immense tension, and if the agent of apocalyptic destruction can only set off an explosion at the very site where that tension is greatest, they can free the fault line to completely realign the world. Bin Laden believes that the West is only corruption, a paper tiger that will crumble as did the Twin Towers. Moreover, in the Islamist apocalyptic narrative, New York is the Whore of Babylon. In the words of one such apocalyptic thinker, in a text written before 9-11: "there is no evil greater than in New York in any other place in the inhabited earth, and for this reason their portion of the punishment will be greater in measure and it will be a total uprooting." Now we may know, or hope, that he is wrong. But we make a fatal mistake in projecting our hopes and assessments on to him.

How new is this Islamic apocalyptic reading? Significant recent mutations in Muslim apocalyptic date back to 1979 (when, in the year 1400 A.H., Khomeini took over Iran with millennial plans for a perfect theocracy). In the last two decades, as this active eschatology passed from Shi'i to Sunni circles in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, in Islamist circles from Africa to Indonesia to America, this apocalyptic discourse has taken on many of the traits and techniques of Western apocalyptic (Biblical themes, sophisticated communication technologies). Al Malawi's book *The Day of Wrath*, for example, is posted on the Web and its content is enormously sophisticated and eclectic in its use of Jewish and Christian sources. For him, every prophetic reference to a coming day of wrath against the Jews, a discourse meant to better the Jews, has become a license to kill them - God wants Islam to bring these punishments down on a people who have failed to understand that God wants them to convert to Islam. At the approach of 2000, the Christian year became increasingly significant for Muslim apocalyptic writers, who mixed conspiracy theory, UFOs, and classic Muslim and Christian apocalyptic to target Israel, and especially their control of the Temple Mount as the center of the cosmic battle. The use of dates in this tradition, which is so common that those who do it are called the "exact people", had them focussed on 2000, and now has them using dates from 2004 to 2012 to 2076 (=1500 AH). (These apocalyptic believers expect a Zionist coalition of Christians and Jews, led by the Dajjal, to trample Al Haram al Sharif in Jerusalem, triggering the final battle. The "Al Aqsa" intifada, started in the year 2000 in reaction to the desecrating visit of Sharon, whose depiction in the Muslim press exaggerated every one of his actions into those of the Dajjal. Aside from a tour of the mount with two hundred soldiers, it became an invasion of the Al Aqsa mosque with thousands of troops. This "reading" contributed its fuel to the attack of Muslim forces against the apocalyptic enemy of Israel. The attack on the US strikes at the other "twin tower" of Western evil.

This kind of apocalyptic violence is hardly new. Indeed Western European Christianity in its "middle ages" engaged in just this kind of thinking, producing crusading massacres both against infidels abroad

and dissidents at home, as well as the totalitarian institutions of inquisitorial Christendom. One of the most important steps towards modern civil society was to abandon such narcissistic, megalomaniac self-perceptions, and restrain religion from using coercion to articulate its message. Unfortunately, we seem to have repressed the apocalyptic so firmly in the West, that we don't seem capable of recognizing it when it reappears elsewhere. And we don't know how to deal with the religious expressions of such overwhelmingly anti-modern hostility to the demands of civil society.

How do we confront such a (terrifying and zealous enemy)?

By minimizing his fanaticism, and telling ourselves, without further investigation, that such insanity is really marginal, the work of a madman? One shudders at the cost of underestimating such implacable and urgent hatred.

By telling ourselves that our own sins have aroused his regrettable but understandable hatred? It makes sense to take apocalyptic hatred seriously; it is folly to imagine that our sins, however numerous deserve this hatred.

By imagining that if we could just get Bin Laden and some of his associates, we could also atone to the rest of the Muslim world by sacrificing the sin offering that their Islamists demand - say, Israel and the oilfields of the Arabian peninsula? Aside from the radically destabilizing implications of both policies, especially the latter, we also, in so doing we reward the violence and set ourselves up for more.

And if we look more closely and see how widespread this virulent form of demonizing apocalyptic has become in global Islam, from its fanatic core to a widespread Muslim sympathy with its world view, how do we deal with it? No civil society can tolerate active cataclysmic apocalyptic religiosity, with its dualistic demonizing and totalizing violence against any dissent. And any viable civil society must confront the less visible passive forms such belief takes and which, under conditions of stress, generates its more violent manifestations. The USA has those tendencies (hence the fearful symmetry of Robertson and Falwell's re-defining of the attack as punishment for our sins of secularism), and we weathered them more or less ably, at the approach of Y2K. These are signs of a healthy civil society, where the expression of such extreme visions does not ignite mass movements. But Islamic cultures in many places visibly do not manifest such resilience.

If we would rather not sacrifice Israel and the oil fields to the apocalyptic rage of Islamism the way we sacrificed Czechoslovakia and then continental Europe to the colder but no less ambitious appetite of the Nazis, and we also do not want to tar all of Islam with the brush of apocalyptic Islamism, thus joining in their dualistic thinking, if we want to build a global community that has a chance for peace, then we must begin to ask ourselves, and our Muslim moderate friends, both politically and personally, some very hard questions about their and our apocalyptic visions.

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