
Discipline in Dialogue

Short articles are invited for the Discipline in Dialogue section of ARC, addressing issues of method and theory in the academic study of religion, pedagogical reflections, state-of-the-art reviews of the discipline or its sub-disciplines, and responses and rejoinders. This new section is intended to offer a forum for stimulating discussion and debate.

Terrorism and World Crisis:

Statement from the Steering Committee, Section for the Study of Islam, American Academy of Religion

The following statement, issued on 17 September 2001, is reprinted here with the permission of the Islamic Study Section of the AAR. We are pleased to include short reflections on the statement by key members of the steering committee addressing the international crisis and its relationship to Islam. The editors of ARC would welcome further reflections on the so-called "War Against Terror," as it relates to religion and violence, for the 2003 volume of the journal.

On behalf of our membership, drawn from the U.S., Canada and several other countries, we are grief-stricken at the horrifying events of this past week. Yet as scholars of the Islamic religion, we must take time from our grief, and the counseling of our students, to help prevent the continuing persecution of Muslims on American soil.

The attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center are nothing short of murder. Those office workers did nothing wrong, nothing to deserve such a terrible fate, and the murder of innocents can never be

justified and must not be tolerated. Anger and frustration at the death of these men and women are completely understandable and shared by us all, yet that anger must not be directed at individuals utterly innocent of these terrible crimes.

We have heard and witnessed many reports of verbal and physical attacks against Muslims (and people who were thought to be Muslims) throughout the U.S., and Muslims have been warned to stay home or to avoid wearing traditional dress. Our own Muslim students, many of whom come from South Asia, Africa or the Middle East, are fearful of what may happen to them in the days to come.

Particularly distressing is the fact that many American Muslims have fled to the United States, seeking a haven from intolerant regimes in Kosovo, Afghanistan or Iraq. For them now to face intolerance and violence here is an abuse of our Nation's most deeply cherished beliefs. Likewise, many of our Muslim students have only just arrived in this country, seeking here new hope and solutions for the poverty and violence they face at home.

Statements of hate or racial slurs are not a part of the American way, and we join President Bush and others calling on all Americans to respect the rights of Muslim Americans. Further, we urge people of good faith everywhere to reach out to Muslim neighbors. Churches, synagogues and temples should hold interfaith services of mourning, arrange for pot luck dinners together and work to heal the rifts that recent events have caused. Muslims from overseas should be invited to tell their stories. We should learn about the poverty and authoritarian regimes that they have fled, not to increase our pride in the United States, but to learn ways we can help alleviate the social and political diseases that cause disaffected young men to see Muslim extremists as leaders. We believe that education is the antidote to further violence on both sides.

American Muslims are good neighbors, devoted to their families and to following God's commands to do good works. There are now some

eight million Muslims in the United States, and mosques are to be found in most every major city. The overwhelming majority are peace-loving human beings who share the shock and despair of all Americans. They know that terrorist acts in the name of Islam are a perversion of their most sacred beliefs, and the actions of a few should not characterize the whole.

With over 1 billion adherents, Islam is the second-largest religion in the world after Christianity. Like Christians and Jews, Muslims believe in one God who has sent a series of prophets into the world “to command the good and forbid the evil.” Jesus is revered in the Qur’an, the scripture of Islam, as are Abraham, Moses and the virgin Mary.

According to Muslims, the Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad some 600 years after Jesus’ birth. It was written in Arabic, and Arabic is still the religious language of Islam. But only 20% of all Muslims are Arabs (and about 50% of all Arab-Americans are Christian). Most are from the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia or Africa.

Although many Muslims might differ with Israeli policy, Muslims do not hate Jews; rather Muslims honor Jews and Christians as fellow recipients of “the book,” God’s revelation to all humankind. In fact, the Qur’an commands all Muslims “If they incline toward peace, then you should too!” Suicide is utterly forbidden in Islam, and war must be declared by the State, not by individuals.

These injunctions explain clear statements by the governments of Syria, Saudi Arabia and Libya denouncing Tuesday’s attacks. Radical groups like Hamas have also denounced it, along with the Palestinian leadership. Such political statements must be taken seriously as they are backed up by all major religious authorities, from the Rector of al-Azhar University to the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, who forbid suicide missions, especially terrorist attacks against civilians. Just this past Friday, Sheikh Mohammed Sayyed al-Tantawi of Al-Azhar, the highest institution in Sunni Islam, denounced the attack on the World

Trade Center and the Pentagon. In his weekly sermon to thousands of worshippers in Cairo, he said: "Attacking innocent people is not courageous; it is stupid and will be punished on the day of judgment." Sheikh Tantawi added "It's not courageous to attack innocent children, women and civilians. It is courageous to protect freedom, it is courageous to defend oneself and not to attack." Likewise, President Mohammad Khatami of Iran in an official statement said: "On behalf of the Iranian government and the nation, I condemn the hijacking attempts and terrorist attacks on public centers in American cities which have killed a large number of innocent people."

As scholars of religious traditions, we observe that religious symbols are used for political motives all over the world in Hindu, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions. However, we must critically distinguish between politically motivated deployment of religious symbols and the highest ideals that these traditions embody. Just as most would regard bombers of abortion clinics to be outside the pale of Christianity, so the actions of these terrorists should not be accepted as representing Islam in any way.

As Tuesday's events gradually shift into the past, the horror of what has occurred becomes even clearer. Many of us have been hit personally by these attacks; we grieve, we cry and we search for answers. Let us now join together as Americans and respond to this act of hatred with compassion and understanding, reaching out to our Muslim neighbors and stopping the cycle of violence.